

Romancing the

FOLK

*Public
Memory
&
American
Roots Music*

Benjamin Filene

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To my parents and to Rachel, Eliza, & Hazel

between folk and popular culture who *re*discover performers, *re*interpret their early recordings in relation to subsequent musical trends, and *re*-define the artists as folk forefathers and foremothers. Appropriately, then, public memory is formed by a recursive process, one that involves revisiting and reevaluating the culture of the past in the light of the present. Understanding the assumptions behind these valuations and the ways in which they are transmitted illuminates how American culture gets created and, just as important, how we come to recognize it as our own.



SETTING THE STAGE IDENTIFYING AN AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC HERITAGE, 1900-1930

As late as 1910, most Americans would have been surprised to hear that America *had* any folk music. Of course rural whites and African Americans had been playing their traditional music since long before the 1900s, but they had done so, for the most part, out of the view of the middle and upper classes: outsiders had showed little interest in their culture, and, correspondingly, the rural musicians had had no reason yet to think of themselves as “the folk” or of their music as “folk” music. In the late 1800s, though, traces began to emerge of what would eventually become almost a national obsession with America’s folk heritage.

The roots of this phenomenon stretched back to Europe. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, European intellectuals turned their attention as never before to the vernacular culture of their countries’ peasants, farmers, and craftspeople, launching what historian Peter Burke has called “the discovery of the people.” Once scorned as ignorant and illiterate, ordinary people began to be glorified as the creators of cultural expression with a richness and depth lacking in elite creations. German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803),

the most influential proponent of the new cultural outlook, contrasted the *Kultur des Volkes* ("culture of the people") with *Kultur der Gelehrten* ("learned culture") and made clear which of the two he favored: "Unless our literature is founded on our *Volk*, we [writers] shall write eternally for closet sages and disgusting critics out of whose mouths and stomachs we shall get back what we have given." To Herder, folk culture offered a way to escape the Enlightenment's stifling emphasis on reason, planning, and universalism in cultural expression. Folk forms could cleanse culture of the artificiality that, he felt, was poisoning modern life.¹

Herder's ideas inspired a generation of intellectuals that came of age in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, initiating a flurry of efforts to identify and understand folk cultures. In 1778 Herder himself published a collection of song lyrics he had gathered and transcribed in the German border region of Riga (present-day Latvia). In titling the work, Herder used a newly emerging word, *Volkslieder*—folk song.²

Herder was certainly not the first to collect traditional music. In seventeenth-century England, old ballads were published in numerous collections, tapping into a fad among both the middle class and aristocratic for things "country."³ Scholars believe that the first explicitly historical collection was *A Collection of Old Ballads*, published in 1723. The collection's anonymous editor directly stressed its antiquarian nature, emphasizing in the work's subtitle that the ballads were *Corrected from the best and most Ancient Copies Extant*. A second volume of the collection, issued later in 1723, accentuated the point further, advertising *Songs, more Antique, and upon far older Subjects* than those in the previous volume. These collections had astonishing popular appeal, becoming among the most popular books of the 1720s. Eventually three volumes of *Collections* were published, all appearing in multiple editions. Moreover, individual songs from the collections were reprinted as broadsides and sold from printers' stalls on the streets for largely lowbrow audiences. Historian Dianne Dugaw notes that to emphasize the songs' antiquity, publishers printed the broadsides "on heavy, old-fashioned folio paper decorated with woodcuts . . . of old-fashioned dress, weaponry, ship design, castles, and so on."⁴

Such antiquarian interest in songs laid the groundwork for a landmark ballad collection, *Reliques of English Poetry*, published in 1765 by English clergyman Thomas Percy. Percy's collection was based initially on an old manuscript he had rescued, he claimed, from a friend's maids, who were using it to light a fire, but *Reliques* also drew considerably on printed broadsides and on the popular *Collection of Old Ballads*.⁵ Ignoring these

low- and middlebrow antecedents, though, Percy depicted his ballads as works of high culture. He attributed the songs to early medieval minstrels who, he insisted, had been respected artists in medieval courts.⁶

Most contemporary readers, however, drew different lessons from *Reliques*. To an emerging generation of romantic poets and philosophers, including William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Herder, the ballads in *Reliques* were popular poetry, evidence of the tremendous creative power of the untutored folk. Increasingly, intellectuals felt that for a country to have a distinctively national cultural voice, it must understand its folk culture.⁷ In Britain and across the Continent, there was a surge of interest in documenting the range of folk cultural expression. Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm published their first collection of children's folk tales in 1812. Other enthusiasts issued books depicting the drama and rituals of popular festivals in Venice, England, and Russia. In 1819 the Austrian government ordered local authorities to collect folk songs.⁸

