

Facing the Future with a Foot in the Past
Americana, Nostalgia, and the Humanization of
Musical Experience

by

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Abstract

Facing the Future with a Foot in the Past Americana, Nostalgia, and the Humanization of Musical Experience Americana, a musical genre defined by its place in a lineage of roots music styles and a nostalgic outlook is enjoying increasing mainstream popularity in response to general societal unease about the fast pace of social change and the increasing presence of technology in everyday life. Americana artists' invocations of the past cultivate a psychic landscape of collective memory that quells fears of change by asserting the sustained value of the past. Instead of actively resisting social and technological change Americana artists, listeners and promoters embrace technology in service of a nostalgically-motivated humanization and disintermediation of musical performance and consumption. Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings (who perform as "Gillian Welch") and their 2011 album *The Harrow & the Harvest* are analyzed vis-à-vis the ways in which their musical and visual invocations of the rural past dialogue with a psychic landscape of collective memory.

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Introduction

If the content of the following 100-plus pages was condensed into its most essential form, it would read, a study of the Americana genre as nostalgic discourse. While “Americana” has been used as a music genre and marketing label since 1995, when the Americana radio chart was first published, it has only been in the last five to ten years that Americana has gained currency as a referent of a distinct genre identity, musical aesthetic and community of artists and listeners. Americana is a meta-genre representing a diverse body of music unified by the foregrounded influence of various American roots music genres – country, folk, bluegrass, R&B, roots-rock. In spite of progress in raising the genre’s public profile, there are still many people unfamiliar with the Americana genre, especially outside the U.S. As a genre on the threshold of mainstream popularity, Americana is an exciting area for investigation. Although a fairly young genre it is still developed enough to discuss in depth and, although the genre’s artists are currently achieving some major commercial success, the genre is for the moment maintaining its “alternative” status.

The most important aspect of Americana in the context of this project however is its heavily nostalgic outlook. The genre’s artists invoke the past in myriad ways including lyrical and musical quotations of old country songs, affected vocabulary in lyrics and stage banter, and vintage dress and music videos edited to look like they were made with outdated technology. This project is driven by the questions of how one can conceptualize these invocations of the past that juxtapose so sharply with contemporary realities and how these invocations operate to trace lines of continuity between the past, present and future. The approach that was finally decided on was to contextualize invocations of the past in the sphere of Americana as fitting into three strategies, a dialogue with a collective memory world of the rural past, and the somewhat

intertwined tactics of humanizing and disintermediating musical experience (production and consumption). What is uncovered in this investigation is that Americana might be considered as a space for the resolution of deep-set ambivalence about social and technological change. Instead of resisting change, Americana artists, listeners and promoters embrace technology in promoting the genre, in effect using the forces of change - the ill effects of which cause people to yearn for the past - to slow down the pace of change. The next section provides a brief introduction to three key strategies used in Americana to invoke the past, dialogue with a collective memory world, and the humanization and disintermediation¹ of musical experience.

Dialoguing with a Collective Memory World

When one hears the words country or rural the images called to mind are often those not of the rural present but of the rural past, a curious phenomenon that is often taken for granted. Even if someone has no personal experience with rural life they probably will have a pretty complete mental image of what rural life looks like. These mental associations can be attributed to collective memory which is formed out of a combination of lived experience and second- and third-hand representations of lived experience, with an emphasis on the latter. Collective memory is powerful because unlike personal memories the content of which is heavily influenced by our personal backgrounds, collective memory is more universal. One might think of collective memory in terms of an imaginary world or a psychic landscape, constructed out of images and ideas attributed to a given time and place in successive iterations. A clear example of

¹ The dictionary definition of disintermediation is “the elimination of an intermediary in a transaction between two parties” (Merriam-Webster). Here it is applied to the relationships between artists and their audiences to refer to the circumventing of various barriers that have come to obstruct and thus “dilute” the artistic intent of musicians. These barriers include bureaucratic record labels whose profit interests impose on the music they fund, conventional music distribution channels (commercial radio or mainstream music press) that act as gatekeepers between artists and audiences, and digital forms of musical consumption.

this is the collective memory world of the pre-Civil War American South, often referred to as the Old South. Mythic images of the American South have been exploited in song, film, radio, television and advertising to evoke sentimentality and humour and to exploit the audience's positive associations of home, purity and comfort with this version of the South (Cox 2011). This form of collective memory however has social implications; often the appeal of these romantic images of rural life is class-based and ultimately they serve to contain the region and its people to the distant past. As Americana's audience is predominantly middle-class, educated people living outside of rural areas, the messages of containment in the music operates as a form of enforcing class divisions and maintaining the social and economic marginalization of rural America.

Humanizing Musical Experience

The increasing role of technology in mediating musical consumption has led to depersonalized and disembodied forms of consuming and experiencing music. Digital music formats make for relatively hollow, disembodied listening experiences. In physical form, it is possible for music to engage several of the senses, sound, sight, touch, smell as well organic and kinesthetic senses. The physical rituals associated with music consumption – travelling to the music store, browsing the selection, socializing with the other patrons, contemplating the album art, reading the liner notes, handling the musical medium etc. – are lost with digital music. Album art is greatly devalued in the age of digital music because in most contexts the listener is unable to appreciate detailed album covers. In digital form the cover art, like the sound files, is compressed to fit the requirements of high-capacity music players with small display screens. The rise of digital music has also eroded the social aspect of listening, in that personal media

players and earphones privatize listening. Humanization refers to a move towards re-inscribing the human element in music production and consumption. On the side of consumption, humanization is about moving musical experiences beyond individualized, technologically-mediated interactions with computers, mp3 players and other devices towards more human relations around music: hearing a band through a club's loudspeakers instead of through a pair of ear buds, feeling the sound's reverberations through your body, partaking in the ephemeral experience of the event in communion with other listeners, going to a physical space to buy music and making small talk with the employees. On the side of production, humanization can be seen in the emphasis on acoustic instruments, and a general eschewing of synthesizers and electronic effects. There is a readily apparent movement towards humanized forms of musical production and consumption in Americana ranging from the emphasis on attending live shows and buying physical versions of albums in the genre's discourse to the highlighting of the human element in music creation in recordings and performance.

Disintermediating Musical Experience

The dictionary definition of disintermediation is "the elimination of an intermediary in a transaction between two parties" (Merriam-Webster). When used to refer to relationships between artists and audiences, disintermediation is shorthand for the circumventing of barriers that obstruct and thus "dilute" the artistic intent of musicians. These barriers include bureaucratic record labels who inevitably shape the work they finance, conventional music distribution channels (commercial radio or mainstream music press) that act as gatekeepers between artists and audiences, and digital forms of musical consumption that depersonalize the connection between artist and fan. Disintermediation is a way of invoking nostalgia in Americana in that

although it often relies on modern technology, it is viewed as a return to a simpler, uncorrupted form of music business, a return to fundamentals. Disintermediation in Americana can be broken down into four categories: promoting music's physical spaces, forms and experiences, artist involvement in self-promotion, online fan activity, and alternative media.

Notes on Literature, Method, and Sources

The literature on nostalgia and retro, especially the work of Fred Davis (1979), Elizabeth Guffey (2006), Simon Reynolds (2011) and Jean Paul Meunier (1969) by way of Vivian Sobchack and Patricia Lange, were foundational in the formation of my ideas around the role of the past in Americana, the operation of memory – individual and collective – and the meaning of invoking the past in the genre. This literature combined with Benjamin Filene's work on folk revivals (1991, 2000, 2004), Barbara Ching's work on the intersections of class, rural identity and country music (1997a, 1997b), Aaron Fox's work on the cultural politics of alt.country (2004, 2005, 2008) and Karen Cox's (2011) expert history of media representations of the American South, form the theoretical basis for the notion of a collective memory of the rural past (as examined in Chapter Two and referenced throughout the project). Another key source that bears mentioning is the 2008 essay collection, *Old Roots New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt. Country Music* edited by Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching which proved invaluable to the development of this thesis, shaping my ideas about Americana vis-à-vis issues of authenticity, commercialism, class, race, and gender.

The research method was also designed around the aim of providing a multi-dimensional examination of Americana, addressing its meaning to different groups of people, as a community of artists, a fan community, an aesthetic, a business, a marketing category, and a sphere of

discourse on memory, tradition, and “roots.” In this vein, I endeavoured to consult a wide variety of sources, and to include the expertise of scholars alongside the views of audiences, Americana artists and people working in the Americana industry. One of the most important parts of the research involved designing a survey to gather quantitative demographic data on Americana’s listening audience as well as listeners’ opinions about what Americana is – in terms of musical, philosophical and visual features. The project accounts for the views of listeners in Chapter Five’s interpretation of the responses to the anonymous, online survey which is explained in greater detail in the following section. The views of listeners were also considered insofar as they appeared in Americana fan forums like NoDepression.com and the responses to online interviews with artists and news stories. Attending the 2013 Americana Music Festival and Conference in September 2013 in Nashville, TN provided the opportunity for experiential research and brought fresh perspective on the meanings various groups of people attach to the genre. The consideration of both visual as well as musical material in the analysis in Chapters Three and Four also demonstrates the project’s multi-dimensional approach. While Chapter Three’s investigation was restricted to close listening to a defined sample (two tracks) of Americana, listening to a broad range of Americana music during the research, even though informal, was crucial in revealing the genre’s overarching musical and lyrical themes, guiding aesthetic, and points of commonality that unify the genre’s diverse body of artists. Similarly, although Chapter Four’s analysis was limited to a relatively small sample of Americana’s visual elements (the art and design of one album and performance dress of one artist), the discussion of Americana’s visuals was inevitably informed by the broad swath of Americana album art and marketing material I was exposed to in the course of the research.

The project was also shaped by a conscious effort to have the method reflect the content.

For example, the goal of Chapter One is to define Americana in order to form a solid foundation for discussing the genre in the latter chapters. Rather than approaching the explanation of the Americana's sonic and musical features in such a way that establishes a set of defining criteria, or strict genre boundaries, Chapter One broadly sketches Americana's musical identity, in a way that acknowledges the value of the genre's eclecticism and broad range of reference to artists and listeners. In resisting codification, Americana resists co-option and allows fans to claim a sense of ownership of the music and to cultivate an imagined community around the genre. The project's themes of modern technology's role in nurturing nostalgia and the importance of the Internet in Americana fan culture is reflected in Chapter Four's emphasis on the two YouTube videos created in relation to *The Harrow & the Harvest's* cover art as well as recurring references to online fan forums like NoDepression.com, links to YouTube videos, music blogs, and radio interviews available online.

The project places a great deal of emphasis on the Americana Music Association's (AMA) role in defining, promoting and mediating the meanings of the genre. This emphasis is demonstrated in commentary on the rhetoric employed by the AMA in marketing Americana on its website, in its press releases, e-mail newsletters and in interviews with the press which often feature the remarks of current AMA president Jed Hilly. I also make several references to my observations from attending the AMA conference, Honors & Awards show, and festival in September 2013. Addressing the role of the AMA seems appropriate given that although the genres Americana draws on –folk, country and alt.country especially –are well-established in the public consciousness, the idea of Americana as a standalone genre with a distinct identity and discourse has only really attracted mainstream recognition in the last five to ten years.

The AMA has been the driving force in promoting the genre and growing its public

profile. Just around the time of the AMA's founding in 1999, the genre label was widely considered a commercial disappointment having failed to deliver the profits first expected of it (Ching and Fox 2008, 237, Pecknold 2008, 35). The *Gavin Report*² even ceased publishing the Americana radio chart in October 2000 after which point the AMA took over publishing it (Pecknold 2008, 33). The Americana Music Association bills itself as “a professional trade organization whose mission is to advocate for the authentic voice of American Roots Music around the world” (AMA 2014, “who”). Some of the organization's promotional activities include organizing an annual industry conference (since 2000) and festival, producing the annual American Music Honors Awards Show (all of which take place during the same week each year), publishing weekly airplay charts, and successfully lobbying for an Americana Grammy awards category (established in 2009). The AMA also works to raise awareness of the Americana scene by participating in other industry events and conferences, increasing Americana's retail potential, and conducting research on the genre's industry and consumers (AMA 2014, “who”). In addition to these activities the AMA is working on a cross-marketing music-history tourism promotion project in the southern states (Wittenberg and Stein 2013, Skates 2013). As there are recurring references to the AMA conference, Honors & Awards show and festival in the main body of the thesis, the next section provides a brief overview of these events.

Each fall the AMA holds the “Americana Music Festival & Conference” in Nashville, TN. Although originally conceived as an industry-exclusive event, the AMA eventually realized the potential benefits of welcoming “anyone with a passion for music” to the annual festivities (AMA 2014, “history”). The result is an annual gathering with a vibrant atmosphere and sense

² The *Gavin Report* was a radio trade journal that published radio airplay statistics according to genre categories called formats.

of inclusivity reflective of the vision of Americana as a community of artists and listeners. Americana industry personnel and fans travel from around the world to attend. The 2013 edition of the AMA conference for example, attracted participants from Scandinavia, Germany, Australia, Britain, and Canada (AMA 2013, “impact”). There are three main components to the AMA’s annual gathering: an industry-centric conference, a multi-venue, multi-night festival of Americana music; and the Americana Honors & Awards Show. The Americana Music Conference features approximately 200 individuals participating in panels, seminars, workshops and performances tailored to the “interests and needs of artists, managers, labels, radio stations, publishers, agents, promoters, retailers, legal and business affairs executives, merchandisers and new media professionals” (AMA 2014, “conference”). The AMA reports that in 2013, “conference attendance increased to nearly 1,500 registrants, marking a 20% increase over 2012” (AMA 2013, “impact”). The festival component is open to conference attendees and the public alike and features a rich slate of programming at some of Nashville’s best music venues, showcasing emerging talent alongside veterans of American roots music. According to the AMA, “The Festival's music programming featured more than 140 official events and showcases attracting an aggregate 20,000 attendees over the fest's five-day span” (AMA 2013, “impact”).

The third component of the AMA’s annual convention is the Americana Honors and Awards Show³ which features the presentation of six member-voted awards and several Lifetime Achievement Awards, the appearances of celebrity presenters and several performances by award nominees backed by an incredible house band lead by Buddy Miller. The AMA added the Honors & Awards Show to their convention starting in 2002, and since 2008 it has been held at the iconic Ryman Auditorium, the historic home of the Grand Ole Opry (AMA 2014, “history”). Over its history the awards show has featured many memorable performances, including Johnny

³ To browse the archive of Americana award winners and nominees see <http://americanamusic.org/recipient-archive>

Cash and June Carter Cash's last live performance, Robert Plant & His Band of Joy and John Fogerty (Americana Music Association 2014, "history").

The Americana Listener Survey

Chapter Five is largely based on the results of an anonymous, online survey I designed to gather both quantitative demographic data on Americana's listening audience and qualitative data in the form of listeners' opinions about what the label Americana means— musically, philosophically and visually (see Appendix 8 and 9 for survey invitation and questions). The fifteen-question anonymous survey was conducted online and was live for a month from mid-February to mid-March 2013 during which time 268 participants representing listeners from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand shared their opinions. I recruited participants primarily through paid advertisements on the No Depression fan community website and in the No Depression e-mail newsletter (sent out twice a week) (see Appendix 7 for survey advertisement). Posts on Facebook groups formed by Americana listeners to share and discuss the music of their favourite artists also attracted moderate attention to the survey.

Among the benefits of conducting the survey online was that it allowed for the information gathered to reflect the opinions of Americana listeners around the world and in doing so, demonstrate Americana's growing popularity and the success of the AMA's branding efforts.

Conducting the survey online allowed the research method to reflect one of the project's main themes, the use of technology to promote Americana as a genre that values disintermediation and humanization over technological mediation, and depersonalized, and disembodied experiences of music. I chose to advertise the survey on NoDepression.com and in the website's e-mail newsletter because it is a popular hub for sharing information about

Americana with a good reputation and a fairly long history that attracts “more than 155,000 unique readers a month” (No Depression 2014, “About”). As a digital continuation of No Depression magazine, a leading voice in defining and promoting alt.country (before the genre went into decline and became part of Americana), the website is specifically focussed on Americana music. Furthermore, as a community website featuring user-generated content, it attracts active listeners who are interested in sharing their opinions and is a space for disintermediated musical consumption.

While valuable to this project’s discussion of Americana, I want to acknowledge the limitations of the survey method and caution against over-interpretation of the data. Several factors limited who participated in the survey. In order to participate, survey respondents had to have access to the Internet, and to have seen the survey advertisement - either by visiting the No Depression website, reading the No Depression e-mail newsletter, or being a member or visitor to one of the Americana-centered Facebook pages formed where the survey invitation was posted. Of course, there are several additional factors that influence a person’s choice to respond to an invitation to participate in a survey such as the technical difficulties involved in filling out a survey on a smartphone.

Introducing Gillian Welch, Dave Rawlings and *The Harrow & the Harvest* (2011)

The ideas presented in Chapters One and Two provide the framework for analysis and discussion of the “stuff” of Americana in Chapters Three and Four. To this end, Chapter Three examines two tracks from Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings’ 2011 album, *The Harrow & the Harvest* (*The H&H*) as a musical example of Americana and Chapter Four analyses *The Harrow & the Harvest*’s art and design, as well as two YouTube videos created in relation to the album

art as a visual example of Americana. The next section contextualizes the work of Welch and Rawlings and the decision to use *The Harrow & the Harvest* to illustrate the project's arguments.

Long-time musical partners Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings make up - to use Welch's words - the "two-piece band called Gillian Welch," a critically acclaimed duo that has released five albums over the course of the last twenty-some years (Wilkinson 2011). In the band, Welch sings lead vocals, plays rhythm guitar and occasionally banjo and Dave Rawlings provides vocal harmonisations and melodically-inventive improvised guitar accompaniment, although he too occasionally plays banjo. For most of their career, Welch's role has been writing the songs which Rawlings arranges, although they maintain a high level of collaboration at all stages of the creative process (Roberts 2011). In order to distinguish the ensemble from the individual in the rest of the thesis, Gillian Welch appears in quotation marks when referring to the collective of Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings. Despite receiving limited radio airplay, and for the most part finding support from regional and public radio stations, "Gillian Welch's" music has received widespread critical acclaim. Both the debut album, 1996's *Revival* and 2001's *Time (The Revelator)* were nominated for Grammy awards in the "Best Contemporary Folk" category (Harris 2011).

Welch and Rawlings model their minimalist performance arrangement of two voices and two guitars on the brother-team acts of the '30s and '40s, having been especially influenced by the Blue Sky Boys, the Stanley Brothers, the Monroe Brothers, the Louvin Brothers and the Delmore Brothers (Wilkinson 2011). The unaccompanied acoustic vocal duet format fell out of fashion with the emergence of bluegrass in the mid-1940s with its fuller sound, faster tempos and flashier instrumental work and has not made a comeback since, making it in the words of Alec Wilkinson, "one of the few forms of American music not yet completely covered with

footprints”(2011). As such, when Welch and Rawlings discuss the brother-team influence on their work, they “are portrayed as defenders of the faith – old-time string musicians - practitioners of a lapsed form” (Wilkinson 2011). Welch and Rawlings’ experience, artistic maturity and their commitment to promoting Americana and values throughout their career make their work an ideal case study of the genre even if the duo does not overtly self-identify as Americana artists. Moreover, Welch and Rawlings are recognized as Americana artists and ambassadors of the genre by audiences and the AMA alike. When asked to name 1-3 artists, acts or groups that best represent Americana, 13% of participants in the Americana listener survey cited “Gillian Welch.” At the 2012 AMA Honors & Awards Show, Gillian Welch won artist of the year and Dave Rawlings won instrumentalist of the year for *The Harrow & the Harvest* (AMA 2014, “Recipient”).

I chose to analyze material from Welch and Rawlings’ most recent album, 2011’s *The Harrow & the Harvest* (*The H&H*), for several reasons. As a relatively recent album, *The H&H* is perhaps best able to speak to the current status of Americana. Moreover, Welch and Rawlings’ nostalgic leanings are perhaps more pronounced on *The H&H* than in any of their previous work. Sonically, the album is their most minimalist to date, featuring just the two of them playing all instruments and Rawlings producing the album. More importantly, the album’s music and lyrics are rich in references to a wide array of American musical and cultural history with a particular emphasis on the nineteenth century. Welch and Rawlings are also fairly well known by this point in their careers so discussing their work makes my work accessible. British-based review aggregator site, *AnyDecentMusic*, ranked Welch and Rawlings’ last album, *The Harrow & the Harvest* as the “best-reviewed new release in the world, beating out Bon Iver” (Levine 2011).

The H&H also “debuted at #20 on the Billboard Top 200 album chart,” a notable achievement for an independently released album (Levine 2011).

Chapter Overview

Chapter One defines Americana according to three key points: its place within a musical and philosophical genre lineage, and as the product of tensions between competing values, one between notions of authenticity and commercial realities, and another between the genre’s nostalgic outlook and the benefits of technology in promoting the genre. Chapter Two develops a framework for discussing and interpreting the meaning of Americana artists’ invocations of the past. The discussion introduces retro and nostalgia, two orientations of engaging with the past, as a point of entry in discussing the idea of a collective memory world. In conjunction with Chapter One, the main points introduced in this chapter provide the structure of analysis and discussion in Chapters Three, Four and Five. Chapter Three examines two tracks from Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings’ 2011 album, *The Harrow & the Harvest* for the way these tracks demonstrate a dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past, as well as a humanizing and disintermediating approach to musical experience. Chapter Four adopts the same approach in analysing *The Harrow & the Harvest*’s art and design as well as two YouTube videos created in relation to the album art. Chapter Five takes a two-part approach in considering Americana’s relatively recent growth in popularity starting with an overview of Americana’s commercial growth, increasing public recognition and its transitioning from a niche genre market into the mainstream. The second part draws on data collected in the Americana listener survey in discussing Americana’s appeal based on three themes that emerged in the responses: class-based appeal, rhetoric of distinction and “roots.” The concluding chapter ties the material of the

previous chapters together to offer a unified condensation of the project's conclusions and to offer suggestions for future research.

Chapter One: Defining Americana

Americana is an umbrella genre representing an eclectic body of artists unified by the foregrounded influence of various American roots music genres – country, folk, bluegrass, R&B, roots-rock – on their work. While there is a great range of diversity within the genre, some of Americana’s common musical features include an emphasis on lyrical craft and storytelling, melodies, rhythms and harmonies that reflect the vernacular ideal of accessibility and the ideal of “three chords and the truth,”⁴ the prominence of vocals, a privileging of a vocalist’s performance of honesty and emotion over their technical excellence, acoustic instruments, especially those with “roots” associations (guitar, banjo, fiddle, upright bass), and an eschewing of overtly electronic sonic sources and processing (guitar and bass effects are generally accepted but synthesizers, vocal processing and sampling are absent). Inspired by the work of historian Benjamin Filene who traces folk revival activity in the early 2000s back to the influence of 1930s folk revivalists (the Lomaxes, the Seegers and Ben Botkin), this chapter outlines Americana’s genre lineage and identifies some of the musical and philosophical features Americana shares with its predecessors in this lineage. This chapter also discusses two tensions in Americana’s genre construction. One of these tensions is that between the anti-commercialism implicit in folk authenticity and the explicit commercial ambitions of the Americana Music Association. The second of these tensions to be discussed is that between nostalgic invocations of the past and the benefits of modern technology in growing Americana as a brand. While these tensions make it difficult to easily define the Americana genre, adopting a broad scope in analyzing the genre’s discourse throws into relief the compromises and resolutions to these two

⁴ “Three Chords and the Truth” is a widely referenced phrase often attributed to legendary Nashville songwriter Harlan Howard whose compositions include “I Fall to Pieces,” “Heartaches by the Number,” “Tiger by the Tail,” and “Streets of Baltimore.”

pairs of competing value systems.

Discussing Americana's lineage inevitably raises questions around the meaning of "roots" and drawing connections across time – questions that are explored in Chapter Two's discussion of nostalgia and in Chapter Five, which offers possible explanations for Americana's cultural resonance and growing popularity. In discussing Americana's genre lineage, this chapter traces some of the origins of a collective memory world of the rural past and examines how discourses around musical genres have contributed to this memory world. The notion of a collective memory world of the rural past is discussed in greater depth and detail in Chapter Two as well as referenced in Chapters Three and Four. While this chapter introduces the discussion around the paradoxical embrace of technology in service of a nostalgically-motivated humanizing and disintermediating of musical experience, Chapters Three and Four continue the discussion in more detail, grounded in analysis of the musical and visual material of "Gillian Welch's" 2011 album, *The Harrow & the Harvest*.

This chapter begins by defining Americana by way of outlining the genre's musical features and guiding philosophies before explaining the genre's origins with particular emphasis on the industry context in which it emerged. This basic outline of Americana is the foundation for the next section which traces Americana's genre lineage: folk, hillbilly, country, rock, punk and indie rock – by way of alt.country – and alt.country. The last section addresses two of the tensions inherent in Americana's genre construction – folk authenticity's struggle against Americana's commercial ambitions and the dilemma between Americana's nostalgic outlook and the benefits of modern technology.

What is Americana?

Americana's musical features are expressive of the genre's nostalgic vision of harkening back to a time when music (production and consumption) was simpler and there was less distance between musicians and audiences – distance in the form of bureaucratic record labels, notions of celebrity, and technological manipulation, for example. While acknowledging that accounting for the wide range of music represented by the word Americana is a potentially thorny issue, it is important to cite some of the genre's musical characteristics even if only to broadly sketch the genre's collective sound rather than establish a set of defining criteria. Musically, Americana artists strive for the vernacular ideal of folk music with sing-able, memorable melodies and relatively simple harmonic song structures. The rhythm of vernacular language in the American South is a clear influence on vocal phrasing and articulation; “Twang” and what is referred to as the “High Lonesome Sound” are prevalent sound qualities in Americana. When used to describe vocal quality, “twang” is best thought of as a combination of ‘loud and high-pitched singing’” (Sundberg and Thalén 2010) and “a nasal or other distinctive manner of pronunciation or intonation characteristic of the speech of an individual, area, or country” (Oxford Dictionary). Twang is also used to describe speech patterns in the American South. When describing an instrument's sound, twang usually refers to the conventional country lead guitar tone, a bright, treble-heavy, piercing sound with rapid decay reminiscent of a banjo, produced by a combination of percussive picking technique and the electronic specifications of certain models of electric guitars, the Fender Telecaster in particular. Twangy guitars and vocals are prominent sonic features in Americana. The “High Lonesome Sound” is a bright, nasal vocal quality associated with Bluegrass that is often employed on long notes to evoke pining. The prevalence of twang and High Lonesome vocals in Americana is indicative of the way vocals are

judged by their sincerity and their distinctiveness or “character” rather than according to their technical excellence or virtuosity. Pat Pattison, Gillian Welch’s songwriting teacher at the Berklee College of Music, probably sums up Americana’s vocal standard best in his comments on Welch’s singing:

One of the things that Gillian did very well was sing the song rather than the notes. You have singers who have a really great instrument, but you don’t feel they’re inside the song. When Gillian sings, it’s about the presentation of emotion. Even back then, she didn’t sing notes; she sang feelings and ideas (Pattison quoted in Wilkinson 2011).

Pattison’s description of Welch’s vocal style could easily describe the standard of vocal performance in Americana more generally. The emphasis on performing emotion over technical excellence might be thought of as a sort of working-class self-effacement in service of conveying the story in a song and an implied rejection of celebrity. The eschewing of celebrity comes back to a fundamental goal in Americana, to strip away the layers of mediation in musical experience so as to minimize the distance between the listeners and the artist and further still, between the listener and the song.