Even in this period, more than a century before folk revivalism truly took hold in America, the pursuit of folk culture involved a complex series of ideological decisions. First of all, not just anyone counted as "folk." Herder distinguished between the true *Volk* (primarily rural peasants) and the urban "rabble in the streets," who "never sing or rhyme but scream and mutilate." To Herder and other early collectors, true peasants were pure and artless and, usually, exotic. "The more wild and freely acting a people is," wrote Herder, "the more wild, that is, the more lively, free, sensuous and lyrically acting its songs must be!" Cultural treasure seekers visited remote villages and shepherd's huts, seeking, as Dr. Samuel Johnson put it in 1775, "primitive customs." Historian Burke recounts a scene of cultural encounter that would be reenacted countless hundreds of times over the next two centuries: "Craftsmen and peasants were no doubt surprised to find their homes invaded by men and women with middle-class clothes and accents who insisted they sing traditional songs or tell traditional stories."⁹

As Burke's description suggests, not all the songs and stories "the folk" knew made the grade as "folk song" or "folk tale" in the eyes of the early enthusiasts. Collectors feared that pure native cultures were being corrupted as transportation improved and literacy spread. Sir Walter Scott wrote that he gathered Scottish ballads fearing that the "peculiar features of [Scotland's] manners and character are daily melting and dissolving into [England's]." He described one singer as "probably the very last instance of the proper minstrel craft." Fired by this sense of being on a last-ditch rescue mission, collectors felt authorized to take drastic steps to reclaim the "original" essences of the cultural products they sought.

Thomas Percy admitted to making "corrections and additions" to the ballads he found. Elias Lönnrot gathered Finnish songs to the point that he felt no "singer could any longer compare with me in his knowledge of songs"; then he began freely arranging and rearranging songs as he saw fit, eventually assembling the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, published in 1835.¹⁰ Such editorial liberties increasingly provoked expressions of outrage among eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century collectors, but the practice continued largely unabated well into the nineteenth century.¹¹

From the start, then, "discovering" folk cultures involved reimagining them. Herder, the Grimms, and their followers romanticized and transformed the cultures they sought out. *Because* of these transformations, as much as in spite of them, their vision of the folk had extraordinary reach, extending well beyond their borders and exerting influence long after their deaths. The work of these early philosophers and collectors showed that the idea of "folk culture" had both power and plasticity. Scholars and intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs, and "the folk" themselves have been shaping and reshaping the idea ever since.

The process by which American folk music eventually became defined as such and started moving into popular culture began with academics and antiquarian collectors. The progenitor of the American folk song movement was Harvard professor Francis James Child. Child seems an unlikely person to have sparked interest in American vernacular music. Born in 1825, he was a Shakespeare scholar and professor of rhetoric, known for his rigorous academic standards, his impatience with those who did not meet these standards, and his obsession with his meticulously cultivated rose garden.¹²

Child's other passion, however, was British ballads, a subject he pursued with the persistence of a bloodhound and the precision of a detective. Like Thomas Percy and the Grimm brothers before him, Child was very much a literary folklorist, one who treated folk song as popular poetry and analyzed songs as series of texts largely divorced from their tunes.¹³ Also like the European folklorists, Child confined his interest to the ballad, which he defined as a "narrative song, a short tale in lyric verse." By no means, however, were all narrative songs anointed by Child as true ballads. Like many of his predecessors, Child felt that although in premodern times the ballad had been "a common treasure" passed on orally and enjoyed by all, it was now a long-dead art. The "sources of English and Scotch ballads," he lamented "may be regarded as sealed or dried up for ever."¹⁴ The culprits in this story were commercial ballads

and printed music, which together, Child believed, had polluted the oral tradition.

This narrative contained considerable class bias. Ballads had once been enjoyed by all, Child felt, but they had become tainted when educated classes had turned their attention to fine-art music, leaving the ballad form to "the ignorant and unschooled mass." Ballads printed for popular audiences as broadsides, which Child noted had been a thriving business from the sixteenth century onward, were "a different genus" from the ballads he treasured: "They are products of a low kind of *art*, and most of them are, from a literary point of view, thoroughly despicable and worthless." To ensure the purity of his collection, Child concentrated on songs that predated the printing press, which had come to Britain in 1475.¹⁵

Child's standards for the ballad's purity profoundly affected his methods of gathering songs. If no new folk songs of merit had been created in the last four centuries or so, Child saw little point in making contact with current folk communities and trying to dredge up songs from their collective memory. Certainly America, with its relatively recent traditions, held only limited interest for him. Although Child was known to encourage his students to collect (especially in European countries other than England, where "some utterly 'uneducated' poor old woman" might yet remember a delightful ballad), for the most part Child preferred archival sources as the most direct means of retrieving the songs of yesteryear.¹⁶ The material that could "at this late day" be obtained from contemporary sources, Child stated, was "meagre, and generally of indifferent quality." With an air of finality Child dismissed living informants, proclaiming, "The material is not at hand." Child's ideal sources, summarizes historian Jo McMurtry, were "old manuscript collections which had been written down by private antiquarian hobbyists, straight from the singers' mouths, at some point in time before the tide of cheap printing had begun to alter the songs' traditional forms."¹⁷

If in his value system Child resembled the literary folklorists who had preceded him, he distinguished himself by the rigor with which he pursued his goals. Child's motto was "Do it so it shall never have to be done again," and to a great extent he achieved this goal in the course of his forty years of ballad scholarship.¹⁸ Despite working in Massachusetts, thousands of miles away from his source materials, Child combed the British holdings of ballads with unprecedented thoroughness. Some collections he examined on his rare trips abroad, but mostly he relied on a network of overseas friends and helpers. Following Child's written instructions, they tracked down and transcribed material for him from

archives and private collections across England and Scotland. After his friend James Russell Lowell was named American ambassador to London, Lowell coordinated some of these collecting efforts, occasionally rushing prize findings to Child via diplomatic pouch.¹⁹

Out of these efforts, Child published the most thoroughgoing works of ballad scholarship ever seen. First, between 1857 and 1858, he issued an eight-volume collection entitled *English and Scottish Ballads*. This work, based on previously printed sources, listed the words to hundreds of traditional British ballads. In later years, though, Child scorned it as hastily compiled and superficial in comparison with the magnum opus that followed.²⁰ In 1882 Child published the first volume of his masterwork, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. The decision to add a “the” to the title of Child’s 1857–58 book was significant, for in this series Child aimed for complete coverage of the Anglo ballad field. In a preface to the first volume, Child wrote, “It was not my wish to begin to print The English and Scottish Ballads until this unrestricted title should be justified by my having at command every valuable copy and every known ballad.” Issued in ten parts between 1882 and 1898, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* numbered 305 different titles.²¹

This number alone, though, hardly conveys the extent of Child’s obsession or the immensity of his achievement. Influenced by his days as a graduate student in Germany (ever after he kept a picture of the Grimms on the mantelpiece in his study), Child approached ballads with the mind-set of a scientist. His student (and eventual successor at Harvard) George Lyman Kittredge remembered, “As an investigator, Professor Child was at once the inspiration and the despair of his disciples. Nothing could surpass the scientific exactness of his methods and the unwearied diligence with which he conducted his researches.” For each song in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Child printed every known variant (thirteen hundred in all), and he provided voluminous annotations explicating the songs’ historical origins, the subjects to which they alluded, and the alterations they had suffered.²²

Along with this effort to be definitive, Child brought to his ballad scholarship more rigid standards of editing than his predecessors. Although he drew extensively on previous collectors, Child was unsparing in his criticism of their penchant for doctoring texts. He criticized Thomas Percy, for example, for including verses that were “undoubtedly spurious” and pointedly attributed to him numerous “alterations and additions.” At times, Child dubbed the work of other respected collectors “modernized,” “twaddling,” and “entirely worthless” because of impurities they had introduced.²³ Child outlined his own editing prac-

tices in the 1860 edition of his *English and Scottish Ballads*: “For the texts, the rule has been to select the most authentic copies, and to reprint them as they stand in the collections, restoring readings that had been changed without grounds, and noting all deviations from the originals . . . in the margin. Interpolations acknowledged by the editors have generally been dropped.”²⁴

For all his high-minded precision, of course, Child was by no means an unbiased analyst, even within the narrow segment of folk song that he admitted into view. In the same 1860 edition of *English and Scottish Ballads*, Child acknowledged that in two instances he had “greatly improved” the original texts. Child was also known at times to omit stanzas he found “tasteless.” Child disciple Francis B. Gummere recalled Child’s consternation when he encountered off-color material—ballads, Gummere noted, that “the Scotch call ‘high-kilted’ songs.” “Yes, he had to print them,” wrote Gummere, “but it was a poor business.” He abhorred “the wanton and outrageous,” and he “frowned on stories, phrases, allusions, which make deliberate sport of man’s best impulses.” One such offensive passage Child characterized as “brutal and shameless.”²⁵ Child seems to have felt obliged to print some percentage of such material that he encountered, but he did not seek it out, and bawdy material certainly is underrepresented in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. The loftiness with which Child treated his subject sometimes butted up against his drive to document the British ballad tradition in its entirety.