While it is challenging to define Americana according to specific musical features, there does seem to be a sonic aesthetic that unifies the work of the genre’s eclectic artists. This sonic aesthetic emphasizes the humanity and materiality of music-making, by highlighting the anomalies of human-made music and the unique sonic qualities that machines cannot replicate. This aesthetic takes many forms: it can be the hand clap, knee slap body percussion in “Gillian Welch’s” “Six White Horses,” the abrasive attack in Justin Townes Earle’s guitar playing, or the fluid vocals of the Civil Wars. The abundance of Americana groups incorporating vocal harmonies, especially in duo formations, is linked to the genre’s humanizing aesthetic. Not only are vocals the most embodied of instruments they are also difficult to digitally and realistically reproduce. Furthermore, the almost mystical quality to voices blending in harmony, the

interaction of the overtones and the variability of that interaction subject to any number of factors seems to sonically evoke a human frailty and ephemerality that cannot be tamed nor replicated with machines. Group singing might also be interpreted as a sonic enactment of community and a nostalgic invocation of the folk ideal of community-based music-making. There also seems to be a trend in Americana recordings to include pieces of dialogue from studio conversations, live shows and other sources to remove some of the sterility that can be associated with studio recordings. For example track one of Ryan Adams' album *Heartbreaker* (2000) is a 37-second excerpt of a good-spirited disagreement about which Morrissey record the song "Suedehead" appeared on, titled "Argument with David Rawlings concerning Morrissey" (Adams 2000). Similarly, as an introduction to the song, "Kemba's Got the Cabbage Moth Blues," from their album *O' Be Joyful* (2012), Americana duo Shovels and Rope tacked on a cell phone recording of a club owner's introduction to one of their sets, telling the audience to stop talking and listen to the band (Shovels and Rope 2012). This human-centered view of music-making seems especially nostalgic at the present time where the pop charts are populated with heavily produced tracks that rely on auto-tuned vocals, electronic sound sources, and other forms of technological manipulation that serve to fix and mask human imperfections.

In broader terms, Americana is music of the present that is clearly indebted to the influence of roots music that has come before it, essentially music with a built in ethic of nostalgia. The AMA highlights this point in their definition of Americana:

contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music styles, including country, roots-rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B and blues resulting in a distinctive roots-oriented sound that lives in a world apart from the pure forms upon which it may draw. While acoustic instruments are often present and vital, Americana also often uses a full electric band (AMA 2014, "what is").

Respondents to the Americana listener survey also highlighted the importance of American roots music from the past to the definition of Americana, writing that Americana draws on roots music traditions, acoustic forms, or even more broadly all American popular genres. The influence of American roots music's history on Americana is demonstrated in any number of ways: the use of clawhammer banjo technique to recall old-time, Appalachian ballads; cover versions of American roots songs; and younger artists performing or recording with older, veteran roots artists are a few examples. Americana's reverence for the past and its positioning as proud heir to American roots music traditions contrast sharply with the obsolescence built into the contemporary logic of country and pop music genres, whereby artists typically enjoy a short period of relevance in their careers before being replaced. Like folk music, Americana has been shaped to represent stability and rooted-ness, music that "sound(s) from the bedrock of U.S. culture, whereas pop is no more stable than the shifting sands of commercial fortune" (Coyle and Dolan 1993, 27). Even the word Americana evokes a myriad of antique, rustic, and nostalgic associations. As Giovanni Russonello notes in *The Atlantic*, "'Americana' was slang for the comforting, middle-class ephemera at your average antique store -- things like needle-pointed pillows, Civil War daguerreotypes, and engraved silverware sets" (2013). In response to Russonello's article, one reader posted "'Americana' implies country and kitsch and lower-classness, and I'm pretty sure that's what it implies to everyone who uses it" (Russonello 2013). Similarly, Petrusich writes that long before Americana was the adopted name for a music genre, the term was well established in the public consciousness, "suggest(ing) a million different things: A Norm Rockwell painting, a pickup truck, an oven-hot-apple pie served on a picnic table with perfect scoops of vanilla ice cream" (2011, 60). These comments capture the potency of "Americana" as a signifier of nostalgia.

The AMA's annual Honor and Awards Show is another expression of Americana's reverence for the past. Among the honours and awards are multiple categories for lifetime achievement: the President's Award, Lifetime Achievement Awards for Songwriting, Performance, Executive and Instrumentalist, as well as the "Spirit of Americana/ Free Speech in Music Award" (Americana Music Association 2014, "about the awards"). The result is that a large part of the awards show seems to be defining Americana's lineage by way of honouring artists whose music was Americana before the term emerged. The 2013 awards show, for example, featured performances by well-known and respected artists such as Dr. John, Duane Eddy, Richard Thompson, Stephen Stills with Richie Furay, and Robert Hunter (a songwriter in the Grateful Dead). Furthermore, as Russonello notes, no musician under sixty-years-old has won an Americana Grammy in the four years there has been such a category (Russonello 2013). This trend continued in 2014 with the Grammy award for Best Americana album going to Emmylou Harris' and Rodney Crowell's album of duets, *Old Yellow Moon* (2013) (grammy.com 2014). Meanwhile, the AMA website's "New Americana Music" page promotes re-issue albums alongside new music, such as the Buck Owens and Dave Van Ronk collections promoted on the page in November 2013 (AMA 2013, "New Americana"). Other examples of this celebratory view of the past can be found in the AMA's daytime conference program, which in 2013 included performance panels celebrating the work of Buddy Emmons and Eddy Arnold, interviews with Dr. John, Rodney Crowell and Delbert McClinton, and readings from newly released books on Merle Haggard and Ernie K-Doe (a New Orleans R&B singer). Americana also celebrates the notion of lineage in its support of generational artists, what others might call "musical dynasties," the sons and daughters of prominent Americana artists. Holly Williams performed a rendition of "I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry" at the 2013 AMA awards show, and

accepted the President's award on behalf of her grandfather, Hank Williams. Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash, gave an interview in the daytime conference before her well-promoted concert the same weekend. Among the other artists with family ties to Americana "royalty" featured in the 2013 AMA festival program were Lisa Marie Presley, Shooter Jennings, Lily Hiatt and Justin Townes Earle. In celebrating veteran artists and promoting second- and third-generation Americana artists, the AMA curates Americana's history, promotes the notion of lineages and cultivates a sense of genre-based community.

Just as significant in defining the Americana genre as its musical and philosophical values is its position vis-à-vis the music industry. As Richard Peterson (1997), Joli Jensen (1998), Keith Negus (1999), George H. Lewis (1993b) and Diane Pecknold (2001, 2008) have expertly shown in their work on the country music industry, it would be foolish to dismiss the role of industry structures – trade organizations, record labels, radio DJs, press etc. in the definition of genres. Accounting for the influence of industry forces is especially important in discussing Americana, a genre that originated within the industry. The Americana label was first used to represent a musical style in January 1995 when *The Gavin Report* started publishing the Americana radio chart founded by Jon Grimson and Rob Bleetstein (Pecknold 2008, 33).⁵ The chart tracked national radio airplay of recordings included in the Americana radio format, a "semicoherent new marketing category that had coalesced out of a disparate and diverse mix of styles: traditional 'hard' country, bluegrass, singer-songwriter, 'roots' rock and especially what was becoming codified in the mid-to late 1990s as 'alternative country'" (Fox 2008, 108 n.2). As Pecknold aptly notes, the *Gavin* Americana chart "started well before Americana was firmly

⁵ Before co-founding the Americana radio chart, Jon Grimson worked as a publicist for Dwight Yoakam, Iris DeMent and Uncle Tupelo at Warner Brothers Nashville, and in 1994 started his own artist promotion company while Rob Bleetstein had been an editor at the radio trade publication the *Gavin Report* (Pecknold 2008, 33).

established as a genre,” preceding the first publication of *No Depression* magazine, the Postcard2 listserv and the founding of the Americana Music Association (Pecknold 2008, 33). The chart arrived at a time when the unexpected success of grunge created a gold rush-like climate in the music industry as record labels sent representatives on the search for the next breakout genre (Pecknold 2008, 33). Americana may owe its existence to this frenzied period in music history, as a brand designed to exploit industry greed and deliver “the next big thing” (Pecknold 2008, 33). It was not until 1999 that the Americana Music Association was founded to develop the genre’s brand and market the music to larger audiences (Fox and Ching, 2008, 237).

The founding of both the Americana radio format and the AMA might also be read as reactions to the effects of intensive consolidation that overtook the recording and broadcast industries in the 1990s (Pecknold 2008, 36). From 1988 on, the mainstream recording industry underwent a process of remarkable consolidation until “by 1999, just over 80 percent of the worldwide market in popular music was controlled by five companies: Sony Music, Universal Music Group, Warner Brothers, EMI and BMG” (Pecknold 2008, 36). The radio industry was similarly affected by the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) (United States) 1996 decision to remove federal limitations on the number of radio stations a single company could own, prompting similar consolidation (Pecknold 2008, 36). In the aftermath of this deregulation, corporate giants, Clear Channel and Cumulus purchased the majority of the major American radio markets and imposed a new model of management on radio stations. This new model was based on efficiency that required centrally programmed “tightly managed playlists of only a few dozen songs and a business strategy dictating that stations either turn a profit immediately” or change their formulas until they are profitable (Pecknold 2008, 36). These changes transformed the traditional role of the radio DJ from promoting music that personally appealed to them to

following orders from company headquarters. In this industry context, artists whose music did not follow the criteria for selling advertising - in broad terms, up-tempo, upbeat songs with non-controversial lyrics mixed at a certain decibel level to match that of the ads - were pushed to the fringes of the market (Cook in Wittenberg and Stein 2013). There, they found a home on community and campus radio stations where freedom from commercial imperatives allowed the traditional role of the DJ to survive. The AMA emerged specifically to promote artists who were increasingly excluded from radio playlists (Knapp 2013, Pecknold 2008, Fox 2008, 108). A recurrent theme in the documentary, *Nashville 2.0: The Rise of Americana* (the first documentary film about the genre) is that Americana is essentially a collective of misfits, who belong in the genre “because there is no place else for them,” either because their sound does not neatly fit the criteria for country or rock commercial radio formats or because they are too old to be played by mainstream country radio (Robert K. Oermann quoted in Wittenberg and Stein 2013). In the words of musician and radio host Elizabeth Cook, Americana is music considered “too rootsy, too twangy, too rockin, or too something” for commercial radio (Cook quoted in Wittenberg and Stein 2013). Although this section has provided an overview of Americana’s essential features and origins as a genre, one cannot capture the essence of a genre, especially one as fundamentally self-conscious of its past as Americana without examining its founding influences, early traces and deeper history.

Lineage

Many of Americana's musical, visual and philosophical features can be traced through a genre lineage that includes folk - in its various revival incarnations - hillbilly, country, rock, punk - by way of alt.country - and alt.country. The goal of this section is to trace Americana's genre lineage and discuss some of the stylistic and philosophical features that Americana has inherited from its predecessors. Tracing Americana's genre lineage will uncover some of the main features shared among the lineage's disparate genres: dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past, a movement to humanize and disintermediate musical experience and the involvement of the middle class in mediating representations of rural culture and "the folk."

The "folk construct," a romanticized view of rural culture as "richer, deeper and less artificial than 'learned' culture" and its logical extension, the folk standard of authenticity premised on isolation from the market and modernity has had a considerable influence on Americana's genre lineage (Filene 2000, 9-11). The folk construct's romantic view of rural culture as a refuge from the various corruptions of modern life has been cultivated, exploited and consumed via American folk song collections of the early twentieth-century, the folk revivals of the 1930s and 1960s, early country music, alt.country, and through to the present time, in Americana. In time these idealistic representations of rural life came to circulate freely so that they became taken for granted, thus forming a collective memory – possessed by many though personally experienced by few. The demanding standard of folk authenticity has required musicians in Americana's lineage to maintain consistent, convincing appearances of naiveté and disinterest vis-à-vis the market even as they pursue careers as professional entertainers (Filene 1991).

Country music emerged from the commercialization and mass dissemination of folk

music in the 1920s made possible by the phonograph after the turn of the century and the radio following World War I (Cohen 2006, 29). The “country” genre classification marked folk music’s break from restrictive notions of “folk authenticity” that had previously denied it access to modernization or professionalization. Having branched off from traditional folk music in the early 1920s though, it is no surprise that country music shares with folk a romanticized collective memory of the rural past even as it embraced the modern technologies of recording and radio in pursuit of commercial success. As Barbara Ching notes, country music “consistently portrays and addresses itself to a psychic geography that is at least metaphorically rustic” notwithstanding that country listeners extend beyond rural backwaters (Ching 1997, 232).

Romanticized images of rural culture were also a driving force in the 1930s folk revival, a period that historian Benjamin Filene argues was highly influential on all subsequent folk revival activity. The legacy of the 1930s American folk song revivalists (the Lomaxes, the Seegers and Ben Botkin among them) is felt both “directly in the sense that you can trace a lineage back from today’s revival artists and cultural brokers to the thirties” and indirectly in that they “shaped our assumptions about what a revival is, who gets revived, and how” (Filene 2004, 51). Filene credits these revivalists with establishing three major tenets of folk revival ideology: the celebration of folk culture “as a distinctively American form” (Filene 2004, 51), the definition of folk music as a “flexible, vital, contemporary form” (Filene 2004, 65) and the view of folk culture as an “alternate source of strength in a time of crisis in America - as a counterculture” (Filene 2004, 55). Indeed, one should not underestimate the impact of cultural brokers in social movements such as folk revivals; a folk revivalist is akin to a film maker, guiding the audience’s eye, shaping interpretations, editing and selecting what is presented, essentially constructing reality. As Neil Rosenberg has argued, folk revivals inevitably involve

transforming the culture under study (1993). Folk cultures are not so much documented as they are packaged, a process shaped by the collectors' ideological motivations. While Americana seems to be more commercially-oriented than folk revivals of the past, it is clear that folk revival ideology, especially the three tenets established by the 1930s revivalists have had a significant influence on Americana.

In Americana's genre discourse, commercialization and consolidation in the country music industry – particularly the shift towards “the Nashville Sound” in the 1950s and the video-friendly, crossover megastars of the 1990s – are viewed as a betrayal of cultural “roots” in favour of profitability and therefore a forfeiture of authenticity and artistic credibility. The aftermath of widespread consolidation in the recording and radio industries during the 1990s is often framed as a major influence on the emergence of the alt.country genre. Alt.country was a kind of sub-cultural reiteration of country music that reclaimed what was allegedly lost in the process of intensive industry consolidation: musical and lyrical signifiers of rusticity, populism, as well as small/moderate-scale production. Within alt.country's genre culture, Nashville country was synonymous with “musical regression, corporate dilution and commercial pandering” (Malone 2010, 491). Similarly, while Americana incorporates many aspects of country music, it paradoxically also defines itself in opposition to country because the latter is too heavy with negative associations among Americana's target audience of educated, white, liberal, middle-class listeners. Aaron Fox notes that, “anti-Nashville rhetoric has played a profoundly important role in the emergence of Americana as a cultural and marketing category” (Aaron Fox 2008, 108). To resolve this tension between country's poor public image and the attraction to sounds and imagery related to country music, Americana repackages country music within a rockist framework, incorporating rockist standards of musical value, replacing country's proudly low-

brow stance with a “rhetoric of cultural distinction” (Fox, 2009, Wolk 2006) and integrating rock’s code of connoisseurship (Straw 1991).

Alt.country was originally conceived as a punk-country hybrid with an anti-commercial stance influenced as much by notions of folk authenticity, as by traditional country’s populism, punk’s fiercely independent D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) aesthetic and the subcultural ideals of 1980s indie rock (Dechert 2001, Peterson and Beal 2001, Powers cited in Hight 2013). While Americana originated as a self-conscious music branding effort, alt.country’s origins were more “folk-like,” crystallizing around the active listening habits of fan communities who supported independent bands, labels and record stores, shared their favourite music with other fans and sought out new music, mostly through online contexts including listservs and discussion boards. Alt.country also drew on nostalgic imagery of rural and small-town life in its lyrics, dialoguing with the same collective memory world as the folk revivals and country music, though perhaps from a slightly different perspective of post-industrial decline (Peterson and Beal 2001). As Aaron Fox points out the “alt.” in alt.country signifies consumption outside the mainstream, as it does in alternative rock, but perhaps more importantly, it also signifies an alternative to mainstream modernity, “stressing connections to particular (usually ‘rural’ and ‘traditional’) places” (Fox 2005, 165). By the mid-1990s “alt.country” was being applied to such a broad array of artists and bands that it became an empty signifier, drained of meaning (Mayshark 2006). In the mid- to late-1990s, as several defining alt.country bands broke up and their leading musicians went in new musical directions away from alt.country (for example, Jeff Tweedy with Wilco), it was increasingly clear that the alt.country scene had run its course.

When alt.country faded it was subsumed by the then-emerging Americana genre classification, a more institutionalized, commercially-oriented genre that represented an even

broader range of music. The influence of alt.country is evident in Americana's promotion of small-scale business models such as independent artists, record labels, and record stores, a less extreme form of the D.I.Y. aesthetic and in the importance of community in Americana's discourse, reflecting the importance of local scenes in alt.country. Americana artists and promoters build a sense of community on an assertion of its underdog position in the market which transforms passive consumers into empowered supporters whose contributions are vital in sustaining the genre. As in alt.country, Americana listeners embrace online platforms – music blogs, YouTube, artist websites, Facebook groups, streaming services, online radio etc. as part of their active consumption – listening, researching, purchasing, discovering and sharing music. This kind of circumventing traditional, bureaucratic music distribution channels in favour of more direct (or seemingly more direct) relationships between artists and fans is what is meant by the disintermediation of musical experience. The paradox of Americana artists embracing modern technology to promote their nostalgically-charged music is discussed in greater details towards the end of this chapter. As has been suggested so far in this chapter, a genre's particular way of engaging with commercialism plays an important role in the genre's definition and reception. The next section, therefore traces the origins of the anti-commercial stance in Americana and looks at how the dilemma between folk authenticity and Americana's explicit commercial ambitions is resolved in the genre's discourse.

Folk Authenticity Vs. Commercial Realities

The folk construct and its logical extension, folk authenticity has had a powerful and lasting impact on Americana's genre lineage. The involvement of the middle-class in perpetuating and policing folk authenticity is also apparent when tracing folk authenticity's early origins through Americana's genre lineage up to the present day. Benjamin Filene writes that European intellectuals of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century were fascinated with folk culture and developed the ideological construction of "the folk": defining "true" folk as "pure and artless" rural peasants (Filene 2000, 9-11). By extension, "true" folk songs were defined by their seeming isolation from the contaminating forces of modern life (Filene 2000, 11). Pickering notes that the folk construct bears the imprint of its privileged class originators, its aesthetics "conceived, in the same image as those of high culture, as free from commercial imperatives and influences, and thus authentic and good" (1986, 205). In nineteenth-century America, academics and antiquarians such as Francis Child studied folk music, continuing an apparent trend of fascination with folk culture among the privileged class (Filene 2000, 12).

Americana's commercial orientation is most comparable to Hillbilly in the 1920s which also struck an uneasy balance between restrictive folk authenticity and commercial interests. Americana could easily be described in the same words that Anne and Norm Cohen use to describe Hillbilly music: new music self-consciously "fashioned . . . on the contours of the old" and "a commercial folk-derived tradition" (1977, 163-165). And, like Hillbilly, Americana is a thoroughly hybrid⁶ musical form that recognizes and embraces the complexity of vernacular musics of the American South in a way that deviates from restrictive notions of folk authenticity. Folk and country both have long histories of promoters who defined the genres as rustic and pre-

⁶ Charles Seeger once referred to Hillbilly as a "super-hybrid form of some genuine folk elements which have intruded into the mechanism of popular music" (quoted in Filene 2004, 54).

modern. This narrow view dismissed a great deal of music as inauthentic and unworthy of promotion. Richard Peterson critiques the longstanding rusticizing of country music which he traces back to the “old-time” and “old home” marketing labels which packaged country music as a “pure” folk expression uncontaminated by the market, modernization or racial mixing (Peterson 1997, 64). It is interesting to note that the people involved in defining country music as backwards and rural were often affluent. Henry Ford, for example, sponsored the first fiddlers’ contests as well as community sings and square dances (Hogeland 2009, 327). George Hay, who worked for WSM country radio and founded the Grand Ole Opry is said to have been “the most self-conscious architect of the radio hillbilly” (Peterson 1997, 72,). Hay christened the Gully Jumpers and the Fruit Jar Drinkers, and changed Dr. Bate and His Augmented Orchestra to the Possum Hunters (Peterson 1997, 75). Richard Peterson points out that this rustic definition of country music was less a response to working-class audiences’ taste and more an ideologically motivated construction:

even in the early decades of the twentieth century, working class audiences ‘quickly tired’ of old-time country music performers but ‘middle-class modernists,’ from Ford corporate titan Henry Ford to amateur song collector Jean Thomas, tried to perpetuate the old-timey image as part of their own ideological agendas (Peterson 1998, 198).

Benjamin Filene also notes the influence of “folk authenticity” and notions of “purity” defined and propagated by 1930s folk song revivalists such as the Lomaxes and the Seegers who strategically collected songs from “self-contained homogenous communities cut off from the corrupting influences of popular culture such as radio,” remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps and Southern segregated prisons (Filene 1991, 605). Ethnomusicologists Anne and Norm Cohen describe folksong scholars as “antique hunters” with “their antennae tuned for the old and arcane” and note that such scholars have historically tended to dismiss

hillbilly recordings, viewing them as “antithetical to the notions of folk cultures” (Cohen and Cohen 1977, 161). Thus, song collectors’ driving motivation to find songs uncontaminated by popular culture in the “eddies of human society” was more a strategy to contain folk culture, defining it “as geographically isolated, chronologically removed, and socially deviant,” an ideological construction, the legacy of which is still felt today (Filene 1991, 605, Filene 2004, 61). As historian Joe Klein writes, “Instead of listening to Grandma sing ‘Barbara Allen’ on the back porch - the kids, and often Grandma too - were listening to Bing Crosby on the radio” (Klein quoted in Filene 1991, 605). The truth is that the populations from which so-called “pure” folk music originated never accepted the notion of commercial, mass-mediated or popular music as a corrupting force.

The involvement of the privileged class in perpetuating notions of folk music as rustic and pre-modern continued in subsequent waves of folk revivalism. The 1960s folk revival was predominantly a phenomenon of the affluent. Bluegrass became very popular at universities in the northern states of the U.S., producing bands such as Yale’s Grey Sky Boys, Harvard’s Charles River Valley Boys and Greenwich Village’s Greenbriar Boys (Lund and Denisoff 1971, 401). Northern collegiate groups were also known to enter musicians’ conventions in the South and capture prizes there, a trend that continues to this day (Lund and Denisoff 1971, 401). Coyle and Dolan write that “the college and coffeehouse scene of the late fifties and early sixties . . . wasn’t folk music at all” because “the music known as folk was controlled by self-appointed collectors, museum curators, and other intellectuals” (Coyle and Dolan 1993, 27).

Ethnomusicologist Tamara Livingston (1999) surveyed a broad range of folk revival movements and found that music revivals are the product of a middle-class habitus. It would seem that Americana, having been influenced by earlier folk revivals would appeal to similar audiences.

Respondents to my survey of Americana's listening audience were predominantly middle-class, university-educated urban-dwellers.

Though much time has passed since the folk revival of the 1930s, notions of folk purity continue to have a considerable influence. Artists whose work could easily be described as Americana are openly against the Americana label because it is perceived as a marketing construct. When asked to discuss "how Americana has evolved – and not evolved" Will Sheff of Okkervil River responds by saying, "I never considered myself an Americana artist, but I'm a huge fan of old-time music from the States, the recordings that were made in the '20s and '30s" (Tedder 2011, 72). Expressing sentiments eerily similar to those of the 1930s folk revivalists, Sheff remarks later in the same interview, "Culture dictated from above is the enemy of folk music" (Tedder 2011, 72). Steve Earle also rejects the genre label, saying, "I'm not going to bad-mouth Americana; I think I have the No.1 Americana record right now. I can fight it all I want to, but basically I'm a folk singer" (Tedder 2011, 72). Sheff and Earle's comments are indicative of the danger posed by notions of "folk authenticity" to turn a burgeoning music scene staid.

Americana is clearly beset by the conflict between folk authenticity and its commercial *raison d'être*. If Americana is a community of artists and fans committed to a shared set of ideals, it is also, if not more so, a thoroughly commercial construct, existing to sell music. Since its early days as a radio format, Americana has grown into a full-fledged music marketing category with a built-in logic of capitalistic growth. As a result of the AMA's efforts, the genre is increasingly receiving coverage in mainstream American press outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* and *U.S.A. Today*, indicating the increasing awareness and currency of the label (Patchett 2007, Russonello 2013, Shriver 2009, Paulson 2013). To borrow David Brackett's description of 1960s folk rock, Americana presents itself as "an anti-mass mass form" that

employs an “‘art for art’s sake’ mode of ‘authenticity’” (Brackett 2007, 116). The AMA’s ultimate goal is to build the genre’s brand so that it becomes a well-known and trusted source for listeners looking for new music. The AMA has built the Americana brand by cultivating a sense of time depth and rooted-ness in its lineage (similar to how companies such as Coca-Cola use old-timey imagery to promote a tradition of quality) and by promoting the genre as a community or a scene. Mark Olson notes that “scenes are valuable because they can secure consumption of those commodities identified with a particular scene,” and writes that like a record label that develops an identity to win the trust of fans, association with a scene can make a band’s music “worth owning” even if the scene’s adherents have never heard of them otherwise (Olson 1998, 274). If the AMA’s self-conscious references to the past and promotion of an Americana scene are interpreted as incidental it is only proof of the marketing’s success; these features are (at least in part) strategic constructions created with the express intent of selling music.

Americana resolves the dilemma between its commercial ambitions and folk authenticity’s rejection of the market by asserting its moderate-scale operations relative to country music’s large-scale commercialism. The mainstream country music boom of the early 1990s was an opportunity in disguise for Americana. The blockbuster sales standards set by artists such as Shania Twain and Garth Brooks undermined Nashville’s capacity for experimentation with new (or old) sounds and decimated the business’ “middle class,” which the major labels ignored in pursuit of artists with the greatest earning potential (Pecknold 2008, 35). This “middle class” refers to “artists whose albums sell by the hundreds of thousands rather than by the millions” (Pecknold 2008, 36). Thus, consolidation in the country music industry in the 1990s made room for Americana whose artists could sell at the mid-market level (Pecknold 2008, 35). While Americana expresses anti-commercial sentiments it does not mobilize the same

punk-influenced, staunchly DIY discourse as its alt.country predecessor. Instead, Americana maintains its position of anti-commercial authenticity by positioning its sales relative to the country industry's much larger-scale business. Pecknold explains that,

By emphasizing the modest expectations of those who stand to benefit from the business, popular accounts of the Americana industry simultaneously defend commercialism focused on 'making a living, not a killing' and reiterate the difference between the specific form commercialism takes in the alt.country business as opposed to the mainstream (Pecknold 2008, 42).

The shared experience of exclusion from commercial radio and operating outside the strictures of the mainstream music industry, freedom from major label involvement is seized upon as a basis for Americana's "alternative" identity. Americana artists share a sense of pride in pursuing music careers on the margins of the industry while Americana fans bond over their complaints that commercial radio betrayed them and by sharing their personal discoveries of new music, approaching their recommendations like an underground trade. Artists and entrepreneurs asserting their middle market position are in essence joining the post-industrial working class in the absence of any connection to the social experience of working class or rural-to-urban migrants who were initially country music's most important market (Pecknold 2008, 43).

I want to pick up on Pecknold's suggestion of a working class ethic amongst Americana artists and promoters in the following section on disintermediation in the genre. It would follow that a working class ethic would appeal to Americana artists and fans taking on roles that were once the domain of industry professionals, and in doing so making closer connections between producers and consumers.

Looking Forward, Looking Back: The Intersection of Nostalgia and Modern Technology

Americana's nostalgic inclinations are also apparent in the privileging of disintermediated relations between musicians and audiences. The idea of unadulterated artistic expression is a nostalgic vision of eras when there was less distance between artists and audiences, when the will and action of audiences had a more tangible impact, and music had a more substantial role in everyday social life. The corporatization and digitization of music has in many ways placed music at a distance from typical listeners. Writing on the general state of music at the present time, Simon Reynolds writes, "Music has become insubstantial – not just in the sense of becoming dematerialised code but because all the various forms of 'substance' with which rock critics and rock fans have dignified and validated pop music (in the process tethering it to the Real of social and biographical context) have now vaporised" (Reynolds, 2011, 113). What we see in Americana is a movement to reinscribe the substance and human element in music production and consumption. Disintermediation then is firmly linked with the humanization of musical consumption. Conventional channels of music distribution (commercial radio and large-scale music retail) operate to *bring* musical product to consumers, and therefore nourish passive consumption patterns. The mediated and dehumanized experience of music is compounded by the rise of mp3 players which promote individualized listening experience. On the other hand, disintermediated channels rely on audience agency, active listeners who *seek* new music and fan communities whose music-based socialization brings a human element to music promotion. When applied to the relationships between artists and their fans, disintermediation refers to the circumventing of various barriers that have come to obstruct and thus "dilute" the artistic intent of musicians. These barriers include bureaucratic record labels whose profit

interests impose on the music they fund, conventional music distribution channels (whether commercial radio or mainstream music press) that act as gatekeepers between artists and audiences, notions of celebrity that place the musicians at a remove from their fans, and individualized, digital forms of music consumption. The success of disintermediation in a genre depends on an audience acculturated to actively consuming music.⁷ Passive consumers make listening and purchase decisions based on the iTunes or *Billboard* charts, Grammy nominations and an artist's presence on commercial radio. Active listeners make a hobby of consuming music: seeking new bands and delving into the musical past by reading music blogs, music-oriented magazines, participating in self-described online music "communities" such as NoDepression.com and Twangville.com,⁸ using YouTube and music streaming services (and pursuing the results of algorithm-generated recommendation features therein), and checking in on the websites of their favourite bands. Even though these alternative forums for music promotion and distribution might still be considered gatekeepers, they are nonetheless viewed as trustworthy because they are supposedly operated by genre insiders who share similar tastes and values. And, while media streaming services and online music stores *are* intermediaries between artists and audiences, they do allow more room for agency on the part of listeners in choosing

⁷ As active music consumption practices require time and effort, discussing disintermediation in Americana inevitably points back to the class aspect of Americana's audience, a group that not only has leisure time but is inclined to spend part of their leisure time researching new music instead of simply enjoying what is readily available.

⁸ NoDepression.com is the online continuation of the hugely influential *No Depression* magazine (1995-2008). NoDepression.com defines itself as a "community website" whose stated mission is to give "voice to the roots music community." In addition to a digital archive of the magazine, unpaid community members generate the website's content which includes blog posts, reviews, music, videos, and live concert photography, as well as a lively public music discussion forum. (<http://www.nodepression.com/page/the-story-of-no-depression>). Twangville.com is a music blog featuring the opinions of a group of writers from the United States whose website "explains that it started "as a place to post playlists for our friends," but grew into a forum for music reviews with an emphasis on "the alternative side of alt-country" (Twangville.com quoted in Ching and Fox 2009, 11). Like NoDepression.com, Twangville.com casts itself as a community that others can join by registering and submitting their own posts, and both sites are supervised so that only the "best" content makes it to the front page (Ching and Fox 2008, 11).

what they can hear and for allowing creative freedom on the part of artists who can use them to retain creative control and pursue a career with their music at the same time.

Paradoxically, Americana's disintemediated musical consumption is at once an expression of nostalgia (in promoting alternatives to exclusively digital consumption) and an acceptance of contemporary life (in that most forms of disintermediation are Internet-based), as well as a way for the genre to assert an anti-commercial, subcultural stance even while engaging with the market. As a genre on the fringes of the music industry, Americana artists and fans especially embrace the opportunities for D.I.Y. artist promotion, alternative media coverage and fan engagement that the Internet offers.

Conclusion

This chapter's definition of Americana and introduction to the project's main themes – the struggle between the allure of the past and the pull of the future, the balance between folk authenticity and commercial realities, and the use of technology towards humanizing and disintermediating musical production and consumption – forms the first part of the project's theoretical foundation. As one might expect, the second part of this foundation is found in Chapter Two. The purpose of Chapters Three, Four and Five then is to ground the material presented in Chapters One and Two in “the stuff” of Americana. To that end, Chapter Three analyzes two tracks from “Gillian Welch's” *The Harrow & the Harvest* (2011), Chapter Four analyzes the visual design of the same album, and Chapter Five interprets the findings of a survey of Americana's listening audience, a sample of Americana's reception and resonance among listeners. The hope is that this approach provides a panoramic view of the genre balanced with in-depth analysis. In discussing Americana's genre lineage, tracing the origins of a

collective memory world of the rural past and examining how discourses around musical genres have contributed to this memory world this chapter introduced the notion of a collective memory world which is the central idea explored in Chapter Two. The next chapter picks up from this chapter's discussion of genre lineage in exploring how the philosophical and musical strains of Americana's genre lineage meet in the construction of a collective memory world of the rural past and the creation of trigger tropes that invoke it. Chapter Two also addresses Americana's paradoxical embrace of technology in service of a nostalgically-motivated humanizing and disintermediation of musical experience introduced in this chapter, from the angle of the Internet's role in collective memory.

Chapter Two: Americana and Collective Memory

“The past is never dead, it’s not even past”
- William Faulkner

Americana artists conjure up the past in many ways: old-timey lyrical themes, references and imagery – mules, plows and moonshine stills among them, lyrical quotations of old and obscure folk and country songs, favouring vintage instruments and analog recording, eschewing synthesizers and other explicitly electronic instruments and effects, and even dressing like they hail from another place and time. But Americana artists and fans also freely juxtapose elements of modern life with signifiers of the rural past and embrace modern technology in promoting their work, making it clear that their nostalgic invocations of a rural past are not intended as a rejection of the present. Rather, these nostalgic expressions cultivate a sense of continuity between the past and the present, and make a present marked by constant change and pursuit of progress more assimilable, acting as a counterbalance to change run amok, in effect, slowing it down. Americana artists dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past in their musical and visual expressions of nostalgia. Rather than the product of lived experience and personal memories of rural life, this collective memory is largely the product of media representations, which makes it something large groups of people can understand regardless of their individual backgrounds. Certain lyrical images, sonic timbres, and musical instruments have been used in the media to signify an ideologically-framed vision of the rural past so often that they have become hypertextual portals to the psychic landscape of this collective memory, formed from second- and third-hand memories. Ultimately, the focus of this chapter is the junction of technological progress, and nostalgia, particularly the ways modern technologies operate to

nurture nostalgia. Building on Chapter One's exposition of Americana in terms of its musical and philosophical features, its musical lineage, and its defining tensions, this chapter conceptualizes Americana's engagement with the past. In conjunction with Chapter One, this chapter forms the theoretical foundation of this project. The purpose of Chapters Three, Four and Five then is to ground the arguments and ideas of this theoretical foundation in analysis of Americana texts, one musical, one visual and one representing the views of Americana listeners. In defining Americana, Chapter One cited several of the ways that Americana artists invoke the past. Drawing from earlier work on nostalgia and retro, this chapter contextualizes these invocations of the past as part of an ongoing construction and dialogue with a collective memory world that has developed through Americana's genre lineage. This chapter also picks up from chapter one's illustration of the tensions inherent in Americana in noting another tension inherent in the genre: a longing for return to a prelapsarian world represented in Americana's landscape of collective memory, and the impossibility of return because all the signifiers of this world are "always already in the order of the reproduced" (Wernick 1997, 221). Alongside Chapter One's material on the movement in Americana to humanize and disintermediate musical production and consumption, this chapter's discussion of Americana's engagement with collective memory provides the framework for the analysis of the musical and visual aspects of Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings' *The Harrow & the Harvest* (2011). The overview of nostalgia as it applies to Americana in this chapter suggests hypotheses for the growing popularity of Americana and other nostalgia-charged cultural phenomena which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

This chapter begins by outlining two forms of engaging with the past, retro and nostalgia as they relate to Americana. An understanding of retro and nostalgia provides the basis for discussing the construction of a collective memory world of the rural past, how Americana artists dialogue with this collective memory world and the unfortunate side effects of this construction. While nostalgia theory provides a general framework for discussing Americana's relationship with the past, Elizabeth Guffey's theorization of retro speaks particularly to Americana's socio-historical context insofar as the influence of mass media on collective memory and the way the availability of the past in the digital age turns history into raw material to be freely exploited.

Retro

Both nostalgia and retro arise in response to feelings of unease (at both the individual and societal level) in reaction to change and *use* the past to quell that uneasiness. Guffey argues that retro is a symptom of our culture having "outrun earlier forms of optimism" which leaves a vision of the future as an unknown and "treacherous territory" (Guffey 2006, 164). Through retro's lens the past is "a remote and distinct other," both separate and naïve, a view that uplifts our collective status in the present, casting us as "more sophisticated than previous generations" (Guffey 2006, 164). As we collectively confront an unknown future coloured with thoughts of foreboding, retro conjures a comforting image of the outmoded and passé to show us the distance travelled since and implicitly suggests then that we are not doomed after all. In his book, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia*, Fred Davis also points out what he refers to as the "powerful benchmarking potential" of invoking the past, which is helped along "by nostalgia's notorious tendency to simplify and romanticize the past, so much as to allow us to adopt an almost patronizing attitude" to the past (1979, 45). Retro's sense of detachment from

the past and nostalgia's tendency to patronize the past create ideal conditions for the construction of a mythic world of collective memory.

In *Retro: the culture of revival*, design scholar Elizabeth Guffey discusses retro as a distinct orientation one may adopt in engaging with the past and outlines its appearance in various pop culture phenomena from the nineteenth-century onwards. I draw primarily from Guffey's theorization of retro because no other author addresses retro as a discreet phenomenon, separate from nostalgia. Most critics approach the word retro as interchangeable with nostalgia. Music critic Simon Reynolds, for example explained that "retromania," the title of his 2011 book was chosen because it was "an open-ended evocative term for a bunch of phenomena to do with retro, vintage, nostalgia, revivalism, curatorial aesthetics, commemorative culture, collecting, reissuing, etc.," phenomena that he explains are, "related and intermeshed" (Reynolds 2012). There are three points of Guffey's theorization of retro that particularly resonate with Americana: retro's detachment, democracy and principle of "freeplay." Retro views the past "through a contemporary sensibility" and tempers its admiration with a sense of detachment, which Guffey writes is perhaps retro's "most enduring quality" (Guffey 2006, 14, 20-21). Retro's detachment is also what makes it so well suited for framing Americana artists' engagement with the past given both the mediated nature of Americana's collective memory and the cultural distance between the majority of people involved with Americana and the rural past they celebrate.

Guffey distinguishes retro from other orientations to the past such as revivalism and historicism related to nostalgia for its free-spirited, non-serious and mildly subversive character. Fitting with its free-spirited and non-serious stance, retro is an essentially popular form of engaging with the past. Unlike historicist and heritage movements which are largely the work of

historians, academics, and other trained persons, retro is open to everyone. In Guffey's words, "retro embodies a communal memory of the recent past preserved by a new kind of 'freelance' historian (that) has developed outside the mainstream of artistic and historical thought [whose] memorialization of the recent past emerges . . . through identification and acquisition of objects from the recent past, as well as the replication of its images and styles" (Guffey 2006, 26). Retro is not concerned with meeting the past through textbooks and documents but rather through the stuff of "everyday life," the "artistic and popular culture" of the recent past (from the Industrial Revolution onward) which contrasts with historicism's tendency to privilege artifacts of official culture and periods in the distant past (Guffey 2006, 27). In chapter one I looked at how influential audiences have been in shaping Americana, particularly through online music-based community forums; the Internet also facilitated democratization of access to history on a massive scale. Whereas before the Internet music history was relatively exclusive – the domain of scholars, music critics, industry personnel, record collectors and the like – sites like YouTube⁹ and Wikipedia encouraged the development of a whole class of amateur musicologists offering ease of access to a huge amount of musical history and implicitly inviting users to personally draw the links between disparate musicians and styles across the lines of space, time, race etc., and to likewise have a hand in writing history. Furthermore, the Internet provided a platform for this burgeoning class of amateur musicologists to showcase their opinions and expertise in blogs and on community-based music forums such as NoDepression.com. Retro's free-spirited-ness and accessibility is perhaps most dramatically expressed in its view of the images, styles and material culture of the past, as a form of public property, a raw material free for appropriation

⁹ One should also note the influence of online music stores like iTunes and Amazon which make a broad range of older music available to "freelance historians."

and endless remixing, unbound by rules of historical accuracy, academic-style citation, or any other ethical concerns (Guffey 2006, 26, 27).

I use the word “freeplay” as shorthand to refer to retro’s approach to the past as a kind of play – viewing history as an immense collection of raw material to be played with so that material from different eras and cultural origins can be freely combined – and as a play that is free from any rules of historical accuracy, ethical use, or the citation of sources. As Elizabeth Guffey writes,

Half-ironic, half-longing, ‘retro’ considers the recent past with an unsentimental nostalgia . . . unconcerned with the sanctity of tradition or reinforcing social values . . . it often insinuates a form of subversion while side-stepping historical accuracy (2006, 11).

Freeplay can also refer to retro’s exploratory aimlessness. Whereas the revivalism of the nineteenth-century (a historicist approach) used the past to frame the present as a culmination of a “progressive evolution of human knowledge,” true to its subversive character, retro is much less intentional in its recall; rather than selectively celebrating “proud examples of the past” so as to “elevate contemporary society,” retro is about shuffling “through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners, replacing the ‘charming’ and ‘romantic’ with the ‘weird’ and ‘ugly’”(Guffey 2006, 14, 21, 161). Jean Baudrillard aptly summarizes retro’s principle of freeplay, describing a retro politics “emptied of substance and legalized in their superficial exercise, with the air of a game and a field of adventure” (quoted in Guffey 2006, 149). Without concern for the sanctity of tradition, the reinforcement of social values, historical accuracy, or even a purpose, retro is hedonistic, encouraging free use of the past for one’s own purposes, borrowing and discarding according to one’s whims alone.

The eclecticism of the Americana genre reflects this sort of unbounded referencing and remixing. While there might seem to be a predominance of acoustic and traditional instruments such as acoustic guitars, banjos, fiddles, mandolins, and acoustic upright basses in the overall sonic character of Americana, the standard rock band instrumentation of electric guitar, electric bass and drums plays just as crucial a role in the genre. Sometimes the diverse array of musical influences on Americana artists produces unlikely juxtapositions like the combination of beat boxing and hip-hop vocal phrasing with string-band instrumentation in the Carolina Chocolate Drops' "Hit 'em up style,"¹⁰ or the mix of high culture in the form of the cello with rural, vernacular culture in the form of acoustic guitars, banjos and twangy vocals in the Avett Brothers.¹¹ Sometimes these juxtapositions are more subtle too: as one audience member at a "Gillian Welch" show in Britain posted to an online message board, "Rawlings' guitar-work was suitably hypnotic and reminded me of Bert Jansch - he even sounded a bit proggy¹² on a couple of songs" (Boult 2011). Retro may encourage experimentation and fresh iterations of old styles but it also fosters a kind of fickleness because the possibilities are seemingly endless and there is no requirement that one commit to anything. Thus, an Americana artist like Steve Earle will reference traditional Appalachian folk, jazz and Southern rock on the same album.¹³ Music critic Amanda Petrusich also notes this sonic eclecticism, describing the work of Americana musicians as, "pillag(ing) the past for scintillating bits of sound, simultaneously pulling from and tweaking a century's worth of song, folding in their own ideas and hopes, reimagining Americana for a brand new world" (Petrusich 2008, 253).

¹⁰ To view a video of The Carolina Chocolate Drops performing "Hit 'em up style" see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKTXJUYiAT4&feature=kp>

¹¹ To see a performance by the Avett Brothers see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abQRt6p8T7g>

¹² Proggy is slang for progressive or "prog" rock, a rock subgenre that borrowed compositional techniques and forms from jazz and classical music. Progressive rock aimed at creating a distinct form of rock defined by its superior artistic worth and credibility relative to mainstream rock of the time, which was considered too "popular."

¹³ Here I am referring to Steve Earle's *Low Highway* [2013] specifically the tracks, "Warren Hellman's Banjo," "Pocket Full of Rain" and "Calico County."

Retro's freeplay is also demonstrated in Americana's artists' selective appropriation of elements from country and other genres. For example, Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings heartily embrace the vocal harmony style of the Louvin Brothers but reject the conservative social values long associated with the genre (except perhaps as a joke).¹⁴ When Americana artists adopt "the country role," they pick and choose pieces of country music culture and dismiss the rest. Often what is discarded and dismissed is that which does not align with the habitus of Americana's audience, a largely urban, affluent, educated, and most importantly, cosmopolitan group. As mentioned in Chapter One, there are deep historical roots to fascination with rural music and culture among affluent, educated, urbanites. According to Amanda Petrusich, this fascination with rural musics evolved into appropriation, writing that, "By the start of World War II, Americana music had begun to be romanticized and urbanized, transforming into a lifestyle choice with its own wardrobe and vocabulary, and taken away from the rural audiences that it was originally conceived for" (2008, 220). In this process, pieces of cultural identity, and "documents of daily life" are transformed into pieces of a lifestyle, severed from their source, drained of their meaning and reduced to signs (Petrusich 2008, 220). If the retro orientation is primarily concerned with the objects and images of the recent past it would follow that it would transform pieces of people's experience into manipulable, consumable signs with an object-like status. The religious references in the lyrics of "Gillian Welch" are a good example of this. "Gillian Welch's" "By the Mark" is a powerful gospel song that successfully evokes the evangelical faith predominant in the Southern states. And yet, Welch talks about it as just another song.

¹⁴ Aaron Fox (2004) and Barbara Ching (1997) have both written about country music's deeply entrenched associations with anti-intellectualism, racial prejudice, excessive patriotism and other values that are unattractive to Americana's demographic.

In an interview with Terry Gross for National Public Radio, Welch comments on the writing of “By the Mark,” saying,

I would listen to a lot of gospel music at the time . . . And I remember thinking, well, I bet I could write one of those. And we had so few songs when we moved to Nashville. I moved there with three songs. And so each song was like a new food group (Welch quoted in Gross 2011).

Religious belief is a deeply meaningful part of Southern cultural identity (Rogers and Smith 1993) but in this explanation Gillian Welch maintains a personal distance from the beliefs expressed in the song, treating faith like any other lyrical trope, reducing it to a sign. Trent Hill also notices this subversive lack of concern for the “sanctity of tradition” among Americana artists featured in *No Depression* magazine, such as Ryan Adams and Neko Case who seem to view “the country role” as “cost-free and strictly voluntary” as they “slide in and out of alternative country sounds and groups” (Hill 2002, 182). It would seem that retro converts history into signs, severed from their sources which are thus free floating, available to be exchanged, remixed, and reiterated ad infinitum.

Nostalgia and the Construction of a Collective Memory World

As mentioned in the introduction, retro and nostalgia are frameworks for creative reconstructions rather than the reliving of the past as they are sometimes misunderstood. Like retro, nostalgia “uses the past” to serve the present and in doing so, shapes a distinct vision of the past, one that dismisses any concern for historical accuracy. In *Yearning for Yesterday*, sociologist Fred Davis describes nostalgia as a kind of lens, writing that, “the nostalgic moment forms a unique optic of the world in its listener, through which he or she comes to temporarily

frame reality,” similar to “sleep, a daydream or other states of altered consciousness with varying degrees of temporal stability and self-awareness” (1979, 74). This lens or “optic” allows for a suspension of beliefs, doubts and logical inconsistencies (Davis 1979, 74). Also of prime importance to nostalgia is that its backward gaze casts the past in a decidedly positive light. Davis describes nostalgia as “memory with the pain removed” and argues that the only criterion for an object of nostalgia is that “we can somehow view it in a pleasant light” (Davis 1979, vii). Taken together, these aspects of nostalgia allow for the construction of a memory world, one that is slightly utopian, highly revised and very beguiling.

The idea of a nostalgically-influenced memory world is also suggested by Andrew Wernick who traces the history of the word nostalgia from its early origins as a medical term through to the present at which time it is widely used to refer to a common emotional experience of wistfulness for the past. Wernick notes that nostalgia translates literally to “homesickness” before going on to write that the word’s meaning shifted first in the mid-19th century to describe a generalized homesickness, then extended from yearning for place to yearning for a time before, referring mostly to regret for the passing of time (Wernick 1997, 220). Wernick argues that the extension of the term’s use reflected an “extension of displacement as a social condition,” the result of an increasingly mobile population and the “growing disconnection between self, family, locale, and country” all of which have diminished the meaning of home as “a single and nurturing and self-defining centre” (Wernick 1997, 219-20). As the notion of a physical “home” was devalued, nostalgia came to refer to a “home time,” a long lost past upon which we could confer all the positive attributes of a home.

While some writers on nostalgia such as Davis (1979) and Harper (1966) have argued that one cannot express nostalgia for memories we have not experienced first-hand, others such

as Steve Chilton and Janelle Wilson acknowledge that nostalgia is a form of “myth-making,” that “a myth can become a reality” and “mythology is perceived as real” (Chilton quoted in Wilson 2005, 104 and Wilson, 2005, 104). Tom Vanderbilt even coined the phrase “displaced nostalgia” to describe people feeling nostalgia for things they have not known firsthand while Simon Reynolds uses the term “epigonic”, derived from the Greek verb meaning “to be born after”, to “describe anyone who's convinced that the present era is less distinguished than its predecessor” (Cited in Wilson 2005, 89, Reynolds 1993). The meaning of epigonic echoes Stuart Tannock’s description of the “nostalgic structure of rhetoric” as comprised of three key elements: a prelapsarian world (an uncorrupted, pure time in the past), a lapse (a turning point or corrupting event, marking a break from the “pure” past), and a postlapsarian world (the present that in some way is “lacking, deficient, or oppressive”) (Tannock quoted in Wilson 2005, 24). The prelapsarian world invoked in Americana is not so much one of lived memories as a mythic past, formed out of third-hand representations of a once-lived reality. Although it would be too simplistic to identify a specific lapse that marked the beginning of a postlapsarian era, Americana’s anti-commercial rhetoric (see Chapter One) can certainly be seen as framing the present as postlapsarian. This vision of a mythic, rural past might be best conceptualized as a memory world consisting of all those mental associations outside observers make with the rural past, the product of their experience with mediated representations rather than lived experience.

One might wonder why the collective memory is set not only in the past but the *rural* past. Andrew Wernick aptly notes that “time and space references can interchange because their asymmetry is erased . . . by translating time into the metaphors of space” (Wernick 1997, 220). One could say that this memory world is the cumulative product of a long history of media representations of the rural life whether in song, film, television, photography, literature,

advertising or other forms. Pamela Fox points to the notion of a genre-specific memory world when she writes that alt.country discourse “pil(es) up signifiers of an equally obscured ‘past’ to be memorialized and celebrated” (Fox 2009, 166). Rory Crutchfield also suggests the idea of a musically mediated memory world in his discussion of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* using the phrase, “misremembered past” in reference to it (2009).

A memory world is collective in nature, an immense body of sounds, stories, imagery, etc. that while familiar to most people can never be grasped in its entirety. What is also important to note (though perhaps obvious) about this memory world is that, like a dream, it is hazy and its details are highly variable according to the viewer – each person has their own mental associations with the rural past – though the general feeling it evokes is shared among those experiencing it. The collective memory’s temporal setting recalls the past without signifying any specific period such that lyrical references to the Dust Bowl may appear in the same song as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and the folk legend Casey Jones. As Crutchfield notes, listeners want all those things “that transport them back to the past without explicitly detailing what that past was like” (Crutchfield 2009, 15).

Tropes of rural rusticity, purity, and deviance, whether the traditional instrumentation of banjos, mandolins and fiddles or lyrical references to things like trains, farms, and the Depression, have been canonized through cumulative iterations by folk song collectors, anthologists and others. The accumulation of these iterations gives these signs rhetorical power so that when referenced in song they serve as portals to a “memory world” that has been under construction since the very first second-hand representations of the rural past. It would be fitting to refer to these potent signifiers as “trigger tropes” because they operate in much the same way as the film souvenir theorized by Belgian psychologist Jean-Pierre Meunier in *Les structures de*

l'expérience filmique : L'identification filmique (1969). Patricia Lange applies Vivian Sobchack's adaptation of Meunier's theory of the film souvenir in which, "a viewer not only processes an immediate image of something from their past, but rather, sees 'through' the image to a flood of other memories that the single image unlocks" (Lange n.d.). Lange writes that the film souvenir acts as "a single sensory moment (that) releases an unexpected temporal floodgate of memory and emotion" (Lange n.d.).

There are many hands involved in the construction of this memory world, but some people have been so influential they might be thought of as architects of this memory world. Among these memory world architects one might count the Hillbilly recording scouts of the 1920s, country radio personality George Hay, the folk song collectors of the 1930s, and Harry Smith (if only for the profound influence of his anthology on later generations of musicians)¹⁵. A key part of this memory world's design has been the deliberate emphasis on signifiers of pre-modern life and the concurrent exclusion of any reference to modernity, urban life or commercial culture (Mancini 2004, 227). Early American folk song collectors idealized mountain culture, ignoring the poverty and adversity of mountain life in service of a romantic vision of noble "folk" who defied the "urban, machine driven, industrial economy" and "mass commercial culture" (Filene 2000, 23-4). These early American folk song collections which portrayed culture in the Appalachian mountains as a refuge from the various evils of modernity - commercialism, irreligion, science, capitalism and greed - contain some of the first mediated representations of rural culture and form the foundation of a collective memory of the rural past that exerts a strong influence on notions of folk music's rightful place even in the present day (Filene 2000, 23, 24).

¹⁵ For more information on Harry Smith and his role in constructing a collective memory world of the rural past see Crutchfield, Rory. 2009. "Discovering authenticity?: Harry Smith's Anthology of American Folk Music." *Popular Music History* 4, no. 1: 5-21, 17 and the chapter, "Smith's Memory Theater" in Robert Cantwell's *When we were good* (1996).

Country music promoters, such as George Hay in the 1920s, and the folk song revivalists of the 1930s perpetuated images of folk music as belonging to a pre-modern rural past. For example, John Lomax proclaimed his belief in folk music's pre-modern character, writing, "A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads" (Lomax quoted in Filene 2004, 54, 63). Mancini points out the impulse to align folk music with a pre-modern rustic past in the collections of Ruth Crawford Seeger and the Lomaxes as well as the *Anthology of American Folk Music (AAFM)*, the latter of which "deliberately shunned 'the Furniture Man,' the industry-making songs of Stephen Foster and even Carson's 'Little old cabin in the lane,' which (as a sheet music standard) might have reminded people of old-time music's roots in consumer culture" (Mancini 2004, 227). These folk curators preferred songs about poverty, such as "Penny's Farm," songs about the railroad, and songs with general anti-modern themes and sentiments (Mancini 2004, 227). Mancini notes that even in the time of Crawford Seeger's songbooks and the *AAFM* (the early 1950s) the railroad was seen to be "charmingly old-fashioned," an association that remains to this day (Mancini 2004, 227). The purpose of citing the work of George Hay, Harry Smith, the Lomaxes and the Seegers in the same frame is to emphasize that the associations between folk and country music with the rural past, which we take for granted as natural, are actually the result of concerted efforts over time to maintain what is an ideological construction. When we hear folk or country music we do not form associations with the natural world and rurality as they exist at the present but rather with a romanticized view of the way they existed in the past. Thus, the space outside the city is conceptually contained to the past, and this is just as the memory world architects designed it.