Nonetheless, the thoroughness of Child’s exploration of British ballads and the sober air of scientism it projected carried immense power. His slice of folk song came to be seen as the touchstone against which all folk songs were judged. Although Child was in many ways a man born outside the time and, indeed, the country that held his heart, his influence extended long after his death and far beyond his Cambridge rose garden. At the turn of the twentieth century, when American scholars began to become interested in the songs *Americans* sang, their frame of reference was almost completely determined by the canon Child had established.

Concentrated interest in America’s folk song tradition began among scholars and antiquarians who became fascinated with the culture of the Appalachian Mountains. The northern middle-class reading public had had some awareness of the Appalachian folk since the 1870s when local-color fiction writers had written stories based on “folk” characters and traditions.²⁶ Into the early 1900s, however, interest in mountain folk music was largely confined to a small group of enthusiasts who collected

songs with an eye to printing them in academic journals. The first published collection of songs from the southern mountains consisted of one ballad and two songs that Lila W. Edmonds had collected in North Carolina's Roan Mountains. The *Journal of American Folklore* (which, along with the American Folklore Society, had been founded in 1888) printed it in 1893. A number of articles followed suit over the next two decades, mostly appearing in the *JAF*.²⁷

These early collectors, although drawing on the Appalachians, were very much in the Child tradition of British song scholarship. They overwhelmingly focused on collecting ballads and were especially thrilled when they found a mountaineer who sang one of the songs Child had anointed as a true British folk ballad. It became habitual to note parenthetically where such finds belonged in Child's canon of 305 ballads—as in “‘Lord Thomas and Fair Annet’ (Child, No. 73).”²⁸ To these collectors, Child's work provided a frame of reference, a set of goals, and scholarly legitimation for the songs they were gathering. Following Child's example, the collectors published the texts but not the tunes of the songs they unearthed. Usually they made no effort to contextualize a song, to explain its importance in mountain culture, or to comment on the mountaineer who sang it. In the words of George Lyman Kittredge, “The text is the thing.”²⁹ Most of the early collectors traveled the mountains as much to document Child's canon as to learn about Appalachian culture.

Although articles documenting folk songs were published steadily in the fifteen years or so after Lila Edmonds's 1893 collection, scholars and collectors did not become fully aware of the abundance of southern mountain songs until after 1910. First to spread the word of musical riches in the South were mountain settlement schools, such as the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County, Kentucky, which had been founded in 1902; the Log Cabin Settlement in Asheville, North Carolina (founded before 1895); Berea College (1869); and the Pine Mountain Settlement (1913).³⁰ Working to preserve what they saw as the mountaineers' traditional culture, these schools usually included folk song programs. Scholars and collectors who visited the schools heard the students sing and returned home talking about the musical mountaineers. In December 1908, Olive Dame Campbell visited the Hindman School and heard the children sing ballad tunes “as old as the hills—the real old plaintive folk tunes handed from mother to daughter.” Inspired, Campbell began one of the most far-ranging collections up to that time, covering counties in Kentucky, Georgia, and Tennessee by early 1910.³¹

In 1911, Transylvania University professor Hubert G. Shearin pub-

lished an article in the *Sewanee Review*, entitled “British Ballads in the Cumberland Mountains,” that both signaled and helped further the growing interest in mountain songs. Shearin revealed that his collecting work had convinced him that the Appalachian region contained a vast trove of old-time British songs. “Like the belated April snows upon their shady slopes,” he writes, “the folk-lore of the British Isles yet lingers here untouched and unchanged.” Shearin goes on to list by number the nineteen Child ballads he unearthed and to make an emotional plea for collectors to hurry and track down other British ballads “before they have faded into the shadows of the past.” “In another generation or two,” Shearin warns, the ballads will be “but a memory” in the mountains: “The clank of the colliery, the rattle of the locomotive, the roar of the blast-furnace, the shriek of the factory whistle, and, alas, even the music of the school-bell, are already overwhelming the thin tones of the dulcimore [*sic*] and the quavering voice of the Last Minstrel of the Cumberlands, who can find scant heart to sing again the lays of olden years across the seas.”³²