The body of tropes that Americana artists draw from in their postmodern invocations of the past and signification of the authentic, rural past were well established in genres such as

country and bluegrass, which were themselves, “invented tradition(s) already evocative of an authentic, vernacular folk object” (Fox 2005, 185). Conscious of its third-hand representations, Americana then comes to signify “a new kind of authenticity by virtue of its very self-consciousness” (Fox 2005, 185). Several authors have discussed the phenomenon of nostalgia for mediated memories. The vision of the past presented in Americana is similar to the successful mass-media myth of the age of innocence staged in Disney theme parks which Davis describes as

a created, second-hand reality (a romanticized version of a slightly earlier historic reality), one that is so successful that, even though we may not have lived then, we feel – because of the movies we have seen, the stories we have read, the radio serials we’ve listened to – ‘as if we had’ (1979, 121).

Similarly, in response to the public’s enthusiastic reception of the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, Benjamin Filene writes that, “many feel nostalgic for a time they never knew but that they intuitively feel must have existed – when culture, when emotion for that matter, came unmediated, when there was substance that transcended the packaging” (Filene 2004, 56).

Amanda Petrusich describes the effect of the décor in Cracker Barrel chain restaurants (often referred to as Americana, the material equivalent to the music) writing,

We are buying into the artifacts of activities and emotions most of us have never experienced firsthand. These objects (cast-iron skillets, lard presses, butter churns), and not memories or facts, are the greatest players in the classic American myth (2008, 178).

Elizabeth Guffey touches on the media’s influence on memory, writing that retro is “dominated by technology and its most popular manifestations,” such as syndicated television shows, movies, records, and advertisements so that it “evokes a memory of days that are not quite so

distant, embodied in forms that are antiquated yet vaguely familiar” (Guffey 2006, 25). Perhaps these forms are vaguely familiar because they are referenced so widely in pop culture and the media has become implicated so fully in the private sphere that the divisions between lived experience and media image are blurred. The development of digital archives has granted access to an immense body of material from the past century of cultural material, in the form of sound recordings, photography, film, television, advertising and so on. As Simon Reynolds writes

all these interrelated phenomena I'm lumping under the term 'retromania'[vintage, nostalgia, revivalism, curatorial aesthetics, commemorative culture, collecting, reissuing, etc] . . . have built to a new intensity since the rise of broadband internet circa 2000, which enabled forms of sharing, collecting, documentation and archiving that are like nothing we could have dreamed of before. That has definitely added greatly to the manic aspect of retromania – the ease of access to the pop cultural past, the instantness and the total recall that's possible (2012).

While Americana artists and audiences may not share traditional common experiences based on geographical origins or kinship ties, they can gather around the memories they share by way of exposure to mass media.

Dialoguing with the Collective Memory World in Americana

Collectively, American artists, industry personnel and audiences dialogue with this memory world of the rural past (one could also imagine it as a “psychic geography” or landscape) and this dialogue is an essential part of the genre. I consciously use the word dialogue to emphasize that every invocation of this memory world simultaneously draws upon and contributes to its construction (a process that is ongoing). In broad terms, this memory world is a highly romanticized version of rural or small-town life, often located in the White American South (a figuration that is at once both conveniently monolithic to be inclusive and yet

sufficiently specific to be distinctive). This memory world has also often been framed as a kind of sanctuary from the malaise of modern life. McCusker writes that early Southern radio shows such as John Lair's *National Barn Dance* contributed to this vision of the iconic Appalachian South as an "aural refuge from modern times," a vision that appealed to both urban and rural listeners (McCusker 2008, 11). According to this vision – which was always set in a vaguely defined "past" - "Southern life was always better and more wholesome than current urban living," and the loss of this "purer" way was reason for lament and memorializing (McCusker 2008, 11). George Lewis notes a whole body of nostalgia songs in contemporary country music that explicitly portray this memory world, imagining "a simpler, often rural (and more than partly imagined) past filled with the romantic warmth of primary, caring relationships" (Lewis 1997, 166). Among the examples he cites are Emmylou Harris' "Goin' back to Harlan," and The Judds' "Grampa, tell me 'bout the good old days" (Lewis 1997, 166). These songs explicitly outline the memory world, setting it in the South and emphasizing its promise of "nostalgic rural salvation and refuge from the cold impersonal nature of the modern urban cityscape" (Lewis 1997, 166). Some examples of this kind of song in Americana include Gram Parsons' "Hickory Wind" and Ryan Adams' "Oh My Sweet Carolina." In "Hickory Wind," Gram Parsons' sings the yearning lines, "I remember the oak tree that we used to climb/ But now when I'm lonesome, I always pretend/That I'm getting the feel of hickory wind" (Cowboylyrics.com a). Adams' "Oh My Sweet Carolina" similarly features lyrics of longing such as, "Up here in the city feels like things are closing in/ The sunsets just my light bulb burning out/ I miss Kentucky and I miss my family/All the sweetest winds they blow across the south" respectively (Cowboylyrics.com d, Adams, 2000).

Americana artists also invoke a collective memory of the rural South by referencing, quoting or otherwise gesturing towards songs, musicians and stories of the past (which in their time may have been mythic themselves). Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings are exceptional in this regard. Their work is rich with ranging references and quotations to songs, artists, folk heroes and stories both renowned and obscure reaching across the span of almost two centuries of American history. Sometimes Welch and Rawlings reference a place from an old song in their work, such as “Scarlet Town” (*The H&H*), which is named for the Scarlet Town in the first verse of the old English ballad, “Barbara Allen.” On the same album, Welch and Rawlings quote both Dock Boggs’ “Country Blues” (1927) and Tex Ritter’s “Rye Whiskey” (1936) in the chorus of “Tennessee” where they sing “Now let me go, my honey oh/Back to Tennessee/ It's beef steak when I'm working/ Whiskey when I'm dry/ Sweet heaven when I die” (Sarahct 2011, Mueller 2011, CowboyLyrics.com c) (see Appendix 1 for direct comparison). There is even an online forum devoted to citing the references on the Welch and Rawlings fan community website, gillianwelchanddavidrawlings.com. Besides lyrical references, people also hear echoes of the American songbook in Welch and Rawlings’ melodies and harmonic progression as well. In the comments section of a 2011 interview with Welch and Rawlings on the National Public Radio website, one poster writes, “doesn't ‘Dark Turn of Mind’ owe a lot to Hank Williams' ‘I'm so lonely I could cry’?” Further on in the same comments section, another poster calls out the song “Sweet Tooth” from Dave Rawlings’ 2009 album *A Friend of a Friend*, accusing it of being “a re-working of “candy man,” right down to the last rhythmic detail” (NPR, 2011). Welch and Rawlings’ intertextual references serve to map not only their personal influences but also the influences of the genre as a whole, mapping the musical side of Americana’s collective memory world. Writing on cover versions in rock, Gabrielle Solis writes,

As musicians cover songs from outside their own style and genre, they affectively lay down increasingly broad links between themselves and others. Through this process, individual musicians come to be connected to denser and denser networks where reference connects them to referenced music and musician, but also to others who reference similar music and so on. These networks of reference become the basis of a shared sense that musicians belong in the same community (Solis 2010, 300).

Welch and Rawlings are therefore simultaneously drawing from and weaving Americana's collective memory. Writing on the blues but arguing a point just as applicable to Americana, Joel Rudinow writes that in debates about white appropriation of the blues it is sometimes argued that

blues is essentially a cryptic language, a kind of secret code. . . texts composed in this language typically have multiple layers of meaning, some relatively superficial, some deeper. To gain access to the deeper layers of meaning, one must have the keys to the code. But the keys to the code presuppose extensive and detailed familiarity with the historically unique body of experience shared within and definitive of the African-American community and are therefore available only to the properly initiated (1994, 165).

When applied to Americana this notion of having the keys to the code relies on “extensive and detailed familiarity” with American roots music, history and Southern culture but it serves the same purpose to mark insiders and outsiders, to cultivate community, to make the music more meaningful. Deena Weinstein writes that “postmodern covers are generally stereophonic: the audience is aware of the originals and hears the cover in terms of it” (1998, 145). When a listener does recognize these references it serves to position the referencing artist among the songs, stories etc. they are referencing, essentially writing them into the collective memory.

Nostalgia's Utopia Effect on Collective Memory

Fitting with nostalgia's requirement that the past be cast in a favourable light, this memory world ignores problematic aspects of the reality it represents such as racial and gender inequality. Peterson describes Halbwach's (1992) idea of collective memory as "the reinterpretation of past people or events to harmonize them with current political needs and cultural understandings" (Peterson 2005, 1085). Ignoring the problematic aspects of the past serves to harmonize that past with current cultural understandings that racial intolerance and gender-based discrimination are morally wrong. Aaron Fox critiques the utopian versions of American roots music history as presented in Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music*, (*AAFM*), the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack, and the PBS American Roots Music collections, when he writes, "black and white contributions commingle without prejudice or disrespect, and with transparent understanding" (Fox 2005, 181). Fox is troubled by the way these collections "attempt to redress an undeniable history of theft and conflict through a nostalgic politics of authenticity" and turn a blind eye to racial conflict and African American grievances which were an undeniable part of the same time periods and places celebrated in the collective memory exploited in Americana (Fox 2006, 181-82). Fox is right in noting the highly revised nature of Harry Smith's *AAFM* in particular. Harry Smith used hillbilly records of the 1920s as the source material for his anthology. Music historian Bill Randle found in the Columbia 15000 and OKeh 45000 series over 150 references to "nigger" or mentionings of black people in the pejorative as well as 134 songs by Southern writers favourable to the Ku Klux Klan during the period from 1922 through 1927 (Lund 1972, 85). In spite of apparent prevalence of racist rhetoric in songs of the period, it is missing entirely from Harry Smith's anthology. As indicative as it is of Smith's curatorial judgment, the absence of such songs also serves the

construction of a memory world uncontaminated by unfavourable complications. The effect of all this is a kind of cultural amnesia. The rural past invoked by Americana artists is an edited version of such with the socially regressive elements either washed out or well faded.

Collective Memory's Trappings

Critics often comment on the work of Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings in such a way as to contain it to the past and deny its relevance to the present, seizing on old-timey references in their music and visual presentation – whether lyrical references to mules and plows, their minimal acoustic duo format or their performance dress that recalls the Carter Family. In interviews, it is clear that Welch and Rawlings object to having their work framed in such a way. When an interviewer comments that Welch and Rawlings appear as though they “stepped out of a time machine,” Welch answers,

I think people look at the way we present ourselves, and they are lulled by our acoustic demeanor into assuming that we are more old-time and traditional than we are. . . We grew up listening to Neil Young, so it'll never be as pure as the Carter Family. . . the story and the subject matter and the emotional tone are very modern to me. I can't tell anyone else how to react to it. . . It's all a question of degree. If we change one note, we hear it as not traditional. We're playing acoustic instruments. If we were playing through amplifiers with the very same notes, you would change your mind (Doherty 1999).

In another interview Rawlings comments, “Setting means a lot in terms of perception . . . if you play something on a banjo, it seems old time. I used to stand on stage in a brand-new Dries Van Noten suit and I would see written next day: ‘Standing on stage in his grandfather's sharecropper’s suit’” (Harris 2011). What Welch and Rawlings’ experiences with audiences and journalists point to is the power of collective memory on perception. Welch and Rawlings’ music

and visual presentation are riddled with “trigger tropes” that powerfully invoke a collective memory of the rural past to the point that this collective memory envelopes their work. What Welch and Rawlings might consider simple nods to the past cannot be received so subtly because of the rhetorical power they have to trigger tidal waves of associations and meaning. Welch and Rawlings’ invocations of the past, from their Carter Family-esque stage dress to their old-timey lyrical references are not received in isolation. Rather, these pieces of the past “release an unexpected floodgate of memory and emotion” (Lange, n.d.), calling to mind all the images and feelings we have been conditioned to associate with the rural past through our exposure to mass media – the country as contained to the pre-modern past, the natural world as refuge. Maybe Welch and Rawlings’ work is so rich in “trigger tropes” that they have come to embody a hypertextual trope of the collective memory world themselves so that their music “comes to instantiate ‘nostalgia’ itself” (Wernick 1997, 218).

Conclusion

In conceptualizing Americana’s engagement with the past it is necessary to consider both retro and nostalgic approaches to invoking the past, two distinct forms of engaging with the past that together explain the construction of the collective memory world of the rural, American South that so heavily informs Americana. The hope is that this chapter’s material explains some of the ways that modern technology can be used towards nurturing nostalgia by providing both access to a vast body of cultural material from the past as well as the tools for “using” this material in new ways. The chapter also introduced some of the social implications of the collective memory of the rural past insofar as the risk of distorting history and containing people, cultures, and places to the distant past. At this point, the connections between the project’s main

themes – lineage, folk authenticity, retro, nostalgia, collective memory and the role of technology in collective memory – should be growing clearer. Chapters Three and Four ground the discussion thus far in analysis of a musical and visual sample of Americana, sufficiently limited in scope to allow for a thorough look at how the main ideas presented in Chapters One and Two are demonstrated by Americana artists. Chapter Three features musical analysis of two tracks from “Gillian Welch’s” *The Harrow and the Harvest*, and Chapter Four analyzes the visual design and production of the same album as well as Welch and Rawlings’ visual presentation. Some questions guiding the analyses include how do Welch and Rawlings invoke the collective memory world? And, how do the visual and sonic features of their work reflect the humanization and disintermediation of musical production and consumption. Following these analyses and building on this chapter’s overview of retro, nostalgia and Americana’s cultural memory world, Chapter Five addresses the question of why Americana resonates with audiences.

Chapter Three: Dialoguing with the Past in *The Harrow & the Harvest*

Over the course of their five albums Welch and Rawlings have consistently expressed their reverence for the past and a commitment to bring pieces of it into the pop culture landscape of the present through their signature intimate sound and carefully crafted lyrics. Two of the main ways Welch and Rawlings express this reverence in their work is in the intertextuality of their music and lyrics and their minimalist approach to recording and performance. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Welch and Rawlings have a penchant for seasoning their work with quotations and references to old folk and country songs and folk heroes. In their distinctive recording practices – analog, live-off-the-floor with no overdubbing and a general eschewing of digital editing – Welch and Rawlings disintermediate their relationship with listeners and express Americana’s human-centered sonic aesthetic by providing a space for the anomalies of human-made music to flourish. On *The Harrow & the Harvest* Welch and Rawlings’ nostalgic leanings are more pronounced than ever. Sonically *The H&H* is the most minimalist of Welch and Rawlings’ work to date, taking this notion of disintermediated sound to an extreme. Welch and Rawlings’ sometime collaborator Colin Meloy of the Decemberists describes the album as “The sound of two people playing live, with no overdubs, and very few takes” (Meloy 2011). In the words of Welch and Rawlings, “When we record in the studio, we record together, and we record sitting as close as we can sit, honestly . . . there's a microphone I'm supposed to be singing in and a microphone Gil's supposed to be singing in but they're all making a picture together. So, we don't do any overdubbing or any fixes, we couldn't. If it isn't the performance, we sort of have to play it again and cut it together” (Knapp 2011). Perhaps even more indicative of their

orientation to the past than the album's intimate, atmospheric sound is that the album's music and lyrics are so richly seeded with references to a wide range of points in American musical history, that at times the album reads like Welch and Rawlings revisiting and honouring their influences by way of imitation. This is what makes Welch and Rawlings' music so compelling: the juxtaposition between sonic minimalism (two voices and two guitars) and a panoramic range of the references and connections invoked in their music and lyrics, making their work small and yet expansive as a mountain vista. In discussing Welch and Rawlings' music from this angle, the challenge is in limiting the scope of analysis and interpretation to allow for an in-depth uncovering of the often tangled roots of the references and allusions in their work, a challenge taken up in this chapter. The purpose of the following analysis is to discuss the ways in which the main ideas presented in Chapters One and Two – nostalgia, collective memory, humanization and disintermediation – are demonstrated in the musical and lyrical material of *Americana*. Much of the analysis rests on the notion that some musical and lyrical forms, idioms, figures, timbres, and images are invested with meaning beyond their objective attributes,¹⁶ operating as “trigger tropes” of collective memory (see Chapter Two).

The scope of analysis is based on two contrasting tracks from Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings' 2011 album, *The Harrow & the Harvest*: “Down along the Dixie line” and “Six White

¹⁶ If a musical instrument is used often enough in association with music considered traditional, then that instrument, regardless of its origins or objective qualities will come to connote “traditional” in the public consciousness. A good example of this is the dobro, a kind of resonator guitar that is played lying across the player's lap with a heavy steel bar placed on the strings. The dobro was not invented until 1928 and even then was not widely associated with country music until the late 1930s when Roy Acuff performed on the Grand Ole Opry with a dobro player in his band. Despite these relatively recent origins, the dobro has become an important bluegrass instrument fitting right in alongside more legitimately “traditional” instruments like the fiddle and banjo. With repeated associations with a given idea, a lyrical trope or a musical figure's web of associations grows denser and amplifies their connotative power. As Robert Cantwell explains, through long service in the human community, music, like language, acquires a connotative surface inseparable from its mimetic power. Whatever the musical instrument, style, or kind, it will carry its connotative message into the music, linking it for that culture to particular times and places (Cantwell 984, 202).

Horses” – though in the case of the latter, I also draw on performance footage of Welch and Rawlings to inform the discussion of Welch’s novelty “hambone” body percussion and buck dancing in the song. The first section addresses “Down along the Dixie Line,” particularly how the song’s music and lyrics place it in a dialogue with a collective memory of the American South, while the second section examines “Six White Horses” with regards to its demonstration of humanization and historic referentiality, specifically focused on the intertextuality in the lyrics, the symbolic meaning of clawhammer banjo and the connotations of Welch’s “hambone” body percussion and buck dancing.

Although “Down along the Dixie Line” and “Six White Horses” were chosen for discussion in this chapter because of their contrasting nature, they do share a stylistic relation to the nineteenth-century minstrel show form, which was highly influential in the construction of the South’s public image as a mythic, pre-modern land. According to Robert Cantwell,

no force in nineteenth-century popular culture more enforced the identification of the South ... with Paradise than the minstrel show, which entered the popular debate over slavery by representing the plantation as an idyll of domestic tranquility and happiness ...the fact is that many of the traditional songs in hillbilly and bluegrass music which touch upon these themes – many more than is immediately apparent – are minstrel songs or derivations of them from which the element of race has evaporated (Cantwell 1985, 241).

It is this vision of a mythic paradise set in the South that forms the thematic basis of Welch and Rawlings’ “Down along the Dixie Line.” “Six White Horses” on the other hand, invokes this mythic, paradisiacal South through its musical features, many of which were common elements of the minstrel show and old-time Appalachian dance bands: clawhammer banjo, “pattin’ Juba” (“hambone”) body percussion, and buck dancing.

“Down Along the Dixie Line”

“Down along the Dixie Line” is the ballad of an exile longing to return to the South of their childhood, a place that is revealed in the last verse to be irrecoverable, experienced only in the space of memory and as an object of yearning. Before looking at the lyrics, a few points about the music should be addressed. One of the most distinctive characteristics of Welch and Rawlings’ music is their preference for exceptionally slow tempos. Many critics have remarked on this aspect of “Gillian Welch’s” work with lines like, “the heavy morphine drip waltz of . . . ,” “more laid-back Southern cadences,” “tempos that are languid” and “the tempo of a slow heartbeat” (Russo 2011, Cronin 1994, Wilkinson 2011). In regards to tempo, “Down along the Dixie Line” is certainly a typical Welch and Rawlings song, played at a mournful speed around 65 bpm. It seems that, rather than an arbitrary musical feature, these slow tempos are a way of sonically reflecting and inducing the hazy, dream-like atmosphere of nostalgia. While Americana is quite different from indie pop, Emily Dolan’s writing on the cultivation of an aesthetic of memory in the genre, raises some interesting ideas about the ways that nostalgia may be sonically portrayed that map nicely onto Welch and Rawlings’ work. According to Dolan, “indie pop highlights the idea of temporal and aesthetic disjunction by sounding wistfully outdated, thus preserving the memory of some distant and imaginary past” (Dolan 2010, 464). Dolan explains this idea writing that the “dreamy and atmospheric textures” of some indie pop bands “sound more like they are performing memories of songs than the songs themselves” and explains that the characteristic lo-fi sound of indie pop lends itself to an aesthetic of memory which is achieved by using “simplistic forms, odd instruments, old electronics and amateur performances” (Dolan 2010, 464). Though not all of these features apply, Welch and Rawlings do demonstrate a

kind of lo-fi aesthetic with their strict adherence to acoustic instruments and their cultivation of atmospheric textures in the interplay of their guitars and voices.

The “Dixie” Song Tradition

In its musical and lyrical composition, “Down along the Dixie Line” follows many of the conventions established in earlier stages of what Karen Cox refers to as the “Dixie” song tradition. The “Dixie” song tradition is a lineage of musical forms that exploited a vision of the mythic South which has its roots in the minstrel show, continued in Tin Pan Alley songs that sentimentalized the American South and from there was adopted in Bluegrass. The songs in this lineage are characterized by lyrics that draw on a familiar catalog of Southern tropes and songs fashioned in the traditional idiom so that they pass as folk songs even if they are recently written. This relation is notable because “Dixie” songs, like the minstrel show, were very influential in establishing the features which form a large part of Americana’s collective memory world of the rural past. Robert Cantwell describes Bill Monroe’s “Molly and Tenbrooks” as a song “fashioned in the traditional idiom” based on its “deliberate simplicity” and its formulaic lyrics, which “places it in a class with certain universally recognized popular songs such as ‘Red River Valley’” (Cantwell 1984, 232-3). Like “Molly and Tenbrooks” and any number of classic “Dixie” songs, “Down along the Dixie Line” has an aura of folk simplicity, easily sing-able, rhythmically and harmonically simple and very memorable. The song’s capacity to invoke nostalgia however extends far beyond its deliberately simple construction and hypnotic tempos with lyrics one might describe as saturated with musical and historical references.

The lyrics to “Down along the Dixie Line” sound antiquated because they are largely drawn from a catalog of well-worn images of the mythic South (see Appendix 2). The song’s

portrayal of a domestic, pastoral idyll with bountiful harvests, and communal music-making have appeared in countless minstrel songs, Tin Pan Alley “Dixie” songs, and bluegrass standards. This is part of what gives the song its instantly familiar feel as though it is an old song emerging from the folk tradition. Proof of “Down along the Dixie Line’s” “classic’ character is that it has already been adopted by The Punch Brothers, a contemporary bluegrass group who perform it alongside bluegrass standards, albeit at a much faster tempo than Welch and Rawlings have ever performed it.¹⁷ The song’s theme of exile from the South is in itself a well-worn trope. Robert Cantwell argues that, “the landscape of bluegrass song contrasts an idyllic and an abhorrent world” (Cantwell, 1984, 226). The idyllic world is often set in the rural past and associated with “happiness, security, and peace; the emphasis is often thrown on childhood . . . spring and summer, flowers and sunshine” while the abhorrent urban present is portrayed as “a world of exciting adventures which involve separation, loneliness, humiliation, pain, and the threat of more pain” (Northrup Frye quoted in Cantwell, 1984, 226). In “Down along the Dixie line” Welch and Rawlings pick up on these classic associations connecting the idyllic South with childhood, “I spent my childhood walkin’ the wildwood” and “I was so happy with mama and pappy.” Themes of longing and intentions to return to this idyllic rural world – often appearing alongside other “objects of longing such as a young sweetheart, a grey-haired mother or the land itself” – are fundamental to both gospel and secular strains of bluegrass (Cantwell 1984, 226). In “Down along the Dixie Line” the narrator longs for a return to friends and family, singing the recurring line “oh do they miss me way down in Dixie?” suggesting that the narrator has been unable to find a similar sense of home and belonging in “the Northland.” Commenting on back-to-Dixie-songs, Isaac Goldberg, an early documentarian of Tin Pan Alley said, “Paradise is never

¹⁷ For a video of the Punch Brothers’ rendition of “Down along the Dixie Line” see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKp0_g5uBgA

where we are. The South has become our Never-never land – the symbol of the Land where the lotus blooms and dreams come true” (Goldberg in Cox 2011, 10). “Down along the Dixie Line’s” lyrics certainly portray this paradisiacal Never-never land in lines like “banjos a strummin’, horseflies a hummin’, ripe melons on the vine” and “rivers of whiskey flow down in Dixie.” Robert Cantwell also notes that a “tragic return to a formerly idyllic world blighted or decayed” is a common theme in bluegrass songs, writing, “As ‘Paradise,’ ‘Sweet, Sunny South,’ and a hundred other bluegrass songs reveal, the idyllic world is perfidious, a snare of stasis and illusion to which no real return, at least in this world, is possible” (Cantwell 1984, 228). Cantwell argues that the exile motif in hillbilly and bluegrass was the creation of blackface minstrels and furthermore that,

many of the traditional songs in hillbilly and bluegrass music which touch upon these themes – many more than is immediately apparent – are minstrel songs or derivatives of them, from which the element of race has evaporated. By an odd sort of historical recurrence, the blackface minstrel’s characterization of nineteenth-century black experience, a characterization of which oscillated between sentimentality and ridicule, had supplied the images by which the Appalachian white, himself expelled from the rural South into the urban North, himself sentimentalized in the popular imagination and at the same time despised and caricatured, himself socially and culturally set apart, might interpret his own experiences a century later (Cantwell 1984, 241).

The next section examines the features of the South to which the exiled narrator in ‘Down along the Dixie Line’ seeks to return by interpreting a curious song quotation in the first verse.

“Down along the Dixie Line” and “Dixie’s Land”

This next section dedicates a significant amount of space to unpacking the implications of Welch and Rawlings’ well-observed quotation of a symbolically potent song written in the mid-nineteenth century. As the quoted song is not very well known outside the American South, detailed background information serves the purpose of conveying the web of associations that the quotation brings to bear on the meaning of Welch and Rawlings’ “Down along the Dixie Line.” On the surface, “Down along the Dixie Line” seems like a sentimental song of longing for the south, a ballad of an exile with a distinctly “classic” quality. But like many Welch and Rawlings songs, the lyrics to “Down along the Dixie Line” contain layers of meaning and in unravelling some of these layers it appears that in this song Welch expresses longing not for some generalized politically-neutral, mythic South but for the Confederate South specifically. While noting various references to the Confederate South in “Down along the Dixie Line” the next section particularly addresses the implications of Welch and Rawlings’ reference to “Dixie’s Land,” a song which followed an unlikely path to becoming the Confederate anthem and thereafter an entrenched musical emblem of the Old South. The most obvious allusion to the Confederacy is in the first verse where Welch and Rawlings sing “the gold and the grey, we’d sing ‘Look Away’” referencing in one line, the Confederacy’s uniform colors¹⁸ and “Dixie’s Land” (“Dixie”), the minstrel song that was adopted as the Confederacy’s national anthem and continues to be a powerful signifier of Southern pride to the present day. Far from some historical footnote, “Dixie’s Land” was an incredibly popular song with surprising resonance and lasting power in both the North and the South, which according to Irwin Silber is the “only

¹⁸ While it was not until the latter part of the Civil War that uniforms were standardized for both the Union and the Confederacy people still refer to the respective Civil War militaries as the Blues and the Greys. When Welch mentions “the gold and the grey” she is probably referring to the gold accents on the uniforms of Confederate generals, and the unadorned grey uniforms of the lower ranking Confederate soldiers (Varhola 2011).

Southern war song to become part of the national musical stream” (Silber 1995, 51). Noting the song’s cultural impact, historian Christian McWhirter argues that although minstrel performers had been using the word “Dixie” since at least 1850, it was “Dixie’s Land” that brought Dixie – a referent for the American South – into “the nation’s colloquial vocabulary” (McWhirter 2012, 69). While the refrain of “Dixie’s Land” is “Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land” I found no evidence that the song was ever known by the title “look away” which makes Welch’s reference, “the gold and the grey, we’d sing ‘Look Away’” all the more obscure (Silber 1995, 59-61). “Dixie’s Land” is said to have been written in 1859 by “one of the first and greatest of America’s black-face minstrels,” Daniel Decatur Emmett¹⁹ (Silber 1995, 50). Emmett wrote “Dixie’s Land” for the Bryant Minstrels who originally performed the song as a “walk-around,” the closing number performed in a minstrel show (Cox 2011, 11, Silber 1995, 50). Karen Cox writes that “Dixie’s Land” is a typical minstrel song modelled after the style of Stephen Foster’s (a prolific Tin Pan Alley songwriter). Just as Foster was known for sentimentalizing the South, the lyrics of “Dixie’s Land,” “make clear Emmett’s effort to capitalize on the sentimental appeal of a preindustrial South” especially in its first two lines which were meant to portrayed the feelings of “a black man who longs to return ‘home’ to the plantation where he was most happy” (Cox 2011, 11, 12). The song caught on quickly, with performances by other minstrel companies and individual variety performers in the North at first and then a rapid spread through the Southern states after its first introduction to the region’s audiences, in 1860 New Orleans (Silber 1995, 50).

¹⁹ Although widely credited to Emmett there was a lot of controversy as to the true authorship of “Dixie’s Land,” with multiple authorship claims to the song presented and one particularly interesting theory that Emmett learned the song from the Snowdens, an African-American family who lived in his hometown of Vernon, Ohio (Sacks and Sacks, 2003). If credible, this last theory makes the adoption of “Dixie” as the Confederate anthem even more ironic. Daniel Emmett also founded the very first minstrel company, a four-person troupe of entertainers established in 1843 called the Virginia Minstrels (Silber 1995, 306, McWhirter 2012, 65).

The early popularity of “Dixie’s Land” in the North demonstrates the production dynamics of cultural representations of Southern culture, that is, Northerners producing representations of the South to satiate the appetites of Northern audiences for the nostalgia and exoticism in the images provided. By virtue of the song’s great popularity and some chance, “Dixie’s Land” became the confederacy’s unofficial national anthem (Silber 1995, 50, McWhirter 2012). Even those who took issue with “Dixie’s” lyrics found the melody compelling; there were several attempts to improve the lyrics among the South’s literati and the melody became “a favorite model for soldier parodies and various propaganda efforts” in both the South and the North (Silber 1995, 50-1). As McWhirter concludes, despite all attempts at appropriation, “‘Dixie’ remained wedded to its Confederate identity” (2012). The result is that even today, “Dixie” represents the “Old South,” a somewhat unsurprising fact given that “150 years of history have loaded the song with indelible political, racial, military and social connotations”²⁰ (McWhirter 2012). Welch and Rawlings’ “Down along the Dixie Line” both references the lyrics of “Dixie’s Land” and plays on the same motif of an exile expressing nostalgia for the antebellum South (Cox 2011, 11).

Welch also alludes to the Civil War in the third verse when she sings the line, “They pulled up the tracks now I can’t go back now/Can’t hardly keep from crying.” A common Union military strategy was sabotaging the Southern railroads, pulling up the tracks, burning bridges,

²⁰ “Dixie” has made many appearances in the pop cultural landscape since the end of the Civil War. Confederate veterans’ organizations “sang the tune uproariously at reunions, connecting it forever with the ‘Lost Cause’” (Poole 2005, 126). The song is featured alongside “the Battle Hymn of the Republic” in Elvis Presley’s “An American Trilogy” (written by Mickey Newbury) and it is a longtime favourite in college football halftime shows at universities throughout the South despite the controversy surrounding its racist implications (McWhirter 2012, 210). “Dixie” was featured in the soundtracks of several southern-themed films, including *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), in which it was sung by its star, Shirley temple; *Under Southern Stars* (1937); *Gone with the Wind* (1939); and a few years later *Dixie* (1934)” (Cox 2011, 32). There is even a trend amongst working-class southerners to install horns on their pickup trucks that play the first few bars of the tune inspired by the 1970s television series *The Dukes of Hazzard*, in which the ‘Duke boys,’ “freewheel around Hazzard Country, Georgia in a Plymouth Dodge christened “General Lee” and honking out the first line of ‘Dixie’” (Poole 2005, 140).

destroying tunnels and capturing equipment (Civil War Trust). This military tactic was also referenced in the first verse of the Band's classic song, "The Night they drove old Dixie down": "Virgil Caine is the name, and I served on the Danville train, 'Til Stoneman's cavalry came and tore up the tracks again." The narrator of "Down along the Dixie Line" seems to say that without railroad access they have abandoned all hope of ever returning to their childhood home.

Lyrically, intertextual connections in "Down along the Dixie Line" enmesh it in a web of American folk and country musical traditions and nineteenth-century American history. For example, the reference in the third verse to "a river of whiskey" might be seen to connect Welch and Rawlings to Willie Nelson ("Whiskey River" 1973) and Charlie Poole ("If the River was Whiskey" 1930) who also used the image of a river of whiskey – and possibly also to the old folk tune "Big Rock Candy Mountain" which features a play on this image in the line, "there's a lake of stew and of whiskey too." Some of the historical references in the lyrics to "Down along the Dixie Line" are so antiquated and obscure that they are repeatedly misquoted in blogs and user-generated lyric websites (printed lyrics are neither included with the physical album nor posted on Gillian Welch's website).²¹ One key example of one of these antiquated references is "Fireball mail,"²² both a slang term for a fast train and the title of a bluegrass standard and a country song that's been recorded by Hank Snow, Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, and Wanda Jackson.

Recall that in Chapter Two I cited Joann Mancini's observation that as early as the 1950s the

²¹ The most commonly misquoted lines include "The gold and the grey weeds saying look away" instead of "the gold and the grey, we'd sing 'look away,'" "fireball man" instead of "fireball mail" and "eyeballs a bawlin" instead of "highball's a bawlin."

²² It is understandable how someone unfamiliar with the slang term "fireball mail" would mishear "gonna catch that fireball man" given the context and Welch's sometimes loose articulation. "fireball mail" is said to have originated from the time when trains were the primary vehicle for delivering mail and were powered by coal, which were called "little fireballs." It is perhaps even more understandable that someone would mishear "eyeballs a bawlin" instead of "highball's a bawlin," also probably the result of unfamiliarity with railroad vocabulary. A highball is a term for the signal "clear to proceed," an expression that comes from the time before electric light signals when a rail station operator hoisted a wooden ball up a standard, to make the signal to oncoming engineers (Russel 1944).

railroad was considered “charmingly old-fashioned” image, in other words, a relic and therefore an ideal signifier of a pre-modern, rural South (Mancini 2004, 227). The classic aura of “Down along the Dixie Line” is derived in part from the rich history of several of its lyrics which have been drawn from nineteenth-century history, and slang as well as having appeared as titles and lyrics in other songs written and recorded by an array of folk and country music legends.

Arguably it is not that “Down along the Dixie Line” features lyrical references that lends to its classic sound but the weightiness of these references that comes from their cumulative repetitions in different contexts over time. Through these references Welch and Rawlings write themselves into the collective memory of American roots music. The next section continues this discussion of drawing connections across time by way of quotations, references and imitation as they apply to the song, “Six White Horses.”

“Six White Horses”

In their performance at the 2011 Newport Folk festival, as Rawlings straps on his banjo and sets up his harmonica’s neck rack, Gillian Welch remarks, as though with a knowing wink, “It’s getting pretty old-timey up here,” a fitting introduction to “Six White Horses” (“Six White Horses” 2011, 0:11). For as innocent and spontaneous as the overtly rural instrumentation, raw vocals and dance routine of “Six White Horses” might seem at first glance, taken together it is a studied condensation of Appalachian musical traditions. In many ways the song might be read as an exercise in folk primitivism due to its overt physicality and its almost exaggerated emphasis on the human element in making music. For one, the song is a dance tune with a driving tempo (approximately 101 bpm.), duple meter and a relatively basic, strophic form, a fact Welch takes advantage of in her buck dance routines in the breaks after verses one, two and three. Whereas

most of Welch and Rawlings' originals might be said to be "of the mind," with artfully-crafted lyrics, rich in detail and imagery and performed slowly as though being reflected upon, "Six White Horses" is a rhythm-based song of the body, a raw-boned song ideal for communal sing-alongs and dancing. The song in strophic form features a readily accessible upbeat melody that is repeated over eleven verses (eight sung and three instrumental) making it a good length for both communal singing and dancing. The lyrical formation of each four line verse features an A-A-B-A pattern in which the first line is stated and repeated, followed by a contrasting line and then reiterated a third time to close the verse (see appendix 4 for lyrics). This simple, repetitive form is ideal for call and response group singing (A1: lead call, A2: group response, B: lead call, A3: group response) even if Welch and Rawlings do not perform it as such. Welch and Rawlings' choice of instrumentation explicitly highlights the body as well; Rawlings plays the banjo using clawhammer style (whose physicality is apparent in the style's less sophisticated nickname: banging), accompanying himself on harmonica (an instrument predisposed to emphasizing humanity, its sound reliant on breath, and transparently expressive of the quality of effort exerted towards its sounding), alongside Welch's "hambone" body percussion and buck dance interludes. Besides the distinctly human-quality of the instrumentation just mentioned, Welch and Rawlings' vocals in "Six White Horses" are particularly raw, intentionally "unpretty" perhaps, even when compared to their typically unadorned vocal style. This quality is especially pronounced in the vocal break in both Welch's and Rawlings' voices at the beginning of the 3rd line of each verse. Welch and Rawlings joyful demeanor in performing the song can seem like a stark contrast to the typically serious and restrained stance they take in performing the dark, meditative material that make up most of their catalog. A surface reading of this might be that Welch and Rawlings are simply enjoying a fun song, but what if their performance of

“unrestrained joy” is part of the performance of primitivism, in the same way that minstrel entertainers played the role of the simple, country bumpkin? “Six White Horses” is an ideal musical example of humanization and disintermediation in Americana, the physicality in performance aptly demonstrating the move to re-inscribe the human element in music-making, in all its imperfections, and the primitive character of the song enacting a ready example of unmediated, unprocessed expression. The next section discusses the ways in which Welch and Rawlings’ “Six White Horses” demonstrates Americana’s strategies of invoking nostalgia: humanization, disintermediation and dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past by focusing on three aspects of the song, the intertextuality in the lyrics, Rawlings’ use of clawhammer banjo style and Welch’s hambone percussion and buck dance performances in the song.

“Six White Horses” and Intertextuality

Even though “Six White Horses” is among the most lyrically minimalist of all “Gillian Welch” songs, its few lyrics are so symbolically charged that they act to connect this song to more than a century of musical history. Most obviously, “Six White Horses” bears a significant resemblance – musically and lyrically – to the folk traditional “She’ll Be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain.” The oft-recurring lyrical motif “Six White Horses” in Welch and Rawlings’ song echoes the recurring line in the second verse of “She’ll Be Comin’” – “She’ll be drivin’ six white horses when she comes” – and both are up-tempo songs in duple meter with both a melody and lyrical construction ideal for communal, call and response group singing. While widely recognized as a popular children’s song, “She’ll Be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain” is derived from an old-time African-American spiritual, “When the Chariot Comes,” the music of which

was first published in 1899 (Studwell 1994, 33 Sandburg 1968, 372). “She’ll Be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain” first appeared in print (music and lyrics) as part of Carl Sandburg’s *American Songbag* collection in 1927 wherein Sandburg explains the song’s origins: “An old-time negro spiritual ‘When the Chariot Comes’ was adapted by mountaineers into ‘She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain,’ and the song spread to railroad work gangs in the Midwest in the 1890s” (Sandburg 1968, 372) (For lyrical comparison of “She’ll be comin,’” “When the Chariot” and “Six White Horses” see Appendices 4, 5 and 6). Although originating in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, “She’ll Be Comin’” became the classic it is today in the twentieth-century, canonized as a children’s song in songbooks and recordings by folk popularizers such as Pete Seeger, joining the repertoire of community folk sing-alongs, and subjected to countless variations and parodies around the world (Studwell 1994, 33). William Studwell describes the song as “a stereotypical symbol of mountain music” (Studwell 1994, 33).

Similar to the references in “Down along the Dixie Line,” the “Six White Horses” lyric has a long history. In different contexts the line “Six White Horses” has carried different connotations so it is difficult to decipher Welch’s intention in using the phrase. Perhaps, rather than convey any literal meaning, in using such a well-worn lyrical and folkloric trope Welch means to signify memory itself. In the traditional songs featuring the “Six White Horses” lyric, “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain” and “When the Chariot comes,” the “six white horses” represent the second coming of Jesus, the horses leading Jesus’ chariot. In “She’ll Be Comin’” round the mountain, for example, “she” refers to the chariot Jesus travels in, much like ships and automobiles have been ascribed feminine characteristics throughout history (See appendices 5 and 6 for lyrics). In the twentieth-century however there were three separate songs recorded by country artists with the title “Six White Horses”: Bill Monroe released one in 1940 as the B-side

to “Mule Skinner Blues,”²³ Tommy Cash (Johnny Cash’s brother) recorded another in 1969 dedicated to John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and Waylon Jennings recorded another still in 1971, a Vietnam protest song (Rosenberg 1985, 51-2, 67). The “Six White Horses” in these three modern songs represent death in a general sense instead of the second coming although the implication of God sending for someone with his chariot remains. Whether referring to the second coming – and by extension the apocalypse – or the death of an individual, the juxtaposition between the bright musical feel of Welch and Rawlings’ “Six White Horses” (up tempo, major key, accompanied by dance) and the dark message of impending doom lends an eerie Southern Gothic quality to the song. While this section addresses the intertextuality of the lyrics in “Six White Horses” to show how the song represents a dialogue with the collective musical memory of Americana music the following section looks into how the music of “Six White Horses” invokes associations with a pre-modern, rural past, with particular focus on Rawlings’ clawhammer banjo playing.

The Banjo as Signifier of Pre-modern Rurality

Rawlings’ accompaniment – his choice of instrument and playing style –sonically invoke a pre-industrial, rural memory-scape. The banjo is well established in the public consciousness as a “traditional” instrument with strong links to rural culture. Bluegrass scholar Robert Cantwell theorizes the banjo as a symbol of tradition and rural culture in more than one of his works. Cantwell writes that the “banjo and fiddle are historically connected to a species of southern music which antedates the Civil War and in the popular imagination are emblematic of a

²³ Bill Monroe’s “Six White Horses” was written by his then-guitarist Clyde Moody and is described as “a blues he’d arranged to a driving guitar riff backing” (Rosenberg 1985, 51). The link between the “six white horses” and death is vaguest in this song whose lyrics seem to align with the floating pool of verses of the blues in which lyrics are not necessarily intended to convey a message so much as to convey the music.

historical era symbolized by the blackface minstrel” (Cantwell 1984, 202). Speculating as to the reasons for the banjo’s firmly established connotations of traditional, rural culture Cantwell writes that the banjo, like the mandolin, is one of the few stringed instruments that have passed from traditional into commercial music and yet stubbornly resisted transformation into a referent of the latter (Cantwell 1993, 13). These instruments’ traditional image is due in part to the fact that they

cannot readily produce tones to qualify (them) for the fine arts . . . no formal techniques are available which will arouse . . . the intensity and brilliance of the violin; nor are further technical improvements likely to give the banjo the resonance of the guitar or the nimbleness of a mechanically more sophisticated stringed instrument such as the harpsichord (Cantwell 1993, 13).

Based on these features, the bluegrass style – in relying on the mandolin and banjo in its standard instrumentation and in making the “best possible use of limited resources” – sonically represents “the agrarian ethic of strict economy with which the national ideals of self-sufficiency and independence are often associated”(Cantwell 1993, 14). Cantwell also notes the instrument’s signification of rural primitivism - a connotation that was entrenched through the banjo’s prominence in minstrel shows - writing that the banjo

remains covertly an Afro-American instrument, retaining the comic quality it acquired in the minstrel show. To play the banjo is always in a sense to play the Fool . . . in America the banjo is by virtue of its Afro-American connections the essential folk instrument, the instrument which to play is always to make do, which we cannot advance into the precincts of polite music without somehow refining out of existence its uncultivated twang (Cantwell 1984, 218-19).

From these explanations, it would seem appropriate to designate the banjo as a sonic “trigger trope” of the collective memory of the rural past (as introduced in Chapter Two). Rawlings’ instrumentation choice in “Six White Horses” then, is at least partly related to its potent signifying power, at once connoting country-ness and past-ness while also gesturing towards the

“strict economy,” resourcefulness and independence of Welch and Rawlings’ overall sound on *The H&H*.

Clawhammer vs. Bluegrass Banjo Style

The pre-modern representations in “Six White Horses” however, extend beyond Rawlings’ choice of instrumentation to his chosen approach to playing the banjo, clawhammer style. While Cantwell might argue that the banjo, as an instrument, is firmly linked with the rural past and has resisted transforming into a referent of commercial music, Scruggs style banjo (also known as three-finger and bluegrass style) has proven prone to brushes with commercialization. Clawhammer and Scruggs are two of the most popular banjo playing styles, the former a rhythmic strumming style suited to old-time music and the latter a picking technique that emerged as a definitive element of the Bluegrass sound. Clawhammer- and Scruggs-style banjo playing can be seen as reflections of the cultural contexts from which they emerged, the former signifying a traditional, agrarian, pre-industrial culture and the latter, representing forces of commercialization and industrialization.

In interpreting the connotations of Rawlings’ banjo performance in “Six White Horses” it is important to start with the musical contexts in which the respective playing styles flourished. Although most associated with old-time Appalachian music and minstrel shows, clawhammer banjo has a long history. As banjo expert Robert Winans writes, clawhammer banjo “undoubtedly reflect[s] preexisting black performance” (Winans 1989, 1042-43). Bluegrass scholar Neil Rosenberg characterizes clawhammer as an antiquated playing technique referring to it as the “old minstrel brushing style” (Rosenberg 1985, 71). Cantwell and Winans both note the influence of travelling entertainment troupes, like the circus and medicine shows in

popularizing the banjo starting in the 1840s, writing that the banjo probably became a part of white Southern culture through the performances of both black musicians and the players in these aforementioned traveling shows (Cantwell, 1984, 91, Winans 1989, 1042-43). The banjo became entrenched in the culture of white Southerners, having “bec(ome) an integral component of white rural instrumentation, particularly in the Southeast” (Malone and Stricklin 2003, 25). In the Appalachians especially, the banjo (played in clawhammer style) became a key element in a typical mountain string band, often accompanying a fiddle (“played in the syncopated, chordal or drone hoedown style”) and sometimes a guitar or percussion instrument (Cantwell 1984, 74). These old-time string bands often performed music to accompany social dancing. Though clearly influenced by the commercial music of minstrel, medicine and circus shows, Appalachian old-time music belonged to the social and domestic spheres, music made for the purposes of social bonding and cultural expression (Cantwell 1984, 74). As Southern music historians Bill Malone and David Stricklin note, a fiddle playing melody accompanied by the driving rhythm of clawhammer banjo was a standard dance band in some parts of the Appalachian South up into the 1920s (Malone and Stricklin 2003, 12). In “Six White Horses,” Rawlings references this old-time Appalachian fiddle-banjo duo format in his choice of tuning. Rawlings plays “Six White Horses” in an adaptation of open-C tuning, a very popular tuning for clawhammer banjo especially when playing old-time fiddle tunes which Rawlings adapts slightly by using a capo on the third fret (which preserves the tonal relationships between the strings in open-C tuning, but transposes the song up three half tones to E-flat major) (Banjo Hangout 2014a, 2014b). Taking this argument a step further, Rawlings’ harmonica might be heard as a substitution for the fiddle and the instrumentation of “Six White Horses,” as an adaptation of an Appalachian banjo-fiddle dance band. While there appears to be some disagreement as to when clawhammer style fell out

of favour, it might have been as early as the 1880s in minstrel shows, making clawhammer a sonic relic of pre-modern rural America.

Based on its cultural and historic origins clawhammer banjo is clearly representative of “traditional” culture but is there anything about this style of playing that in and of itself indicates a link to the rural past? I argue that, even to those without much knowledge or exposure to varying banjo styles, clawhammer banjo does signify rural primitivism. For one, the required hand position in clawhammer style is claw-like which, combined with the style’s repetitive movement patterns, gives the style a deceptive appearance of simplicity. Audiences tend to interpret performances featuring fast tempos and demonstrations of physical exertion as displays of virtuosity as though conflating musical and physical feats. When playing clawhammer style, one holds their hand in a rigid claw-like position. In basic terms clawhammer banjo style relies on the constant repetition of a three part rhythmic figure often denoted as “bum-ditty.” The bum is played when the index finger strikes a melody note in a downward motion with the back of the fingernail followed in quick succession by the index, or index and middle fingers, brushing a strum across several strings and then the thumb striking a high drone (fifth) string by pulling away from the banjo skin so that the claw-like hand position is maintained. Robert Cantwell explains clawhammer, writing that,

As the various names applied to it reveal – rapping, beating, frailing, clawhammer – the minstrel or mountain style of banjo playing is highly percussive, laminating rhythmic and melodic phrases together in repeated motives. In the clawhammer style the banjoist, using the forces of his wrist and sometimes his forearm, brings the back of his fingernail down upon the string, snapping it and striking the banjo head more or less forcefully at the terminus of its arc; this action encapsulates the note in a hard percussive shell which dissolves with the decay of the tone (Cantwell 1984, 93).

Here, Cantwell highlights the inherent physicality and crudeness of movement involved in playing clawhammer-style banjo. While one might not be able to appreciate the sense of

simplicity conveyed in clawhammer style when listening to a recording of “Six White Horses,” YouTube videos of Welch and Rawlings performing the song certainly capture clawhammer’s appearance of primitivism (“Six White Horses - Gillian Welch & David Rawlings” 2011). Although Rawlings performs a variation on the bum-ditty rhythmic pattern with a technique called drop-thumbng, as far as the audience can see his left hand is performing a repetitive pattern-based movement (banjohangout.com 2014a). Meanwhile, Rawlings’ right hand is also playing with seemingly minimal exertion as well because playing in an open tuning frees up his hands from having to finger chords. From a purely spectator point of view, Rawlings seems to be having a leisurely time playing, his left hand only having to fret some of the the melody notes.

On the other hand, in Scruggs style banjo, the strings are picked rapidly in repetitive sequences called rolls because the fingers seem to roll across the strings so that melody notes emerge surrounded by arpeggiated sequences. The style is generally syncopated and is meant to be played at rapid tempos (Rosenberg 1985, 3). In performance the technical demands of Scruggs style are explicit, making it a much flashier approach to playing the banjo, a fact not lost on audiences. In a *New York Times* report on the 1959 Newport Folk Festival, Earl Scruggs was likened to Paganini and the playing style he developed has been described as a “virtuosic instrumental technique” (Rosenberg 1985, 3, Shelton cited in Rosenberg 1985, 152). The most obvious differences between clawhammer and Scruggs style are speed and technical difficulty but Scruggs style also seems to reflect in its sound a starkly different cultural landscape than the one evoked by clawhammer. Whereas clawhammer banjo maintained associations with its folk origins, one might say that Scruggs style banjo, left home to find fortune in the city in that it proved to be commercially viable from the 1940s onwards. One example is the success of Flatt and Scruggs (formed by ex-Bluegrass Boy Earl Scruggs and guitarist Lester Flatt) among whose

achievements was providing the theme and incidental music as well as cameo appearances for *The Beverly Hillbillies* television series (Rosenberg 1985, 261). Chuck Hicks goes so far as to characterize Scruggs-style banjo as a style born of industrialization, writing,

it can be said with a straight face that Earl Scruggs is the father of industrial music, because his home environment had everything to do with his sound . . . when listening to Scruggs's signature piece "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," don't fantasize about the mist-shrouded ridges of the Great Smoky Mountains; instead, imagine the deafening cacophony of spinning and weaving machines inside a textile mill. The sharply metallic, clanky syncopation of Scruggs' banjo reflected the industrial culture in which he grew up, worked, and learned to play music . . . There was something novel yet urbane in Scruggs' playing (Hicks 2002).

The purpose of looking into the connotations of clawhammer and bluegrass banjo styles in such depth has been to give a thorough consideration of one example of a sonic "trigger trope" of collective memory, and how it can be deployed by Americana artists to powerfully invoke the past. In spite of its appearance of minimalism and spontaneity, "Six White Horses" is a studied, dense miniature of nineteenth-century Appalachian folk culture with an expansive referential scope. Like the lyrics of "Down along the Dixie Line," the sonic references in "Six White Horses" are carefully chosen and potent signifiers of the past. In Chapter Two these potent signifiers of the past were referred to as trigger tropes which act as "single sensory moments [that] release an unexpected temporal floodgate of memory and emotion" (Lange n.d.). As we have seen, the sound of a banjo, for example, is neither intended nor received as neutral but rather as a powerful signifier of a collective memory of the rural past. The signifying power of the trigger tropes Americana artists exploit to convey a sense of grounding in the past developed over time, accumulating a sense of association with the past through cumulative iterations by many songwriters, singers, instrumentalists, and promoters working in the various genres in Americana's stylistic lineage.

“Hambone” Body Percussion and Buck Dance

Like Rawlings’ use of banjo and clawhammer style in “Six White Horses,” Welch’s “hambone” percussion and buck dancing are cultural relics with deep historical “roots” and strong associations with the rural past. In a broad sense, buck dance and hambone share the same cultural history as clawhammer banjo, truly hybrid forms with African origins that incorporated European influence in the rich melting pot of the American South and grew into important elements of Southern, white Appalachian culture in the nineteenth-century (Axelrod and Osler 2000, 75). While the tangled roots of buck dance are certainly interesting, this next section focuses on Welch’s body percussion as a signifier of the rural past. The body percussion Welch incorporates into “Six White Horses” – in the instrumental breaks after verses one, two and three – reinforces the primitive associations of clawhammer banjo and the song’s lyrical simplicity enacting an ideal of humanized and disintermediated musical expression. Welch performs her body percussion accompaniment with a combination of left and right hand thigh-slap rhythm patterns punctuated with handclap accents. Even though in performance Welch’s body percussion is amplified by a microphone shared with Rawlings’ banjo, it is surprisingly resonant so that their volume levels are approximately matched. When listening to the album version of “Six White Horses” the sound source of the percussion is unclear but similar enough to spoons that it carries the same old-timey associations as it would if the listener could easily identify the sound as body percussion. Body percussion can be traced back to “Pattin’ Juba,” a dance of West-African origins that the slaves brought to America featuring “a clapping or slapping of the thighs, the chest, knees and body” creating a complex, syncopated rhythm pattern (Southern 1983, 309, and Epstein 1977, 141-44). “Pattin’ Juba” became a popular percussion accompaniment to many plantation dances and later was incorporated into minstrel shows

alongside other forms of improvised percussion such as the jaw-bone (Epstein 1977, 141-144).

As Eileen Southern writes, in the antebellum South, slaves danced to the music of fiddles and banjos with percussion accompaniment provided “by the foot stomping of the musicians and the ‘juba patting’ of the bystanders” (Southern 1983, 309). Southern explains that,

when the fiddler grew tired, the slaves provided a different kind of dance music by ‘pattin’ juba.’ Basically, this procedure involved foot tapping, hand clapping, and thigh slapping, all in precise rhythm. There seems to have existed, however, a number of ways to accomplish this feat . . . there were as many ways to pat juba (or juber) as there were patterns (1983, 179-180).

Today “pattin’ juba” is better known as “hambone”²⁴ and is performed predominantly by white folk revivalists who sustain the practice through their performances, which are usually part of the programming at bluegrass festivals and mountain folk camps. Hambone is a nearly extinct folk musical practice that is even less well known than other traditional improvised folk percussion practices like washboard, bones and spoons. Similarly, Welch’s buck dance routine in “Six White Horses” invokes myriad associations with Appalachia, primitivism, rurality, and a lineage of American roots music traditions. At the same time though, Welch’s buck dance routine might seem novel to contemporary audiences, several traditionalist country and folk performers from Uncle Dave Macon and Snuffy Jenkins in early country music to John Hartford and Bill Monroe²⁵ have also incorporated clogging and related dancing into their performances to enhance their old-timey image.