Shearin's call to pursue the rich song heritage in the Appalachians marked the beginning of a great expansion of collecting efforts in the region. Ballad enthusiasts followed Shearin and Campbell to the mountains and issued numerous collections of their own.³³ Most important, folk song collectors began professionalizing after 1910. State folklore societies were organized in North Carolina and Kentucky in 1912, in Virginia in 1913, and in West Virginia in 1915. These societies were founded mostly by area English professors eager to systematize collecting work that hitherto had been done in a makeshift way by them and students in their classes.³⁴ In 1913 the head of the Virginia Folk-Lore Society, C. Alphonso Smith, tried to elevate ballad collecting into a national campaign. He enlisted the United States commissioner of education to issue a circular urging Americans to preserve the country's “ballad resources” before it was too late. The circular included an essay by Smith entitled “A Great Movement in Which Everyone Can Help,” an alphabetical listing of Child ballads, and statements on the social necessity of ballad collecting. Smith quoted poet Sidney Lanier, who intoned, “I know that he who works in the way these . . . ballads point will be manful in necessary fight, fair in trade, loyal in love, generous to the poor, tender in the household, prudent in living, plain in speech, merry upon occasion, simple in behavior, and honest in all things.”³⁵

Smith wanted to galvanize ballad collectors to document the remnants of the Child canon before the songs inevitably disappeared from America. Shortly after Smith issued his circular, though, collectors began

to emerge who saw no reason for the ballads to fade into “the shadows of the past.” Josephine McGill, Loraine Wyman, and Howard Brockway shared Smith’s and Shearin’s fascination with surviving Child ballads, but rather than preserve them in destined-to-be-dusty tomes, they worked to popularize the tunes they collected.³⁶

McGill, Wyman, and Brockway could embrace a less esoteric purpose for their work largely because they were not academics but private collectors and enthusiasts. McGill was a ballad lover from New York whose interest in the Appalachians had been piqued by local-color writer Lucy Furman’s short stories and novels about the Hindman Settlement School. In 1914, using Hindman as her base, she spent the summer collecting ballads in the Kentucky mountains. Two years later, Wyman and Brockway, both classical musicians from New York, embarked on a somewhat more extensive trip that covered three hundred miles in seven Kentucky counties, including both the Hindman and Pine Mountain settlement schools.³⁷

McGill’s, Wyman’s, and Brockway’s interest in popularizing the music they collected shows through in the very form of the songbooks they published after their expeditions. McGill’s *Folk Songs of the Kentucky Mountains: Twenty Traditional Ballads and Other English Folk-Songs* (1917) and the two books jointly edited by Wyman and Brockway, *Lonesome Tunes: Folk Songs from the Kentucky Mountains* (1916) and *Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs* (1920), plainly aspire to different goals than the more academic collections. A comparison with Child’s multivolume *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* illustrates the differences. Child’s tomes, chock-full of footnotes and cross-references and, in many cases, with lyrics written in Old English dialect, were meant to occupy a place of honor in a scholar’s library. McGill’s and Wyman and Brockway’s books, in contrast, suggest that their publishers intended them to be used not by scholars but by families eager to make music at home. In a striking departure from previous folklorists’ work, these three books feature not just a song’s text but also its tune. Most significant, the tunes are scored with a simple piano accompaniment beneath the melody line. The song’s words are written between the melody and accompaniment so that pianist and singers can easily sing along together.

In keeping with the emphasis on popularization, all three authors strove for conciseness and simplicity. None of these books aspires to Child-like completeness: they give no introductory material about individual songs, provide not a single footnote, and do not bother to specify the folk sources who sang each song to the collectors (they are thanked in prefaces). For convenience and price considerations, moreover, two



Folk songs for the middle-class parlor: left, front cover of Folk Songs of the Kentucky Mountains, 1917; right, front cover of Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs, 1920.

of the three books came in paperback editions, and all are slim volumes.³⁸ Each contains between twenty and twenty-five songs and is roughly one hundred pages. Keeping the books short in part prevented them from looking too academic and intimidating; but doing so also allowed them to be thin, which, along with their unusually tall height, enabled them to fit easily on a piano’s music stand.