²⁴ For some examples of a Hambone performance see Dave Holt with Doc Watson:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJYInQbb4b0> and Steve Hickman:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnrlzc39edM>

²⁵ See Bill Monroe’s clogging routine in a performance on the Austin City Limits stage at 1:44:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cxRXgZanwQU>

Conclusion

Both “Down along the Dixie Line” and “Six White Horses” carry on a musically-mediated dialogue with a collective memory of the mythic, pre-modern South, a tradition started in the Minstrel show and continued in Tin Pan Alley “Dixie” songs and Bluegrass. Whereas “Down along the Dixie Line’s” dialogue with the memory of the mythic South takes place mainly in its lyrics, “Six White Horse’s” dialogue with this memory world is mainly musical but the overall effect is the same in both cases, an invocation of the past that is so powerful it envelopes Welch, Rawlings and their work in an aura of memory.

The next two chapters proceed with the same aim as this one, to ground the ideas presented in Chapters One and Two in the “stuff” of Americana. Towards this end, Chapter Four examines how the project’s three main themes of collective memory, humanization and disintermediation are demonstrated in a visual sample of Americana, the art and design of *The Harrow & The Harvest* and Chapter Five takes the same approach to the analysis of a sample of Americana’s reception among listeners in the form of the results to an Americana listener survey conducted as part of this project.

Chapter Four: Visual Invocations of the Past

While there is no denying that sound is the fundamental focus in discussing music, it would be shortsighted to limit the scope of analysis to music alone, to dismiss the abundance of information offered in the visual material surrounding music, especially since in many instances an album's graphics or a band's visual presentation precede the sonic element in consumers' experience of music. No matter how much anti-commercial rhetoric swirls around a genre like Americana, the artists working therein inevitably engage with the market and part of that engagement is packaging the music, attaching a visual element that introduces the band, the album, the songs, and ideally speaks to the themes and aesthetic presented in the sound. The focus of this chapter then, is a visual analysis of *The Harrow & the Harvest's* (H&H) album design and the visual presentation of Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings in performance. This chapter functions as a sequel to Chapter Three's musical analysis, and like Chapter Three, the analysis here is oriented around the themes and arguments presented in Chapters One and Two, namely lineage, folk authenticity, retro, nostalgia, collective memory and the influence of the digital age on collective memory. The questions guiding the analysis examine how Welch and Rawlings invoke a psychic landscape of the rural past, and how the movement within Americana to humanize and disintermediate music is expressed in the visual material under examination. Overall, the goal of this chapter is to ground the main ideas presented in earlier chapters in the "real," to examine how they are demonstrated in the material of Americana. The visual material under consideration in this chapter's analysis includes the complete packaging design of *The Harrow & the Harvest*, with particular attention to the album cover art, two YouTube videos

made to contextualize and promote the cover art,²⁶ as well as Gillian Welch's and Dave Rawlings' performance dress and the iconography of their instrumentation.²⁷ The chapter is divided into two sections, the first is concerned with how the production of the cover art as portrayed in the YouTube videos and the YouTube videos themselves demonstrate the principles of humanization and disintermediation, while the second section addresses how *The H&H's* album cover art, overall visual design, and Welch and Rawlings' visual presentation, invoke a collective memory of the rural past.

Humanization

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *The H&H's* cover art and what makes it stand out so sharply from its contemporaries is the old-fashioned printing process used in its production. Welch and Rawlings chose letterpress for the printing of *The Harrow & the Harvest's* album cover despite the expense and logistical challenges involved. Letterpress printing is a pre-digital, mechanical printing method that was the standard printing process from the invention of the Guttenberg printing press in the mid-15th-century up until the 1950s when it was overtaken by offset printing (Elation Press 2013). The invention of photopolymer plates in the 1980s (which allow for photo negatives to be digitally transferred to a printing plate), made viable larger runs than were previously only possible with traditional typesetting and encouraged a niche revival of letterpress printing (Two Paperdolls Letterpress 2014). When something is printed by letterpress, the design is first transferred onto custom-made plates,²⁸ and then mounted on either metal or

²⁶ Welch and Rawlings had two short videos made to accompany the cover art for *The H&H*: one a short "How to Stain Your Album Cover" video and the other, a documentary-style "behind-the-scenes" account of the cover art's creation, simply titled, "The Harrow and the Harvest-Making of the Album Cover." These videos were posted to their record label's (Acony Records) YouTube channel as part of the album's promotional campaign.

²⁷ Iconography insofar as use of particular guitars and microphones can signify a given era and specific values.

²⁸ See Acony Records 2011a, 2:19-2:50 for an explanation of the function of the plates in letterpress printing.

wood (depending on the intended depth of the indentation on the paper) (Acony Records 2011a). These plates are then fitted into the letterpress machine where they act like rubber stamps, inked and punched into the paper (Acony Records 2011a). The documentary-style “The Harrow and the Harvest - making of the album cover” video posted to Acony Records’ YouTube channel guides the viewer through the process of creating the album’s cover art, interspersing segments of commentary from illustrator John Dyer Baizley, Aardvark Letterpress co-owner Cary Ocon, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings with footage of the shop employees operating the letterpress machines. The old-timey mechanics of letterpress printing are highlighted in close-up views of the machines operating, shot from multiple angles. In the video Cary Ocon explains the operation of the “windmill press,” named for the mechanical arms that cross over to first pick up the blank paper and carry it to the point where it is punched by the inked plate in the centre of the machine and then over to the other side where it is dropped as a finished product (Acony Records 2011a, 4:22-4:58). Given that Welch and Rawlings not only chose to use letterpress printing for their album covers in spite of costs and complications but also had a film made to document the process, one should question what letterpress printing and its finished product are meant to represent in this context.

Letterpress printing demonstrates the same principles as Americana’s human-centred sonic aesthetic (as discussed in Chapter One). Just as this aesthetic emphasizes the unique sonic qualities that machines cannot replicate, letterpress printing is framed in the “making of the album cover” video as a human-centred production process whose unique qualities – such as the deep impressions in the paper – cannot be replicated with digital printing (See Acony records 2011a, 2:04-2:19 & 3:48). Welch and Rawlings’ decision to use letterpress printing for *The H&H’s* album cover might be likened to their use of analog recording throughout their career.

Like analog recording, letterpress printing is a pre-digital process that uses tangible materials instead of computers, and demands careful attention, has significant room for error and is both expensive and physically involved relative to more automated, digital alternatives. If nostalgia is a reaction to perceptions of change and technological progress run amok, then a revival of letterpress printing could be considered a response to software-based production in areas from graphic design to composing, performing and recording music. A revival of hands-on production processes might be emerging as a countermovement to computer-based process which make production cheaper and more accessible at the same time that they devalue certain forms of knowledge and co-opt some of the process away from humans. The revival of letterpress printing in the digital age is a way of reintegrating the human element in production. Letterpress is a highly involved process that requires knowledge of the machines, paper and inks as well as plenty of human input in the actual printing process. Furthermore, unlike the finished products of more industrialized and automated printing processes, there is a sense that with letterpress, the finished products bear an imprint of the care and expertise of the person operating the machine. For example, the depth of the indentation varies according to several factors: the type of paper, the type of plate used to print and the machine settings.

The production of *The H&H's* cover art, as framed in “the making of the album cover” YouTube video, also demonstrates the humanization principle in the way it celebrates the artisanal ideal. An artisan is defined as “one that produces something in limited quantities often using traditional methods” (Merriam-Webster 2014). Based on this definition, the “making of the album cover” video clearly emphasizes the artisanal character of *The H&H's* album cover art framing illustrator John Dyer Baizley’s and Aardvark letterpress as model artisans. The video’s narrative notes the long hours Baizley and the employees at Aardvark invest in their work (see

Acony Records 2011a, 0:40-1:04, 3:00-3:15), their expertise and enthusiasm as well as the modest scale of their production. For example, in the first ten seconds of the “making of the album cover video” the viewer knows that the cover art was printed at a 43-year-old family-owned printing business operated by a father and his two sons instead of a large-scale industrialized printing company. Rather than take the filmmaker’s emphasis on the artisanal nature of the project for granted, it should be noted that most likely the album was also part of industrial-scale production processes at other stages of its packaging – the pressing of the compact discs or the printing of the back cover photography, for example. Just as folk anthologists (i.e. Ruth Crawford Seeger, Harry Smith) constructed a vision of folk music as pre-modern by excluding signifiers of industrialization, commercialization and modernization (Mancini 2004, 238) “the making of the album cover” video also excludes explicit signifiers of digital and large-scale processes involved in producing the album’s packaging. Welch and Rawlings’ use of letterpress printing is also interesting in that the rhetoric of nostalgia at work in marketing Americana is often deployed in promoting the revival of letterpress printing and artisanal production more generally, in products from locally-sourced food to craft beer to clothing made by small scale designers (see Chapter Five).

One of the most significant ways that *The H&H’s* album cover art demonstrates humanization is in its tactility which promotes the physical format of the album and encourages listeners to actively engage with it. There is no comparison between the embodied engagement that *The H&H’s* unique, material, “art project” cover encourages and the typically alienating experience of album art in digital form such as low resolution jpeg files viewed on small screens. Letterpress printing uses thick, spongy paper to achieve the characteristic debossing effect that results from the force with which the letterpress machines stamp the paper. *The H&H’s* cover art

is printed on cotton paper so thick that one reviewer remarked it could “double as a coaster” (Carlin 2011). This thick spongy paper converts the cover art from mere packaging into an artifact and encourages listeners to engage with the artwork on a tactile level as was the norm in the era of vinyl records when cover art was more highly valued and music was approached as a physical item.

Besides working with renowned illustrator John Dyer Baizley (whose posters and prints are becoming increasingly sought after) and having their covers printed by letterpress so their album covers take on an artifact status, Welch and Rawlings also filmed a “How to Coffee-Stain Your Album Cover” video that explicitly encourages listeners to engage with their album’s cover art. In the two-minute video, Welch and Rawlings take their fans through the process of staining the “100% cotton cover in a coffee bath” so as to create a one-of-a-kind album cover with an aged look. Welch explains that the staining “kinda gives it an antique feel” and notes that “there’s so much relief on the letterpress that the coffee actually gives the print slightly higher contrast because it sorta pools in the deeper places where the plate struck the paper and picks up all these beautiful anomalies in the paper” (Acony Records 2011b). The idea of encouraging fans to stain their copies of the cover art came about by accident. Welch and Rawlings had originally wanted to use a warm-toned, off-white stock to achieve an aged look that fit with the visual feel of the rest of the packaging. When they could not locate a large enough quantity of the off-white stock they settled for a pearly-white colour but they still wanted to find a way to add a vintage look to the covers. Rawlings experimented with dipping the covers in coffee for fun at one point and they found that the hand-stained cover was even better than if they had used warm-colored stock because the staining process made each one unique. When staining each cover individually before insertion into the jewel cases proved too complicated, Welch and Rawlings had the “how-

to” video made and posted alongside the “making of the album cover” video on their record label’s YouTube channel. In highlighting the distinctiveness of the *Harrow & the Harvest*’s cover art, these two videos add value to the physical version of the album. More than one person posted in the public comments that they had downloaded the album and bought the physical CD after watching the “How to Coffee-Stain Your Album Cover” video. The many facets of the *H&H*’s cover art – the old-fashioned, human-centred and artisanal character of letterpress printing and the artwork’s materiality – work in tandem to restore an aura of authenticity to *The Harrow & the Harvest* in spite of its mass-production (the album’s first run was 100,000 copies) as well as to affirm the value of pre-digital, human-centred forms of musical production and consumption.

Disintermediation

The disintermediation element in *The Harrow & the Harvest* is demonstrated in the two videos Welch and Rawlings had filmed and posted to their record label’s YouTube channel to contextualize and promote the album. Much like the production of the music in *The Harrow & the Harvest*, the cover art project for the album seems to reflect an ethic of obsessive transparency, a desire to frame the album as an honest and pure representation of Welch and Rawlings’ artistic intentions. If disintermediation is about removing the intermediaries in the production process to ensure the purity of artistic impulse in the final product, in situations where, for example, Welch and Rawlings cannot physically illustrate or print the album covers themselves, the next best thing is for them to be heavily involved in the mediating processes. As “The Harrow & the Harvest - Making of the Album Cover” video makes clear, Welch and Rawlings were involved in all steps of the production of the album’s packaging. Cover illustrator

John Dyer Baizley explains in the video that creating the cover image was a collaborative process with Welch and Rawlings as far as sharing ideas about imagery (Acony records 2011a, 0:40). In a similar vein, Cary Ocon comments on Welch and Rawlings' involvement in the printing process, explaining that the pair had come into the shop on several occasions for test printings (Acony Records 2011a, 6:42). Welch and Rawlings' involvement in creating the cover art is emphasized further in their presence all the way through the "Making of the Album Cover" filmed in the workshop of Aardvark Letterpress.

The "Making of the Album Cover" video also demonstrates the disintermediation principle in that making fans aware of the mediating processes involved in creating an album is akin to removing the mediating effect of those processes. The entire concept of the "Making of the Album Cover" video is a kind of "behind-the-scenes" exhibition of the typically hidden processes involved in making an album's packaging. Fitting with Americana's general favouring of imperfections as a sign of honesty, the video even mentions the various mistakes, problems and challenges encountered in creating the album's packaging: the unavailability of sufficient quantities of the first choice of paper stock, manufacturing the design plate with "too large" type, the paper being too thick for machines to insert into jewel cases, etc.

As explained in the introduction and Chapter One, the humanization and disintermediation of musical production and consumption in Americana demonstrates a dialectic between nostalgic invocations of the past and an embrace of contemporary life. Much as the two YouTube videos discussed in this chapter evoke a sense of nostalgia for artisanal craftsmanship, and pre-digital, human-centred production processes, they (their very existence and their content) also depict a reliance on modern-day mobility and technology-aided connected-ness in producing the album's packaging. At one point in "The Harrow & The Harvest - Making of the Album

Cover” video Welch explains the multi-site process of producing the album packaging with an illustrator in Philadelphia, additional graphic design in Brooklyn, the front cover’s printing done in Los Angeles, the back cover printed in Tennessee, and assembly in North Carolina (Acony Records 2011a, 1:28-1:53). It is obvious that Welch and Rawlings relied on modern communications technology to coordinate the contributions of the many people involved in the project. Furthermore, even as the two YouTube videos promote the uniqueness of the album art as a selling point for the physical format of the album, and by extension the brick-and-mortar stores that would sell it, the videos also carve out a home for the album in the digital ether of the internet, preserved in countless archives of news websites, music blogs, design blogs, and fan communities.

The Harrow & the Harvest’s Visual design vis-à-vis Collective Memory

In this section the discussion shifts from the material qualities and production of the cover art to in-depth analysis and interpretation of the content of the album’s packaging design. While John Dyer Baizley’s cover illustration is compelling, to focus on it at the expense of the other sections of *The H&H’s* album design would be to miss the impact of the striking consistency in the visual aesthetic across the various pieces of the album’s packaging design in spite of the different artists involved in their creation (Baizley did the illustration for the front cover, Mark Seliger did the photography for the back cover and there was an unnamed graphic artist who worked on the overall packaging design). While the first part of the chapter discussed the expressions of humanization and disintermediation in the visual aspects of *The H&H*, this section’s focus is the ways in which *The H&H’s* visual design and Welch and Rawlings’ self-presentation invoke Americana’s collective memory world.

Welch and Rawlings worked with friend, fellow musician and artist John Dyer Baizley (he is the singer and guitarist in the heavy metal band, Baroness) to create the cover art for *The Harrow & the Harvest*. Baizley's work is well known among heavy metal fans and artists as most of his design work has been for heavy metal album covers, posters and band merchandise. As one reviewer familiar with Baizley's work put it, *The Harrow & the Harvest* "is a departure from flaming skulls and tusked creatures of the night" (Junkyard Arts 2011). The line drawing that graces the album cover was originally intended to be a full colour illustration, keeping with Baizley's signature style but Welch and Rawlings felt so strongly about the last draft Baizley presented before the colouring stage they decided it was complete. The resulting brown and white two-tone lends the illustration an old-timey sepia-like quality.



Figure 1: *The Harrow & the Harvest* Cover Art by John Dyer Baizley

In an interview about the project, Baizley outlines his vision for the work saying, “Gillian is great at building narratives within her songs and in finding an implied storyline across the course of her records . . . any complimentary [sic] artwork would include elements of the pastoral and Gothic allegories for which Gillian is so renowned” (Redefine magazine 2011). The cover illustration is lushly detailed, even in its compressed form (having been shrunk from its original dimensions of fourteen inches square down to four and three-quarter inches square), rich in the allegories Baizley mentions (Redefine magazine 2011). In the illustration Welch and Rawlings sit side by side; Welch stares straight ahead, appearing transfixed on something in the far distance as Rawlings leans over to whisper in her ear. This is the first “Gillian Welch” album to feature both Welch and Rawlings on the cover but even so, Gillian is clearly the focal point in this image, facing the viewer, occupying more of the frame and holding a more open stance than Rawlings. While Welch also has her legs crossed and one arm across her legs in a semi-guarded posture, Dave holds a curiously secretive posture with both arms and legs crossed over his body, one arm raised to covertly relay a message to Welch. Dave’s guarded stance fits with the role he has consistently performed in the duo, providing vital contributions to the project without attracting attention to himself. A large barn owl - evocative of quiet wisdom - perches on Rawlings’ shoulder to highlight his understated power in the duo. A pair of perfectly symmetrical sparrows connected at the beak crown Welch as though to represent the intertwined nature of Welch and Rawlings’ vocal and guitar parts; a quality that is especially pronounced in *The H&H*. A large harvest moon encloses Welch and Rawlings in reference to the harvest of the title and the autumnal feel of the record as mentioned by Welch in interviews (Knapp 2011). A fireball leaves a trail of flames along the rim of the full moon in the background – starting at

Rawlings' right hand holding a match and ending at Welch's right hand, which eerily points to the sky. The corners between the full moon's borders and the edge of the frame are filled in with wheat, peaches, autumn leaves and flowers in full bloom - references to rurality and the harvest in the title. These rural referents also position Welch within country music's discourse of the natural. In *High Lonesome*, country music scholar, Cecelia Tichi argues that country music "defines itself as belonging to, and united with, the natural world of earth and sky and seasons" (Tichi 1994, 197). Tichi notes that the country music industry often hides "the terms of its art – the schooling of its musicians, long hours of practice, auditions, vocal coaching, etc." framing skills as bestowed rather than learned, natural rather than developed (1994, 210). Welch and Rawlings' visually positioning themselves in the realm of the natural might be read as a strategy for masking the terms of art and diverting attention away from the aspects of their work that are enmeshed in contemporary realities.

Even the banjo headstock that appears in the bottom right section of the frame is more than a simple nod to the instrument's role on the album. The banjo is a potent signifier of traditional music and rurality more broadly. Recall the reference in chapter three to Robert Cantwell's characterization of the banjo as a representation of "the agrarian ethic of strict economy with which the national ideals of self-sufficiency and independence are often associated" based on its technical limitations and exclusion from the fine arts (Cantwell 1993, 13-4). The banjo in the cover illustration reinforces the country-ness suggested by the peaches and wheat at the same time that it points to the "strict economy," resourcefulness and independence of Welch and Rawlings in making *The H&H*. The entire image fits neatly within a thin frame, leaving a narrow border of blank space between it and the edge of the cover. "Gillian Welch," appears at the top centre of the graphic, interrupting the frame, and the album title, *The*

Harrow & the Harvest, appears at the bottom centre, also interrupting the frame. Overall, the artwork evokes a strong sense of symmetry and balance.

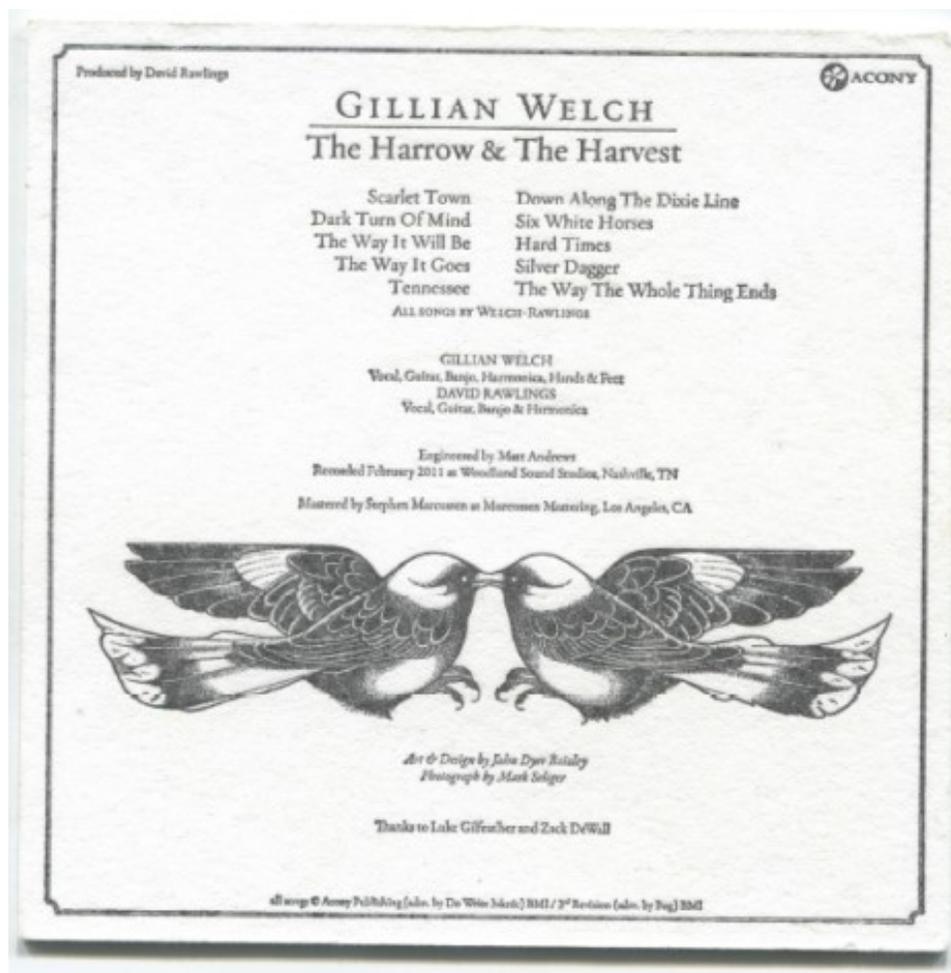


Figure 2: Flipside of Cover Art Insert

On the flipside of the cotton album cover (also printed by letterpress), there is the standard requisite album information: the credits, a track listing and copyright information as well as an iteration of the sparrows that appeared upon Welch's head in the front cover's design. The visual design on the compact disc features an excerpt from the bottom right section of the cover art illustration and the banjo headstock is the focal point. The image is printed in autumnal colours, two-tone brown and golden-orange.

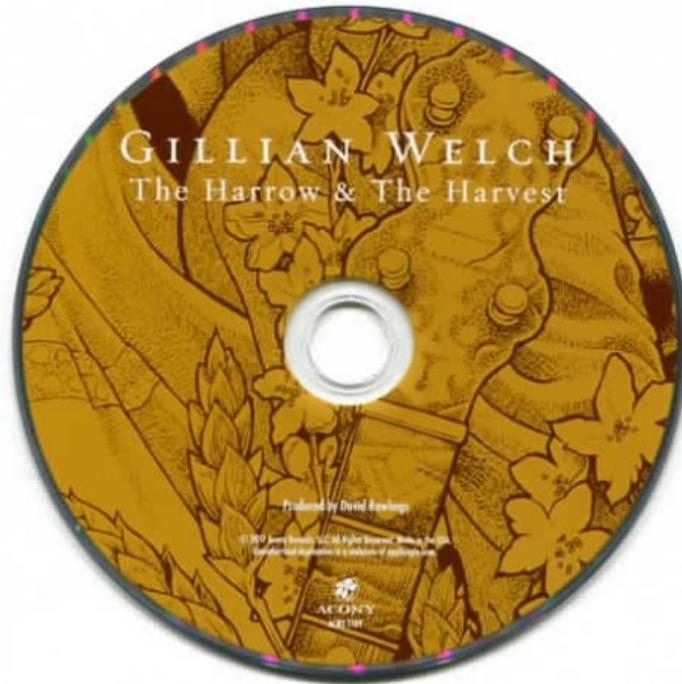


Figure 3: The Harrow & the Harvest Compact Disc Design



Figure 4: The Harrow & the Harvest Back Cover Photo by Mark Seliger

Mark Seliger, a prominent photographer with a background in fashion and celebrity photography who has shot more than one-hundred covers for *Rolling Stone* magazine did the photography for *The Harrow & the Harvest*, both the image on the album's back cover (figure 4) and additional promotional shots (management +artists).²⁹ The photo on the CD case's back cover is a black-and-white image of Welch and Rawlings sitting together in a field, Welch again facing the viewer while Rawlings' faces Welch, the two of them foregrounded against a vast open landscape bounded by mountains in the distance, absent of any signs of civilization. The uninterrupted expanse of landscape, the lack of colour and Welch and Rawlings' reclined postures indirectly recall the pastoralism of Andrew Wyeth's paintings.³⁰ The image connotes a sense of independence and freedom; Welch and Rawlings seem small in relation to the wide open wilderness around them. Like the collective memory world of the rural past which recalls the past without specifying a specific place or era, this image also strongly evokes a sense of old-timey-ness; the pair's clothing is vaguely antique without being archaic and the rural setting provides no evidence of a time stamp. Like the early architects of the collective memory world of the mythic South, *The H&H's* visual design excludes all signs and suggestions of modernity, commercialism and industrialization, preferring instead to emphasize signifiers of a pastoral, pre-modern world. Seliger's photo is integrated seamlessly into the album's visual design, its black and white echoing the brown and white two tone of the front cover, Welch and Rawlings dressed in the same, old-timey, outfits as on the front, and the image bounded by a thin, golden frame that parallels the thin frame around Baizley's illustration.

²⁹ Mark Seliger also directed "Gillian Welch's" 2001 DVD, *The Revelator Collection*.

³⁰ Andrew Wyeth (1917-2009) was a famous American realist painter. His better known works feature an emphasis on scarcity in ornament and colour, often painted from a limited palette of neutral colours accented with dark green and blue. Wyeth primarily worked in the regionalist style, a popular American art movement in the 1930s characterized by anti-modernism and positive portrayals of rural life, which are also central themes in folk music and the collective memory of the rural South.

In both the front cover illustration and the back cover's photograph Welch's and Rawlings' expressions are serious and guarded, reminiscent of the Carter Family's consistently somber expressions in photographs. This plainness speaks to a sense of folk authenticity in its rejection of spectacle and glamour but also to a nostalgic impulse for a time before smiles and "playing to the camera" became the norm. Welch's and Rawlings' serious expressions on the front and back covers of the album might be an intentional visual reference to 19th-century portraiture to fit with the abundance of 19th century musical and lyrical references in *The Harrow & the Harvest*. According to communications scholar Christina Kotchemidova, the typically solemn portraits of the nineteenth-century "took their cues from traditional European fine art portraiture, where smiles were only worn by peasants, children and drunks" as well as from "the etiquette and beauty standards of the time [that] also called for a small, tightly controlled mouth" (2005). Smiling for portraits was not the norm until the 20th century when Kodak made photography accessible to the masses (Kotchemidova 2005).