A final indication that these books were made for a piano is that none of them has a title on its spine; instead they have elaborate and colorful covers, designs meant to face forward and be seen as a part of a parlor’s decor. All three feature floral patterns, and, perhaps most significant, both McGill’s book and Wyman and Brockway’s feature images of the home. McGill’s cover shows a quaint log cabin—like house in a tidy clearing by a mountain stream. The cabin has an open back porch, partly drawn curtains, and a red brick chimney from which smoke rises. Wyman and Brockway’s *Twenty Kentucky Mountain Songs* shows a barefoot dulcimer-playing mother and five happy barefoot children sitting on a back porch overlooking verdant hills.

This move to link mountain music to the feminized realm of the home has significance on several levels. Most directly, it suggests that publishers were trying to appeal to women as consumers of songbooks.

Traditionally, middle-class women controlled cultural activities within the home, overseeing family reading, music making, and playacting; in middle- and upper-class families, at least, the parlor or piano room was decidedly in the woman's sphere. At another level, to depict a singing woman on the cover of Wyman's book says something accurate about the actual sources of the songs in the books: the strong majority of the songs Wyman, Brockway, and McGill collected came from women. Likewise, the more extensive mountain collection that Cecil Sharp and Olive Dame Campbell published in 1917 draws on vastly more women than men.³⁹ The preponderance of women in these collections may indicate that they felt more comfortable than men singing for collectors or that the collectors themselves felt more comfortable with female informants. Certainly countless Appalachian men did sing folk songs, but women may have been more likely to preserve the sorts of songs in which collectors were most interested. Scholars have noted that in American folk-singing traditions, men have tended to do more "public" singing—that is, in social gatherings involving people outside the family—while women have been more likely to sing in the "private" realm of the home, often while completing their domestic work. Folklorist Edward D. Ives speculates that the "domestic tradition" is more static and contains more old-fashioned songs, including more Child ballads.⁴⁰

A final element in the gendered aspects of early folk song collecting is that many of the collectors themselves were women. Aside from McGill and Wyman, Lila W. Edmonds, Katherine Pettit, Olive Dame Campbell, Maud Karpeles, Louise Pound, Louise Rand Bascam, and Dorothy Scarborough all made pioneering contributions to song collecting before the mid-1920s. Pound and Scarborough operated in the more scholarly camp of the early folk song movement, but it is perhaps significant that the first collectors to try to extend the songs they found into middle-class women's parlor (Wyman and McGill) were women themselves.

Wyman's and McGill's parlor books represented the first efforts to popularize British ballads, but not until Englishman Cecil Sharp arrived in the Appalachians did Americans begin to appreciate the extent of the folk song heritage in the Appalachians. In some ways Sharp was a latecomer to the mountains. He did not make his first trip there until 1916, when he and his assistant, Maud Karpeles, accepted Olive Dame Campbell's invitation to visit and collect in western North Carolina. By this point, the *Journal of American Folklore* alone had published more than a dozen articles about mountain folk song; McGill, Wyman, and Brockway had completed the expeditions that would lead to their books; and Camp-

bell's own collecting in the area had yielded seventy or eighty tunes.⁴¹ Sharp's renown as a collector, though, rests not so much on his being the first to show any interest in mountain song but rather on his ability to crystallize and extend trends that had been emerging over the previous two decades.

Sharp used his status as an authority on British folk song to add weight to the notion that the mountains were rich in Child ballads. He bolstered this claim in part through the sheer numbers of traditional British songs he collected. In close to twelve months of collecting in Appalachia (spread over three expeditions between 1916 and 1918), Sharp collected more than 1,600 versions of 500 songs from 281 singers, almost all British-derived material.⁴² Like his American predecessors, Sharp most eagerly sought Child ballads. In the book he published from his first expedition, *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, thirty-seven of the fifty-five ballads he selected belonged to Child's canon. He privileged these thirty-seven by listing them first in the volume, adopting what folklore historian D. K. Wilgus refers to as the "Child-and-Other" organization so prevalent at the time.⁴³

In other ways, too, Sharp's *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* reinforced trends that had been emerging in folk song scholarship since the late nineteenth century. To a great extent, it is an academic book in the Child tradition. It includes several variants of every song published, and in each case Sharp carefully notes the singer who sang the variant to him and when and where he collected it. Further, Sharp indicates for every song which mode or scale governs the tune, referring to an involved chart he gives in his introduction. For example, Variant C of "The Cruel Ship's Carpenter" is "Hexatonic. Mode 4, b (with sharpened 7th)."⁴⁴