Welch and Rawlings also demonstrate Americana's nostalgic strategies of humanization, disintermediation, and dialogue with collective memory in the performative aspects of their work, that is, in their stage dress and demeanour and choices of instrumentation and amplification. In their understated performance Welch and Rawlings enact an antidote to the commercial music industry by affirming the power of simply performing music as honestly as one can, a philosophy that precludes the backup singers, dance routines, light shows, wardrobe changes, and flying stage gimmicks that have become standard fare in highly choreographed, arena-scale country music spectacles. The prioritizing of musicianship and a straight delivery of well-crafted material over showmanship recalls the seriousness of the Carter Family or Bill Monroe and his Bluegrass Boys. Welch and Rawlings also recall the Carter Family and the

Bluegrass Boys in their standard performance attire, him in a suit, Stetson-style cowboy hat and cowboy boots and her in a country dress and cowboy boots. The Stetson and boots clearly associate the pair with the mythic South and a sense of the rural past (even if they are urban dwellers) while Rawlings' suit and Welch's dress evoke a sense of old-timey Sunday-best formality and adherence to hetero-normative gender conventions. Critics note that Rawlings "says almost nothing onstage . . . play(ing) with his eyes closed and an impassive expression on his face" (Wilkinson 2011) and the way Welch bends her head over her guitar during instrumental passages, one boot kicking the floor in time with the "ruthless rhythmic precision" of her strumming (Harris 2007).³¹ Their focus is entirely on the music and each other, as they "shoot each other knowing glances and whisper between songs" (Reed 2003). The lack of overt showmanship in "Gillian Welch" concerts is appreciated by audiences who interpret the plainness of presentation as an expression of old-fashioned honesty. As one fan shared on an online message board, "As well as the musicianship, the singing, the songwriting, the Stetson and the boots, they also come across as totally charming - no front, no cynicism, just good honest total commitment to their music" (Boult 2011).

Welch and Rawlings also visually invoke the past in their performance when they opt to amplify themselves through a shared microphone. The single shared microphone is the pair's preferred setup in radio performances. Radio hosts often comment on this arrangement on air, framing it as "a nod to the history of music" and great artists like Ralph Stanley and Bill Monroe (Houston 2012). Sometimes Welch and Rawlings also use the shared-microphone setup in live performances as well (Leahey 2011).³² Performances of the rustic gospel tune "Six White

³¹ For an example see "Gillian Welch's" performance of "The Way it Goes" on *Jools Holland live* Nov. 22nd 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GNUYF-MuHRY>

³² For an example of the shared microphone set up in performance see "Gillian Welch" perform "Six White Horses" at the Newport Folk Festival July 30, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZWIZbNWte>

Horses” from *The H&H* feature the added old-timey visual reference of Welch accompanying Rawlings’ clawhammer banjo with hambone percussion and an old-fashioned clogging routine between verses (Levine 2011).

Elizabeth Guffey points out that, unlike nostalgia or historicism, “Retro does not seek out proud examples of the past” but instead “shuffles . . . through history’s unopened closets and unlit corners” (Guffey 2006, 14). Proof of their retro orientation to the past, Welch and Rawlings share an affection for the odd, the unlikely and the generally abandoned in their music and everyday life. Rawlings’ strange guitar is one manifestation of this tendency. By any measure Rawlings’ 1935 Epiphone Olympic, the guitar he has played with the “Gillian Welch” project since the duo’s first album is a peculiar choice of instrument. Even when it was new, the unusually small, arch top model with f-holes on its face was a cheap student model guitar (Wilkinson 2011, Harris 2007). While the casual listener in the audience at a “Gillian Welch” show would not necessarily recognize the make, model and year of Rawlings’ guitar, they would probably be somewhat aware of the guitar’s age and obscurity. The acoustic arch top guitar style is distinctly evocative of the 1930s, when it was especially popular amongst jazz guitarists, and the distinctive carved f-holes, metal bridge and dark sunburst finish are rare on modern guitars. Furthermore, while it may be born out of practical concerns for an easy set up on tour, there is something old-fashioned about Rawlings’ choice to play just one instrument over the course of all the “Gillian Welch” albums and performances. It is rare that a professional guitar player commits so fully to one instrument, even a rare, vintage one.

Conclusion

The acoustic duo, Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings and their 2011 album, *The Harrow & the Harvest* have proven to be rewarding subjects of musical and visual analysis, materials rich in imagery, references and hyper textual triggers of the mythic past of the rural South, home of Americana's collective memory world. Towards the goal of grounding the ideas presented in Chapters One and Two in the visual aspects of one group and artists representative of Americana this chapter addressed how *The H&H's* unconventional cover art and its production (as portrayed in the "making of the album cover" video) depicts humanization, how the "making of the album cover" video depicts disintermediation and how Welch's and Rawlings' visual presentation and the album's visual content – the imagery and colour schemes – invoke Americana's collective memory world. Chapter Five draws on all the material presented thus far in addressing the current growth in Americana's popularity and exploring why the values and ideas associated with Americana resonate with listeners, the latter part informed by the findings of the Americana listener survey.

Chapter Five: Americana's Cultural Resonance

The following penultimate chapter, is in a sense, a return to the question explored in Chapter One, “What is Americana?,” although approached from the angle of what this music is to listeners. The chapter begins with an overview of Americana’s rising popularity and transitioning from a niche genre market into the mainstream followed by a discussion of some of the reasons for Americana’s cultural resonance, drawing on arguments presented in earlier chapters and informed by the results of the online survey designed to gather input from Americana listeners. Like Chapters Three and Four, the aim of this chapter is to examine how the ideas presented in Chapters One and Two apply to texts representative of Americana (as it is produced and consumed), in this case a text representative of Americana’s reception.

Americana’s growth

One of the earliest signs of folk music revival activity that would grow into what is increasingly referred to as Americana was the unprecedented success of the *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack in 2000. The album curated and produced by T-Bone Burnett³³ featured a motley mix of folk, gospel, early country and blues songs and performances by well-known roots music revivalists including Emmylou Harris, Alison Krauss, and John Hartford. Authors such as

³³ Following *O Brother*, T-Bone Burnett continued to promote Americana artists as a music supervisor and producer for film and television. In 2011, Burnett shared a Grammy award with Ryan Bingham in the Best Song Written for Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media category for “The Weary Kind” featured in the independent film *Crazy Heart* (Grammy.com b, 2011). T-Bone Burnett was also the music director for the first season of the popular network TV-series, *Nashville* (Wiseman 2013). The songs performed in the show are drawn heavily from the unreleased compositions of Americana artists such as Lucinda Williams, Gillian Welch, Elvis Costello and John Paul White of the Civil Wars (Wiseman 2013, Gilianwelch.com b). The show’s celebration of Americana continued after T-Bone Burnett stepped away after Season One as veteran Americana artist and producer, Buddy Miller took over the music supervisor position for the show’s second season (Wiseman, 2013).

Benjamin Filene and Aaron A. Fox have framed the success of this soundtrack as a watershed moment in the recent wave of interest in roots music. The soundtrack reached No. 1 on Billboard's Top 200 Albums chart, won five Grammy awards and has been certified platinum eight times over for sales of more than eight million copies (Lewis 2011). Those sales numbers alone would have qualified as a significant success for a mainstream country act, especially in an era of sharply declining album sales, but for an album marketed as alternative country or bluegrass, these numbers were previously unimaginable (Fox 2005, 177). More importantly though, the *O Brother* soundtrack brought American roots music to mainstream audiences, which did not sit well with devoted fans who supported the artists featured on the soundtrack long before its release. As Aaron Fox notes, “many sophisticated alternative country fans began to distance themselves from the success of *O Brother* in embarrassment” as the album received broad-spectrum critical acclaim in addition to its commercial success from institutions such as *NPR*, *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Newsweek* as well as college radio stations (Fox 2005, 177).

Coincidentally, the Americana Music Association was formed a year before the release of the *O Brother* soundtrack and was therefore in a key position to build on the hype created by that album. In the more than ten years since *O Brother*, the AMA has worked to promote the Americana brand and the work of the artists the brand represents. One of the biggest achievements of the AMA's lobbying came in 2010 when the Recording Academy added an Americana Album of the Year category to the Grammy Awards (Purdy 2009). This kind of mainstream recognition has had a large impact on Americana's transitioning from a genre on the fringes of the mainstream market to a brand solidly positioned for large-scale commercial success. One should also consider how much Americana's public profile has been enhanced by

the involvement of well-respected American Roots Music artists with the AMA's annual gathering. Some of the more notable artists who have appeared and/or performed at the awards show and festival include Mavis Staples, Gregg Allman, Richard Thompson, Judy Collins, John Prine, Ry Cooder, Joan Baez, Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, Billy Bragg, Rodney Crowell, Solomon Burke and Lyle Lovett (AMA 2014, "history").

As a result of increasing interest in Americana, the AMA and its annual gathering are more successful now than they have been in the organization's fifteen-year history. Current AMA president, Jed Hilly explains that the AMA is "in the black for the first time" in its existence, "membership is at an all-time high of 1800-plus, up from a 2008-09 slump of about 800" and furthermore that, "The organization's flagship event, the Americana Music Festival and Conference, has grown from 56 acts on the official showcase lineup to 140" in the 2013 edition (Skates 2013). In 2013 attendance at the AMA conference also increased to nearly 1,500 registrants marking a 20% increase over 2012's attendance figures (AMA 2013, "impact"). Jed Hilly is currently working with philanthropist Aubrey Preston (founder of the Tennessee Trails & Byways driving tour) on the Americana Music Triangle, a multi-state tourism and history project that showcases the significant places of American roots music history in the states of Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Arkansas (Walters 2013, Skates 2013).

Slowly but surely Americana is gaining currency as a genre label. In 2011 *Merriam-Webster* announced the addition of "Americana" in their Collegiate Dictionary, defining it as "a genre of American music having roots in early folk and country music" (Schlansky 2011, Skates 2013). Mainstream press outlets are also drawing the public's attention to the Americana genre. On their website and in their e-mail newsletters, the Americana Music Association often invokes the authority of *The New York Times* which in 2007 featured an article written by novelist and

proud Nashvillian, Ann Patchett referring to Americana (albeit indirectly) as "the coolest music scene today" (AMA 2014, "Belfast," AMA 2014, "AXS TV"). With the help of major media partnerships, the Americana Honors & Awards Show was available to audiences across the U.S. and the world, having been broadcast live on AXS TV, NPR.org, Sirius/XM's "Outlaw Country" and WSM and re-broadcast (in an edited form) on Austin City Limits (PBS) and Bob Harris' BBC2 radio show in the following months (AMA 2013, "Duos"). *USA Today* covered the Americana Honors and Awards show, Americana Fest (part of the annual AMA conference) as well as PBS' "Americana Weekend" in November 2013, which included the airing of an edited version of the 2013 Americana Music Association Honors & Awards show and the premiere of *Nashville 2.0*, the first documentary about the Americana genre (Matheson 2013). Americana has also been discussed as a de facto genre in *Newsweek* and *The Atlantic* variably characterized as liberal to the point of offering refuge to those excluded by commercial country's conservatism (Feder 2011) and staunchly conservative in a way that fails to represent the breadth of American identity implied in its name (Russonello 2013). Even rock-centric publications like *Rolling Stone* have addressed Americana, if only because of the association of respected rock artists such as Robert Plant and Dan Auerbach (of the Black Keys) with the AMA's awards show (see Gold 2013). Even Bob Dylan picked up the growing popularity of the word Americana, christening his 2013 summer tour the "Americanarama Festival of Music," which featured concerts lasting over four hours and a multi-act program including Dylan's band, Wilco, My Morning Jacket and Ryan Bingham (Pareles 2013). The growing recognition of Americana is not always met with enthusiasm however. In an interview, celebrated multi-instrumentalist Darrell Scott explains,

I love that Americana is so hard to pin down. As soon as it gets too easy to understand, it may detract from the wonderful music that it is. It's a funny spot between Americana being promoted, talked about and understood, then defined. Once it's defined too specifically, it will get pigeonholed for everyone. . . I do still think Americana is an

alternative form. Bluegrass fits into Americana. Honky-tonk fits into Americana, and Texas Swing does too. I love that Americana's just a big, ol' messy catch-all that no one knows what the hell it really is . . . When it's defined, its power will be gone (Scott quoted in Dearmore 2012).

Here, Scott speaks to one of the tensions driving Americana, between subcultural value based on a sense of exclusivity and the push to build this music's market profile. However, as interesting as it is that press coverage and public recognition of Americana is growing steadily, this is only a side effect of the music's commercial success and seeming ubiquity in the contemporary pop landscape.

Americana's mainstream presence is indeed growing and steadily, evident in the immense popularity of acts like the British folk-rock group, Mumford and Sons who are ironically the most prominent ambassadors of Americana. In 2011 the AMA named Mumford and Sons Emerging Artist of the Year (Paulson 2013). Their sophomore album *Babel* (2012) was a huge success, winning the Grammy for album of the year, setting a record for the highest sales in an album's week of release for 2012 (600,000 units outselling even Justin Bieber's *Believe* at 374,000), the second highest sales of digital album downloads in history (with 420,000 downloads sold), scoring four top 10 singles on the alternative airplay chart and becoming the band's first No. 1 on the Billboard 200 albums (Caulfield, 2012, Paulson 2013). While Mumford and Sons' successes might seem striking they are simply one among a number of recent breakout Americana groups. Jewly Hight indicates that one sign of Americana's ascendance is that the Americana label and its associated aesthetic are not only revitalizing the careers of artists established in other genres (Robert Plant), they are now launching previously unknown bands such as the Alabama Shakes whose album *Boys & Girls* reached gold sales status (500,000 units sold), earned three Grammy nominations and featured the radio hit "Hold On" (Hight 2013,

Paulson 2013). Songs like the Lumineers' "Ho-Hey" a radio-friendly, catchy pop song with a shout-out chorus are even proving that Americana can find a place in the singles market (Hight 2013). Americana award winning duo, The Civil Wars have found mainstream commercial success with their debut full-length album, *Barton Hollow* (2011) which achieved platinum sales status, reached the top of the iTunes charts and cracked the Billboard Top 20 (The Civil Wars, Paulson 2013). Jewly Hight also notes the increasing commercial potential of Americana in that several Americana artists such as The Avett Brothers, The Alabama Shakes, Langhorne Slim and The Lumineers have signed deals licensing their music for advertising campaigns (Hight 2013). Even the staunchly "rough-around-the-edges," South Carolina duo, Shovels and Rope have been embraced by mainstream audiences having performed on the Late Show with David Letterman, Austin City Limits and at Coachella (a major American summer music festival) following the success of their 2012 album *O' Be Joyful* (Paulson 2013). Given the increasing recognition of the Americana genre as seen in the creation of the Americana Grammy category, the increasing use of the term in the mainstream press, coupled with the genre's growing audience – as seen in the commercial successes of several Americana acts discussed above – it is clear that Americana has grown into a publicly recognized musical genre and movement. While cause for celebration among some Americana proponents, this commercial growth also threatens the very identity of a genre built on a fundamental tension between artistic integrity based on modest commercialism and the lure of untapped market potential. In a 2013 feature article in *Nashville Scene*, on the band Shovels and Rope and the state of Americana more generally, Jewly Hight notes this "big-time paradigm shift happening in the Americana world" and asks "If the underdog proves it can break through to broader audiences . . . can it still position itself as the underdog?" (Hight 2013).

Thoughts on Americana's Cultural Resonance

While the first section of this chapter provided an overview of the recent growth of the Americana genre into the mainstream market, this next section explores the question of what attracts listeners to Americana. This discussion draws on the ideas and arguments presented thus far as well as the results of the Americana listener survey. As mentioned in the Introduction, a significant part of my research was designing a survey questionnaire to gather quantitative demographic data on Americana's listening audience as well as listeners' opinions about what Americana is – in terms of musical, philosophical and visual features. The fifteen-question anonymous survey conducted online was live for a month from mid-February to mid-March 2013 during which time 268 Americana listeners from North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand participated.³⁴

The first part of the survey consisted of seven questions designed to gather the opinions of Americana listeners about the genre's defining features and appeal (see Appendix 9 for survey questions). Questions in this first section asked participants to define the genre according to their personal opinions on the genre's musical, philosophical and visual features, themes and values, quintessential artists, stylistic relationship to other genres and reasons for its appeal as well as about the stylistic range of their listening habits. The second half of the survey consisted of multiple-choice style questions designed to gather information that would provide a rough demographic profile of Americana's listening audience. Questions in this section asked participants their country of residence, their age, gender, ethnic background, education, employment status as well as the regional profile of where they live (urban innercity, suburb, small town, rural). The motivation behind these questions was to test the hypotheses running

³⁴Survey respondents did not have to answer every question in the survey for their submission to count and one result of this was that the response rates dropped gradually from the first "qualitative" question (#2) to the last (#7) perhaps as respondents lost interest in the survey.

through this thesis that Americana is a cultural form that speaks to the privileged and that romanticized images of the rural past are especially appealing to people outside of the source cultures represented in those images. In including the question about the regional profile of where participants were living, I was considering city, country, small town etc. not as neutral demographic categories but rather as psychic spaces and a major influence on one's lifestyle, worldview and experiences.

Although one might expect to find a wide range of opinions on the defining features of Americana, especially given the survey's global reach, the themes that emerged – even if expressed in different phrases and wordings – were striking. When I noted recurring keywords such as “roots” I searched the document for occurrences of that word and its variances (rootsy, rooted) and took note of the number of occurrences, dismissing any repeated use of the word in the same response. In sifting through the statistical results to the eight quantitative questions and the written responses to the seven “qualitative” survey questions, I found three main themes that speak to Americana's appeal: marketing to a specific class segment, rhetoric of distinction, and an attraction to the idea of “roots.”

Class-Based Attraction

Two recurring themes in this project are that Americana's audience is primarily made up of listeners from privileged backgrounds and the romanticized images of the rural past that form a significant role in the genre's representations are especially appealing to people outside of the source cultures represented in those images. These points were evident in the examination of Americana's lineage of the privileged class perpetuating images of folk music as rustic and pre-modern (Coyle and Dolan 1993, 27, Lund and Denisoff 1971, 401, Livingston 1999, Filene

2004) as well as in the discussion of the media's role in the construction of collective memory. It is the privileged after all, who often hold the power to represent and define through the mass media, in television, books, newspapers and in art, whether in photography, film, music or otherwise. Even the disintermediated consumption patterns in Americana discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One can be interpreted as expression of an "aesthetic disposition."³⁵ In this way Americana might be likened to indie rock. Ryan Hibbett (2005) compares indie rock to high art in that both possess cultural capital based on their appeal to a limited, elite segment of society (cited by Dolan 2010, 460). Emily Dolan explains that "indie music is a discourse that is inherently critical: fans invest time and critical thought in order to follow indie music; fans and indie musicians alike take an explicitly critical stance towards mainstream music - the music is often seeped with intellectualism, manifest in clever lyrics, obscure citations, satire and self-analysis" (Dolan 2010, 461). Similarly, Americana possesses cultural capital based on its appeal to a "smaller" audience and its "inherently critical" discourse that encourages fans to research the backgrounds and connections between their favourite artists and albums. The layers of referentiality in Welch and Rawlings' music and lyrics are most recognized and appreciated by those who know early folk and country music either passively, having heard it through family and friends or actively, having intentionally sought it out. For those listeners who have collected and studied this music, recognizing the references in Welch and Rawlings' songs is a sign of, to use Bourdieu's term, "ease" (Bourdieu 2010, 252). Familiarity with a vast body of older music with limited circulation might be read as a sign of one's privilege, one's freedom from necessity

³⁵ In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (2010), Pierre Bourdieu introduces the notion of the aesthetic disposition, "a generalized capacity to neutralize ordinary urgencies and to bracket off practical ends, a durable inclination and aptitude for practice without a practical function, can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end in themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art" (Bourdieu 2010, 47).

and indifference to the amount of time expended on the impractical activity of consuming music (Bourdieu 2010, 47-8, 278).

The survey findings support the hypothesis that Americana appeals to listeners from privileged backgrounds. The majority of respondents (61%) self-identified as musical omnivores who listen to a broad range of music that includes Americana. According to Peterson and Kern (1996) musical omnivorism is a sign of high socio-economic status. The majority of respondents were also well into adulthood with 86% between the ages of 40 and 70 years of age, an age bracket in which people are more likely to be financially established. Americana's class-specific appeal even came up in the survey in which one respondent wrote, "The fans are usually white, better educated, musicphiles."

The survey results also portrayed a clear picture of the Americana audience's distance from the life world commonly represented in the genre. For example, the survey found that more listeners live in the suburbs than in rural areas, small towns or the city. Residents of small towns and rural areas, to whom folk and country music traditionally spoke, only represented 42% of total survey participants. This finding lends support to the argument that Americana is a sphere of displaced nostalgia, fed by second- and third-hand images of the rural past rather than lived experience. The survey results also point to other ways in which Americana's audience lives at a distance from the genre's representations, with many participants appearing to have backgrounds incongruous with the lyrical themes of struggle and abjection so prevalent in Americana. The majority of survey participants had privileged backgrounds in that they were well-educated (70% had a bachelor's degree or higher education level), well-employed (57% were employed full-time) and belonged to groups that have traditionally enjoyed social power and privilege (77% respondents were male and 92% were Caucasian).

Although the majority of the survey's respondents were male, rather than accept this finding as evidence that Americana is a genre representative of a masculine ethos or otherwise has a distinct appeal to men, I see this result as a reflection of a social pattern of women shying away from forums of musical connoisseurship and curation which have traditionally been deemed "masculine" spaces. This is not to say that women listeners do not form musical preferences or opinions, but rather that, in spite of their opinions, they tend to avoid the pseudo-competitive circles of musical connoisseurship. Peterson and Beal (2001) found in their survey of P2 (alt.country listserv) that most active listserv members were male. Similarly, Barbara Ching argues that during its time in print, *No Depression* demonstrated a clear rhetoric of macho nostalgia in carving out a distinct identity for alt.country, noting the significant value attached to record collecting and the attendant "willful obscurity and contrived authenticity of the male music connoisseur" (Ching 2004, 184).

Music with Distinction

Before continuing into the discussion of the responses in the qualitative section of the survey I want to briefly explain my approach to analyzing this somewhat large body of information. When discussing the themes that emerged in the responses to qualitative questions, I reference word clusters that centre on a theme and cite the number of times each word was mentioned in brackets next to the word to provide a clear representation of its significance. To account for the wide range of words and phrases used to express similar sentiments, I found that searching for truncated versions of keywords such as "pur" when searching for variances on pure was an effective strategy.

Another prominent theme illustrated in the survey responses was the idea of Americana

as music with a certain cachet, a motif most commonly expressed in statements framing Americana in opposition – and superior – to its rhetorical antithesis. Although there are many names for this rhetorical antithesis – “commercial country,” “mainstream country,” and the ironic “Nashville country” among them – for the purpose of this discussion I will use “pop country” to refer to this genre. “Pop country” refers to a strain of country music that is proudly commercial, performed by “celebrity” artists, and less bound to tradition insofar as its incorporation of elements strongly coded as “pop” or otherwise “not roots” and general eschewing of roots idioms and instruments (fiddles, banjos and upright bass) in favour of standard rock instrumentation (although six-string banjos, and acoustic instruments make occasional token appearances). Survey participants portrayed Americana as less commercially motivated and therefore more “honest,” as well as more traditional and more liberal than pop country. For example, when asked to define Americana according to its musical and philosophical features, participants answered, “more real and down to earth than commercial country,” “opposite of pop country,” “somehow non-country music-television country,” “Country music for people who can read,” “From the heart and not the wallet,” and “All styles of roots music expect [sic] the neo-country stuff played on the radio and sold at WalMart.” Similarly, when asked to identify music genres related to Americana survey participants continued affirming Americana’s opposition to “pop country,” writing, “I believe it is most closely related to country music (not most of the crap on commercial radio but country from the 1960s and earlier),” “Also [related] to commercial country, but with better instrument players, and real song subjects (not sappy romance, religious, or patriotic content),” and “Country (which is now mostly Cowboy costume Pop).” According to some participants, Americana’s distinction from “pop country” is even an essential part of its appeal. When asked to name one feature of

Americana that is most important to them as a listener some participants wrote, “it is NOT pop country,” “Music outside of the Maonstream [sic] ‘Nash Trash’” and “It’s real, it hasn’t run through the commercial music carwash.” While these responses suggest a view of Americana as “better-than,” some respondents were even more overt in emphasizing Americana’s distinction.

Survey respondents identified Americana as elite and exclusive using words like smart (3), intelligent (11), literary (3), thoughtful (2), and superior (2), quality (10), and meaning (3) as though to imply that pop music or pop country is devoid of meaning, targeted at people of lower intelligence and generally of sub-standard quality. This should come as no surprise however, as Americana artists and promoters actively endorse Americana along these same terms. One expression of this is the trend among Americana songwriters to align their work with poetry and literature by noting the influence of celebrated authors and poets on their craft.³⁶ One reason for Americana’s rhetoric of distinction is that it appeals to an affluent demographic. Even if the AMA actively seeks a broader market for the genre’s artists, it simultaneously cultivates the notion that the product is for discerning listeners. One example of this is in how the organization recently began comparing itself to the *Sundance* film festival. In an August 2013 interview, AMA president Jed Hilly explained, “Our event is to the music business what *Sundance* is to the film business . . . What makes our festival different than other music festivals is that we curate the event. I think it’s important, because the moment you don’t, you lose control and money becomes the deciding factor as to whether or not an artist can perform” (Hilly quoted in Skates 2013). In its e-mail newsletters, the AMA has also taken to invoking the authority of Robert

³⁶ See for example Jason Isbell’s comment about reading Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* in interviews for his 2013 album *Southeastern* (Tucker 2013), Lucinda Williams discussing her experience growing up around her father and his circle of poet friends (he was an English professor) in *Right by Her Roots* (2011) and the various forays Americana songwriters have taken into writing short stories (Steve Earle’s *Doghouse Roses* (2002) and *I’ll Never Get out of this World Alive* (2012), Ryan Adams’ poetry collections, *Infinity Blues* (2009) and *Hello Sunshine* (2009), Mary Gauthier’s forthcoming collection of short fiction (Bass 2013) and the short story collection, *Amplified: Fiction from Leading Alt-Country, Indie Rock, Blues and Folk Musicians* (2009).

Plant who said of Americana “It's great to be considered to be part of the movement that is healthy and has some discrimination” a statement that at once compliments Americana and affirms its cachet (AMA 2014, “Nominate”). Other writers have also noted this aspect of Americana, such as Aaron Fox who writes, “*O Brother* embodies bourgeoisie ease: the freedom to cultivate, curate, dabble in, and reconfigure the alternatives offered up in the commodity form by modern American culture” (Fox, 2005, 188) and Pamela Fox notes that, “While paying tribute to country’s long-neglected musical heroes, [Americana] frequently adopts a hip ironic posture and rhetoric of cultural distinction targeting an elite, upper-middle-class audience” (Fox 2009, 15). The survey results also illustrated the way listeners value Americana’s image as an “alternative” form with an exclusive audience in that survey participants demonstrated a defensive stance against all efforts to codify Americana. Without directly stating that they oppose attempts to codify Americana, when asked what defines Americana respondents answered, “I love that it’s so hard to define,” “I believe Americana music can’t be defined specifically,” and “It is good music that defies a clear definition and therefore cannot be pigeonholed and therefore doesn’t fit into a commercial setting.” On one hand, this is understandable given that as pop music history has proven, codification is the first step towards co-option by mainstream audiences and from there inevitable decline (grunge, alt.country). At the same time though, these comments suggest that becoming an Americana fan requires a kind of initiation by way of recognizing what is and what is not Americana.

Survey participants responded most passionately when asked to characterize the visual aspects of Americana. Some participants expressed offence at the very suggestion of discussing image in relation to Americana as if to do so was a gross misconception of what the genre represents, writing “really? I buy americana because of the music not looks or packaging,” “I

have no visual aspect of Americana. It's an aural sense, not a visual one," "visual doesn't have anything to do with it in my opinion," and "It's music - visuals are irrelevant." These responses betray a conflation of "image" with pop music, commercialism and inauthenticity and bear a clear debt to notions of rock authenticity according to which an artist's visual presentation is a natural expression of their personality rather than a considered construction. Other participants expressed the belief that talking around the music risks cheapening it, in one instance writing,

Too many ill-fitting brown suits, depression era dresses and fedora hats. It is odd to see so much focus on image in the search for authenticity. I don't [sic] care if you look like a WPA photo and don't want you to sound like [sic] one. I'd prefer it was more about bringing the musical value [sic] of American music forward.