For all these academicisms, though, *English Folk Songs* reveals Sharp to be much more in sympathy with parlor-book popularizers like McGill and Wyman than Child would have been. The book treats folk songs not just as literature but as pieces to be sung. It includes the tunes as well as the songs' texts. Although in keeping with academic practice Sharp does not harmonize the tunes in *English Folk Songs*, he advocates harmonizing in the volume's introduction, saying that adding accompaniment would give the songs "a wider and more popular appeal."⁴⁵ He did add harmonic accompaniments to other of his folk song books. Sharp, then, was at the forefront of a slowly emerging group of collectors who refused, in Karpeles's words, to see folk songs as "precious objects [that] must be protected from common usage for fear of their vulgarization."⁴⁶ Sharp wanted to reintegrate folk songs into people's everyday lives.

As he worked to reinvigorate folk song traditions, Sharp's ultimate goal was to forge a national British culture. Folk songs, he felt, would help a young Englishman "know and understand his country and his countrymen far better than he does at present; and knowing and understanding them he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by the subtle bond of blood and kinship, and become, in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen, and a truer patriot."⁴⁷ On the face of it, this vision of national culture was an extremely populist one. Sharp proposed uniting society around the songs (and dances) created by those whom he called "the common people."⁴⁸ Public-school education was the centerpiece of this plan. In *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, Sharp wrote that "the value of such songs as these as material for the general education of the young cannot be overestimated." He felt folk songs were "the ideal musical food for very young children," provided the songs were English—"English folk songs for English children, . . . [not] German, French or even Scottish or Irish." With confidence, Sharp envisioned that when "every English child is, as a matter of course, made acquainted with the folk-songs of his country, then, from whatever class the musician of the future may spring, he will speak in the national musical idiom."⁴⁹

This reference to the "musician of the future" suggests a more elitist side to Sharp's populism. Despite his respect for the songs of the "common people," Sharp did not believe that the commoners themselves were up to the task of creating the national music. Rather, they were to be commended for having preserved the raw materials out of which trained composers would create new music. In his introduction to *English Folk Songs* Sharp encourages high-art composers to assimilate the tunes into their work, saying that if composers were to "master the contents of this book" they would gain training "far better suited to [their] requirements than [they] would from the ordinary conservatoire."⁵⁰ Classical composers who used folk sources, such as Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Grainger, and Béla Bartók, were the true heirs of Sharp's brand of nationalism.

Along with this preference for trained composers, Sharp had a strong antipathy to the music to which the "common people" of his day actually listened. In trying to establish an English folk song tradition, Sharp explicitly hoped to undermine the popular music of the day. He proposed to "flood the streets . . . with folk-tunes, and those who vulgarize themselves and others by singing coarse music-hall songs will soon drop them in favour of the equally attractive but far better tunes of the folk. This will make the streets a pleasanter place for those who have sensitive ears,

and will do incalculable good in civilizing the masses." Such hostility to contemporary popular culture was very much in step with a nostalgic reformist impulse that cut across the ideological spectrum in Britain in the early part of the century. As historian Georgina Boyes notes, "Culture had developed in ways which were widely perceived as 'unnatural.' Commercialism, progress, irreligion, science, capitalism or greed were variously proposed as fuelling a perverted descent into industrialisation, mass culture and urbanisation."⁵¹ To Sharp and the revivalists, folk culture offered a way to knit society back together and return it to a simpler era—a peaceful time in which community bonds were held securely in place by class deference.

Like Child before him, Sharp felt that the England he cherished had disappeared several hundred years ago, leaving only fragments behind. Unlike Child, though, Sharp found a way to revisit the British past he had never known: he created it in America. The key to Sharp's attraction to the Appalachian mountaineers' culture was that they fit (or could be constructed to fit) his conception of old-time England. In his depictions of the mountain people he encountered, Sharp reinforced myths about the Britishness of America's folk song heritage.