Still other participants expressed offence stemming from a fear that discussing Americana's features inevitably leads to dissection for the purpose of codifying the genre, writing, "this has to be wide open, once identification with an image is established, the genre is vulnerable to being mannered," "Don't try to tie it down," and "Please do not try to pigeonhole and become what I dislike about other so called forms of music. Americana artists could care less about what your marketing tells them." Evidently, Americana listeners, artists and promoters adopt several strategies in constructing and maintaining the genre's rhetoric of distinction. This section touched on but a few of these strategies including affirming the music's superiority both in negative terms relative to "pop country" and in positive terms by way of alignment with the prestige of literature and film, and maintaining the genre's reputation of authenticity by opposing codification – hence preserving an image of commercial disinterest – and rejecting the idea that constructed-ness in the form of visual image has any influence on the genre's artists.

The following section explores a third motif of Americana's appeal as portrayed in the survey results, the attraction to "roots."

The attraction to “roots”

A third theme that emerged in the responses to the Americana listener survey was that a significant point of audience’s interest in Americana was the genre’s connotation of “roots.” “Roots music” is often used synonymously with Americana. Even the AMA’s definition of Americana begins with a reference to roots music: “Americana is contemporary music that incorporates elements of various American roots music styles” (AMA 2014, ‘What is’). In a 2013 AMA conference panel titled, “Americana’s Global reach” Ron Kitchener of RGK Entertainment said that he found “roots music” to be a better choice for marketing Americana artists in Canada where audiences were put off by the Americana label. “Roots” music is a funny signifier because it is at once vaguely defined but widely used, accepted and understood for its basic suggestion of music grounded in the past. In this discussion though, the specific musical styles connoted by “roots music” matters less than the ideas that come to be associated with the music when people use the word “roots” to describe it. “Roots” was also very popular in the Americana listener survey appearing 214 times. What is meant by “roots?” The word conjures up numerous connotations, only some of which will be explored here, namely durability/continuity, and a return to fundamentals.

As a genre defined by its connection to “roots” and “traditional” music styles, Americana is packaged as a continuation of a musical lineage, valuable enough to have been sustained as long as it has and by implication worth keeping into the future. This notion of continuity across time was a very prominent theme in the survey responses: tradition and its variations appeared 120 times, nostalgia/nostalgic, 10, retro, 11, classic, 20, old-timey, 13, vintage, 8, and heritage, 6. One survey participant expressed that Americana is a vehicle for feeling a sense of continuity across time in their own life, writing, “I grew up listening to country

music and Americana takes me back to some of those feelings.” The idea of durability, that some things are lasting, is appealing on several levels. Listeners may find that in supporting an art form that represents durability and endurance, they quell their own fears of insignificance. Moreover, by supporting older artists who would be ignored based on their age in other genres, Americana listeners are able to express a personal protest against the ethic of obsolescence. When asked to name one feature of Americana that is personally important to them, one participant answered “‘old’ Rodney Crowell on the cover of his new CD!” The notion of a music that endures might also be appealing as a symbol of strength in times of crisis. Benjamin Filene explains that the cultural crisis of the 1930s caused by the Depression prompted Americans to “revaluate what forces in society were good, powerful and sustaining” in the wake of witnessing the downfall of all that was once stable. In that context images of “America’s human and cultural strength” were popular reassurances that the country would make it through its time of trial (Filene 1991, 606). Historian Warren I. Susman writes that the 1930s were shaped by an “effort to find, characterize, and adapt to an American Way of Life as distinguished from the material achievement (and the failures) of an American industrial civilization” (Susman, quoted in Filene 1991, 606). Building on this idea in a later article, Filene writes “The notion of people making their own music from scratch, often with handmade instruments, drawing on traditions free from commercial manipulation suggested an independent, self-sustaining culture that could endure any crisis – an alternative, more vital American culture” (2004, 56).

Many respondents also described Americana in terms of a return to fundamentals. Survey participants expressed this sentiment both in positive terms using words such as stripped down (4), rough/rough-hewn (5), raw/rawness (10) and in negative terms such as not slick (4), not fancy (3), not flashy (4), no frills (2), unadorned(2) , unpolished (5), unpretentious (4),

unproduced/simply produced/not overproduced (9), unpolished/not polished/not so polished/lack of polish (8), lacking glamour (4), lacking glitz/glitzy(2), lack of affectation (1) , and lack of ostentatiousness (1). This idea of fundamentals ties in with the principles of humanization and disintermediation discussed in the Introduction and Chapter One as defining features of Americana. A return to fundamentals is often associated with simplicity and by extension a sense of authenticity and honesty, a sub-theme that was also well-represented in survey responses featuring words like honest(y) (62), authentic/authenticity (48), real (47), heart (39), heartfelt (18), truth/truthful/truthfulness (10), genuine (10), pure/purity (10), “from the heart” (9), integrity (7), sincere (2) and earnest (2). The connection between Americana and honesty relates back to the disintermediation of musical production and consumption. The eschewing of various forms of mediation between artists and audiences is akin to a removal of layers of outside influences that compromise the honesty and purity of an artist’s original intent. What these responses point to though, is that the ideal of direct connection is taken to an extreme in Americana so that there is not even room for artists to express mystery or irony. John Paul White of the Americana duo, The Civil Wars raises the idea of Americana as a return to fundamentals in an interview in which he explains, “I don’t think it’s any coincidence that so many people are gravitating towards this type of music now. Lots of people are devolving a bit, trying to strip down and simplify their lives. It’s not hard to see why they’d want that from their music too” (White quoted in Petrusich 2011 66). This social trend of devolving and returning to fundamentals might be seen as a sign of widespread unease about the fast pace of technological and social change. Technological advances have introduced entirely new conceptions of artificiality in the form of virtual realities that transpose cultural practices and rituals into digital spaces and innovations in biotechnology that blur the definition of human at the same time that

the internet, globalization and increasing mobility have fostered a sense of place-lessness. A cultural desire to return to fundamentals might also be a reaction to a social climate of distrust vis-à-vis organizationally dense systems/bureaucratic organizations caused by the high-profile failures of organizationally-complex systems in recent memory. The 2008 economic recession and the largely unsuccessful military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq are two standout examples. Amanda Petrusich suggests that, “It’s also possible that the Americana revival is part of a larger cultural shift toward local, handmade, heritage products. Picking up a washboard is analogous, in a way, to jarring your own pickles or buying hand-wrapped chocolate bars . . . embracing it is an easy way to anchor yourself in time and place” (Petrusich 2011, 70). It is easy to see how Americana might represent a tonic for many of these anxieties. In the depersonalized, digital age, Americana re-inscribes the human in music-making by way of a human-centred sonic aesthetic, as well as in music consumption by way of physical formats, communal musical experiences, and active consumption patterns. At a time when administratively dense organizations and digital technologies hyper-mediate experience, it seems like the “real” is threatened to the point of extinction but Americana artists perform the idea of raw, unprocessed, expression. And, finally, in an age of displaced-ness Americana represents “roots” in history, in tradition and in place. Americana songs are rife with references to specific places, landscape and place-specific imagery. When change seems overwhelming, social movements centred around a return to fundamentals act in two ways to ease collective angst, serving as a brake on progress run amok and, in asserting the presence of the past in the present, working like a security blanket to reassure the masses that while change is occurring at a steady clip, it will not erase what has come before.

Conclusion

In exploring Americana's recent growth and discussing reasons for the genre's resonance among audiences as informed by responses to a survey of Americana listeners, this chapter reconsiders many of the questions and issues first raised in the beginning of this thesis, exploring what Americana is from the audience's perspective, and revisiting the notion of lineage insofar as this chapter's look at the class aspect of Americana's discourse. In addressing the views of Americana listeners, albeit a relatively limited sample of such, this chapter completes the three-part grounding of the ideas and arguments introduced in Chapters One and Two in "the stuff" of Americana. In looking into the meaning and appeal of "roots," this chapter comes full circle in examining the question posed from the very beginning of this project, what is Americana in relation to the past?

Conclusion

As a genre that encompasses an eclectic body of music of the past and present, the outline of Americana's identity is found as much in its musical features as in its overarching nostalgic outlook. Americana might be best defined according to three recurring motifs in its genre discourse, lineage, the tension between Americana's nostalgic outlook and the benefits of modern technologies in growing the genre, and the friction between the genre's anti-commercial stance based in notions of authenticity and the overtly commercial motivations of the AMA. This lineage is dynamic, influencing Americana's musical features – instrumentation, timbres, form, sonic textures, performance standards, and production standards – as well as its philosophical values and genre discourse, especially its politics of anti-commercialism, anti-modernism, and its romanticization of rural culture. This lineage also refers to Americana's engagement with the past, insofar as Americana artists exploit trigger tropes – whether lyrical images, instrumentation, timbres, musical forms – of the rural past which have accrued their signifying power through an accumulation of iterations in which they were used to represent pre-modern rural life. These trigger tropes recall a collective memory of the rural past, as pre-modern, mythic and paradisiacal which has been constructed in various mediums of representation from literature to film, though musically-mediated representations have played an especially important role in its construction. Accepting the model of Americana's genre lineage, it is clear that Americana's stylistic predecessors – especially folk and country – have had a powerful impact on defining rural culture as mythic and pre-modern in the public consciousness and in doing so, trapping it within the bounds of memory.

Towards the ultimate goal of forming some conclusion as to the rationale and meaning of the widespread invocations of the past in Americana, this project contextualizes Americana's invocations of the past as belonging to three categories of nostalgic expression, a dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past, and the somewhat interrelated principles of humanizing and disintermediating musical experience (both consumption and production). It is not just sets of tensions that define Americana's genre identity but the resolutions offered to them in Americana's discourse. Working in tandem, technologically facilitated trends of humanizing and disintermediating musical production and consumption offer a resolution to the tension between Americana's nostalgic outlook and the benefits of modern technologies in growing the genre. Even though Americana's genre discourse is heavily invested in reverence for the past and the genre's musical and visual elements are rife with nostalgic references, paradoxically the Internet plays a crucial role in the genre, serving as a space for promotion, fan socialization, discovering new music, selling music, researching music history and so on. *The H&H's* cover art is an outstanding example of the way nostalgia is nurtured in the digital age. In creating the cover art the pair relied on the mobility of contemporary life and digital-age communication networks to facilitate the multi-stage production process that involved people in various parts of the U.S. The two YouTube videos filmed to accompany *The H&H's* cover art played an even more significant role in the art project and by implication, the album by explaining the value of the cover art which would otherwise not be so clear to people who bought the album. Moreover, the accessibility of the cover art's story on YouTube greatly enhanced the album promotability in an age of music blogs with in-article links. Even as the cover art is indebted to the digital age it participates in a pro-analog revival of cover art, music in physical format, and the niche revival of letterpress printing and other pre-digital production processes. John Dyer Baizley's cover

illustration for *The H&H* can also be seen as expressing a retro aesthetic of freeplay, juxtaposing imagery and symbolism of the agrarian past with an illustrative style that is thoroughly contemporary in its gestures towards tattoo art.

As a resolution to the tension between the genre's anti-commercial stance, based in notions of authenticity, and the overtly commercial motivations of the AMA, Americana relies on rhetoric of working-class, small-scale commercialism. The notion of a community of artists and listeners serves to quell suspicions of the genre as purely a marketing construct. Meanwhile, maintaining an image of small-scale commercialism and a working-class ethic defends the genre against accusations of "selling out" as groups like the Avett Brothers and the Lumineers threaten to redefine the genre's commercial prospects with arena tours and commercial airplay.

Constructing a collective memory of the rural past using romanticized images of "the folk" has pronounced class features as well. Drawing on a sample of Americana's reception in the form of the responses to the Americana listener survey conducted as part of this research project, and the ideas presented in earlier chapters, Chapter Five presented three points of Americana's appeal: class-specific appeal, rhetoric of distinction, and "roots." Americana's resonance with listeners of privileged backgrounds is a thread that runs through the entire project. Chapter One first introduces the point that romantic images of rural culture and the idea of "the folk" itself have been consumed predominantly by the affluent as far back as the late eighteenth century. Chapter Two examined how the collective memory of the rural past has been constructed mainly from second- and third-hand representations of rural life rather than from accurate portrayals drawn from lived experience. Guffey's theorization of retro maps nicely onto this process of affluent urbanites appropriating and converting pieces of cultural identity and lived experience into signs, manipulable and consumable, executed according to retro's ethic of

freeplay. In appealing to a certain target audience, Americana recasts the associations of the music it draws on, replacing country music's proudly low brow stance (Ching 1997a) with one of distinction (Fox 2005, Fox 2009). Americana's rhetoric of distinction not only reinforces the genre's appeal to a certain affluent demographic, it also cultivates a sense of a community among fans with a built-in set of borders rooted in taste, and cultural capital based on "knowing" the music. The discussion of audiences' attraction to Americana for its representation of "roots" takes the project full circle, exploring the meaning and attraction of invoking the past in the present even when those signs of the past juxtapose sharply against contemporary realities.

Americana artists dialogue with a collective memory of the rural past in several ways. Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings' use of especially potent references to old minstrel, folk and country songs in the lyrics to "Down along the Dixie Line" which operate as powerful hypertextual portals to Americana's collective memory is one example. The referential density of "Six White Horses" also connotes strong associations with a memory of the rural past. At the same time "Six White Horses'" emphasis on the body and multi-layered invocations of primitivism make it a clear demonstration of humanizing and disintermediating musical experience. Welch and Rawlings' reception among some listeners also points to a risk inherent in overly enthusiastic invocations of the past, the risk of collective memory overtaking the image of an artist and their work so that rather than being perceived as drawing lines of continuity across time, they come to "instantiate nostalgia itself" (Wernick 1997, 218), a performance of memory.

What has emerged in this investigation is that Americana could be considered to be a space for the resolution of deep set ambivalence about social and technological change and our place in history. Instead of resisting change, Americana artists, listeners and promoters embrace technology in promoting the genre, in effect using the forces of progress – the ill effects of which

cause people to yearn for the past – to slow down the pace of change. By maintaining the presence of the past in the present Americana quells generalized anxieties that our age is one of change run amok. Americana offers the positive feelings people associate with the notion of roots: home, safety, comfort, community, and belonging among them but without any attendant restrictions. Perceptions of overwhelming change and displacement might draw people to Americana for its association with “roots” but an attraction to roots is not the same thing as willingness to be tied down. True to the freeplay aesthetic of retro, Americana offers the benefits of roots cost-free. In Americana’s collective memory world one can explore a banquet of musical sounds and images from various eras and places, the fiddles and banjos of Appalachian old-time ringing alongside twangy country rock electric guitars, high lonesome vocals telling dark stories and gospel choirs.

Directions for future research

The early incarnations of Chapter Five’s discussion of reasons behind Americana’s growing popularity included sketches of four hypotheses for Americana’s growing popularity and cultural resonance in the present social, historical and cultural context. While the chapter alludes to some of these hypotheses, ultimately unpacking these four hypotheses properly was beyond the scope of this project. The first hypothesis is that the movement to disintermediate and humanize music in Americana is an expression of a broader social climate of distrust vis-à-vis organizationally dense systems and bureaucratic organizations stemming from several examples of historically significant failures of such systems in recent memory, an especially prominent case being the 2008 economic recession (attributed to overly complex and abstract financial “products”). The increasing awareness and distrust of multinational corporations and the

downsides of globalized trade and food production are also demonstrations of this broad scale loss of faith in the promise of large-scale, “efficient” production. The principles of humanization and disintermediation are fundamental in a range of contemporary social movements such as the local food and fair trade movements and initiatives to support independent and local businesses.

A second hypothesis of the reason for Americana’s growing popularity and potentially fruitful line of inquiry for future research is examining how Americana might be consumed by listeners belonging to traditionally privileged groups (Caucasian, male, affluent) in response to perceptions of their declining class trajectory. This research would examine how listening to Americana might be interpreted as a demonstration of cultural capital and the “ease” of high-status persons. This idea emerged in response to several prompts, one being Bourdieu’s (2010) observation that high-status groups consume products with a distinctly nostalgic aura in response to perceptions of their declining class trajectory, another being Keith Hampson’s (1994) master’s thesis on class and nostalgia vis-à-vis the consumption of *Martha Stewart* and *J.Crew* products. The demographics represented in the Americana listener survey (overwhelmingly “privileged”) also certainly lend support to this theory. I am also obliged to acknowledge the urging of someone in the audience at McGill University, where I delivered an early iteration of this work that I account for the reactionary politics inherent in nostalgia-oriented social movements.

A third hypothesis of a reason for Americana’s cultural resonance that was beyond the scope of this project is that Americana is consumed as a response to a perceived “cultural crisis.” Framed as heir to older musical forms, and associated with the natural world and the agrarian past, Americana is implicitly packaged as “durable music,” representative of “durable culture.” As “durable culture” Americana might be seen as a cultural resource of symbolic strength in times of social upheaval and overwhelming change just as folk music and its rhetoric of

“durability and strength” were deployed in the 1930s and 1960s, times of social upheaval and change. This hypothesis draws on Filene’s work on folk music revivals (1991, 2004, 2005), Aaron Fox’s (2005) work on folk music’s resurgence in the aftermath of 9/11 as well as on Fred Davis’ argument that “nostalgia thrives on transition, on the subjective discontinuities that engender our yearning for continuity” (Davis 1979, 49).

A final speculation as to Americana’s growing popularity is that the genre is benefitting from the natural laws of demographics and nostalgia. In his sociological study of nostalgia, Fred Davis (1979) writes that nostalgia thrives on transitions on the levels of both the individual and the collective because it satisfies a yearning for continuity that arises in such circumstances. Davis also points out that the periods of adolescence and early adulthood are particularly powerful sources of nostalgic fantasy. This theory explains in part the popularity of Americana among aging boomers who encountered the folk- and country-rock antecedents of Americana as adolescents and young adults. The recent spike in Americana’s popularity might be the result of a double cohort audience made up of the boomers and their children whom they introduced to the pre-Americana folk- and country rock they enjoyed in their youth. According to Davis’ theory of nostalgia, both of these audience segments are especially prone to wax nostalgic as they face shifts and transitions in their roles and statuses, on one hand retiring and facing the realities of aging, and on the other, facing the transitions into adulthood.

Appendix 1: Lyrical Excerpts Demonstrating Intertextual Relationships

Gillian Welch and Dave Rawlings' "Tennessee" (2011)

Now let me go, my honey oh
 Back to Tennessee
 It's beef steak when I'm working
 Whiskey when I'm dry
 Sweet heaven when I die
 (CowboyLyrics.com 2014c).

Dock Boggs' "Country Blues" (1927)

Give me corn bread when I'm hungry, good people
 Corn whiskey when I'm dry
 Pretty women a-standing around me
 sweet Heaven when I die"
 ("Country Blues" - "Dock" Boggs" 2010)

Tex Ritter's "Rye Whiskey" (1936)

Beefsteak when I'm hungry red liquor when I'm dry
 Greenbacks when I'm hard up and religion when I die
 They say I drink whiskey, my money's my own
 All them that don't like me, can leave me alone
 (Cowboylyrics.com 2014e)

Appendix 2: Lyrics to Gillian Welch's "Down Along the Dixie Line"(2011)

Way down in Dixie, oh do they miss me
 Down along the Dixie line
 Banjos a-strummin' horseflies a-hummin'
 Ripe melons on the vine
 the gold and the grey, we'd sing 'Look Away'
 Way down along the Dixie line

I've spent my childhood walkin' the wildwood
 Down along the Dixie line
 Freight trains a-squalling highballs a-bawlin'
 Four engines at a time
 I was so happy with mama and pappy
 Down along the Dixie line

[Chorus]

Can't you hear those drivers wail?
 Can't you see those bright rails shine?
 Gonna catch that fireball mail
 Leave the Northland far behind

A river of whiskey flows down in Dixie
 Down along the Dixie line
 They pulled up the tracks now I can't go back now
 Can't hardly keep from crying
 Oh do they miss me way down in Dixie
 Down along the Dixie line

[Chorus]

Can't you hear those drivers wail?
 Can't you see those bright rails shine?
 Wanna catch that fireball man
 Leave the Northland far behind
 Down along the Dixie line
 (Cowboylyrics.com 2014b)

Appendix 3: Lyrics to Dan Emmett's "Dixie's Land" (1859)

I wish I was in the land of cotton,
Old times they are not forgotten;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land
In Dixie Land where I was born in,
Early on one frosty mornin,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land

Old Missus married Will the Weaver,
William was a gay receiver;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land
But when he put his arm around'er,
He smiled as fierce as a forty-pound'er,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land

Dar's buck-wheat cakes an 'Ingun' batter,
Makes you fat or a little fatter;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.
Den hoe it down an scratch your grabble,
To Dixie land I'm bound to trabble.
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land
(Civil War Heritage Trails 2014).

Appendix 4: Lyrics to Gillian Welch's "Six White Horses"(2011)

Six white horses coming two by two
Six white horses coming two by two
Coming for my mother, no matter how I love her
Six white horses coming two by two

Whoa now horses, easy on the wheels
Whoa now horses, easy on the wheels
So broken-hearted up now they started
Whoa now horses, easy on the wheels

See them horses pulling on a rein
See them horses pulling on a rein
Sunshine and sorrow, yesterday, tomorrow
Bedlam and Barlow Billy are their names

Some bright morning what will you see
Some bright morning what will you see
Some bright morning looking on yonder coming
Some bright morning what will you see

Six white horses coming after me
Six white horses coming after me
Pretty as a picture, certain as a scripture
Six white horses coming after me
(CowboyLyrics.com 2014f)

Appendix 5: Lyrics to “When the Chariot Comes” (1899)

O, who will drive the chariot when she comes?
O, who will drive the chariot when she comes?
O, who will drive the chariot, O who will drive the chariot?
O, who will drive the chariot when she comes?

2. King Jesus, he'll be driver when she comes.
3. She'll be loaded with bright angels when she comes.
4. She will neither rock nor totter when she comes.
5. She will run so level and steady when she comes.
6. She will take us to the portals when she comes

(Sandburg 1968, 372-73).

Appendix 6: Lyrics to “She’ll Be Comin’ ‘Round the Mountain” (1927)

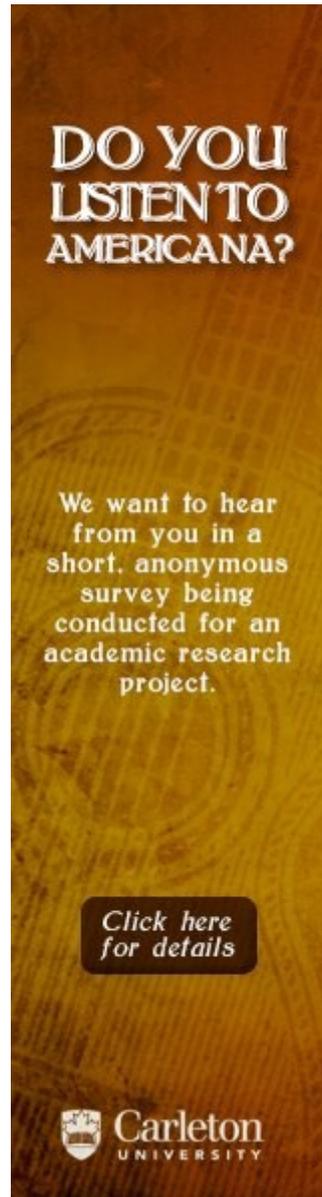
She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain
 when she comes
 She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain
 when she comes
 She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain
 she’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain
 She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain
 when she comes

She’ll be drivin’ six white horses
 When she comes
 She’ll be drivin’ six white horses
 When she comes
 She’ll be drivin’ six white horses
 She’ll be drivin’ six white horses
 She’ll be drivin’ six white horses
 When she comes

Oh, we’ll all go to meet her
 When she comes
 Oh we’ll all go to meet her
 When she comes
 We will kill the old red rooster
 We will kill the old red rooster
 And we’ll all have chicken and dumplin’
 When she comes

(Sandburg 1968, 372-73).

Appendix 7: Survey Advertisement



**DO YOU
LISTEN TO
AMERICANA?**

We want to hear
from you in a
short, anonymous
survey being
conducted for an
academic research
project.

*Click here
for details*

 **Carleton**
UNIVERSITY

Appendix 8: Americana Listening Audience Survey Invitation

Hello and thank you for your interest in participating in the following survey of Americana's listening audience. Completing the questions should take approximately five minutes. The purpose of this survey is to collect quantitative and qualitative data on the ways that Americana's audience defines the genre in terms of musical, visual, and philosophical features as well as demographic information on Americana's listening audience. Addressing the audience's interpretation of the genre's definition and its demographic make-up will provide a more complete analysis of the genre and its meaning(s) in contemporary society. My name is Christine Steinbock and I am the researcher undertaking this survey as part of my master's thesis project titled, "Facing the Future with a Foot in the Past: Americana, Nostalgia and Revivalism". This project is being supervised by Dr. Anna Hoefnagels in the School for Studies in Art and Culture (SSAC) at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. The survey will be live for four weeks from February 15th, 2013 to March 15th, 2013. Responses to survey questions are anonymous. To maintain your anonymity please do not include anything that might identify yourself in your answers to any of the survey questions. The survey is administered through the Canadian company, fluidsurveys, and the data collected will be stored on the site's Canadian servers until April 30th, 2013 and used exclusively for this research project. You are not obligated to answer every question in the survey. The system accepts partially complete surveys which will be used in my research project. Once you have completed the survey you also have the option to withdraw before submitting your answers. Fluidsurveys' privacy policy can be found at <http://fluidsurveys.com/about/privacy/> Please refrain from completing the survey more than once.

If you would like further information about this research, or would be interested in a final report of the results please contact Christine Steinbock at christine_steinbock@carleton.ca.

Appendix 9: Americana Listening Audience Survey Questions

#1 Listening Habits: Please choose the answer that best illustrates your listening habits

- Primarily listen to music that falls in the Americana genre category
- Listen to a broad range of music that includes music in the Americana genre category
- Primarily listen to music outside the Americana genre category
- Skip Question

#2 What is Americana?: In your opinion, what defines the Americana genre-musically, philosophically?

#3 Quintessential Americana Artists/Acts/Groups: Name 1-3 artists, acts or groups that you think best represent the Americana genre

#4 Genre themes and values: When you think of the Americana genre, what are some key words that come to mind?

#5 Visual Aspects of the Genre: In your opinion how is Americana characterized visually, in album art, concert posters, artist websites, typical dress of artists and fans etc. In other words, what types of images do you associate with the Americana genre?

#6 Americana's Relationship to Other Genres: What other music genres do you think are related to Americana and why?

#7 Americana's Appeal: Name one feature of Americana that is most important to you as a listener

#8 Country of Current Residence: Where do you currently reside?

- The United States
- Canada
- Europe – specify country
- Other _____
- Skip Question

#9 Region: Select the option that best describes the area where you live

- Urban innercity
- Suburb
- Small Town
- Rural
- Skip Question

#10 Gender: Please indicate your gender

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Other
- Skip Question

#11 Age

- 18 or under
- 19-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60-69
- 70 and over
- Skip Question

#12 Ethnic Background: Please indicate your ethnic background

- Caucasian
- African-American
- Latin-American
- Asian
- Native-American
- Other
- Skip Question
-

#13 Educational Background: What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received?

- No schooling completed
- Nursery school to 8th grade
- Some high school
- High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent
- Some college credits
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree
- Doctorate degree
- Skip Question

#14 Employment Status: Are you currently?

- Employed part-time
- Employed full-time
- Self-employed
- Out of Work and looking for work
- Out of work and not looking for work
- Full-time parent
- A student
- Retired
- Unable to Work
- Skip Question

#15 How did you hear about this survey?

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