From his earliest moments in the Appalachians, Sharp linked the mountaineers he saw to his idealized image of the English folk. Sharp had done extensive song collecting in Britain, but whereas in his home country he always was grasping at fragments, in America he felt he was seeing English peasant culture in full operation. In 1916 Sharp wrote that his work among the mountaineers had convinced him that the Appalachian singers were "just English peasants in appearance, speech, and manner"; or rather, "I should say that they are just exactly what the English peasant was *one hundred or more years ago*."⁵² In his introduction to *English Folk Songs*, Sharp confidently asserted that the mountaineers' speech was "English not American," although he offered no evidence to explain or bolster this claim. As Sharp's companion, Karpeles, noted, Sharp had discovered the "England of his dreams in the United States of America."⁵³

Sharp justified equating the mountaineers with old England by citing evidence to show that the mountaineers lived in a time warp—in a society still dominated by the barter system, still "talking the language of a past day" (Old English), and still beholden to the Bible and an "unrelenting" and "austere creed, charged with Calvinism." Sharp attributed this antiquated lifestyle to geographic isolation, depicting inhabitants of "sequestered mountain valleys" who "have for a hundred years or more been completely isolated and cut off from all traffic with the rest of the

world.”⁵⁴ Sharp saw the mountaineers’ supposed insularity as a chance to escape his era and return to a culture he had given up for dead.

Closely linked to his penchant for locating the mountaineers in the past, Sharp idealized Appalachian culture as refreshingly natural and pure. In his writings he extrapolated from the supposedly clean and unadulterated folk songs he heard to imagine that the singers had wholesome and simple lifestyles as well. He praised the mountaineers for their “elemental wisdom, abundant knowledge, and intuitive understanding which those only who live in constant touch with Nature and face-to-face with reality seem to be able to acquire.” Sharp contrasted this harmonious existence with what he saw as the spiritually empty routine of contemporary industrial life. The mountaineers, he felt, were “immune from that continuous, grinding, mental pressure due to the attempt to ‘make a living,’ from which all of us in the modern world suffer.” Ignoring the moonshining and feuds that so preoccupied local-color writers, Sharp continued, “Here no one is ‘on the make’; commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown. In this respect, at any rate, they have the advantage over those who spend the greater part of every day in preparing to live, in acquiring the technique of life, rather than its enjoyment.” At times Sharp made the mountaineers’ closeness to nature sound less like subsistence poverty than like an ascetic philosophy. He surmised that many people “set the standard of bodily and material comfort perilously low, in order, presumably, that they may have the more leisure and so extract the maximum enjoyment out of life.”⁵⁵ In his excitement at having discovered Old England reincarnate, Sharp projected his antimodern bent onto the mountaineers.

Sharp’s vision of mountain culture may seem romanticized, but his views were very much in tune with the conception of mountain culture that had been forming among early folk song collectors since the turn of the century. The early collectors depicted the mountaineers as still living in a rosy distant past in which plain-speaking farmers with upstanding values occupied quaint log cabins, worked in harmony with nature to feed their families, and entertained themselves by dancing old-time steps to old-time ballads. These collectors, then, much like the contemporary Arts and Crafts and New Country Life movements, located authenticity in a rural past. Idealizing mountain culture enabled them to challenge or at least sidestep the contemporary trends toward an urban, machine-driven industrial economy and a mass commercial culture. Whereas critics said the mountains existed in a state of “arrested development,” Sharp spoke for most collectors by the 1910s when he replied, “I should prefer to call it a case of arrested degeneration.”⁵⁶

Underlying the early collectors’ defense of old-time culture lay fear of another kind of degeneration as well: racial degeneration. Sharp’s pursuit of pure English culture had a racial component that translated powerfully in the American setting. In trying to isolate the source of the cultural richness in the mountain communities, Sharp settled on race as the deciding factor. He wrote, “The reason, I take it, why these mountain people, albeit unlettered, have acquired so many of the essentials of culture is partly to be attributed to the large amount of leisure they enjoy . . . , but chiefly to the fact that they have one and all entered at birth into the full enjoyment of their racial heritage.” In Sharp’s view, racial inheritance in large part determines a culture’s value. He observes that the mountaineers’ “language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually handed down generation by generation.” Sharp meant that the mountaineers were part of the *English* race, but his attitudes extended easily into the black-white dichotomy familiar to Americans. In 1918 he described Winston-Salem, North Carolina, as “a noisy place and the air impregnated with tobacco, molasses and nigger!” He told his diary that when his liberal hosts challenged his “dubbing the negroes as of a lower race,” he attributed their objections to “a mere lack of education etc!”⁵⁷

Sharp’s emphasis on racial determinism adds a twist to the early ballad enthusiasts’ insistence that the mountaineers were 100 percent British. Mostly white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, the song collectors asserted that mountain culture was America’s authentic folk inheritance and at the same time stressed that the mountaineers were British. In effect, therefore, the collectors established *their* heritage as the true American culture. This racial message also gives another perspective on the educational efforts of early popularizers such as Sharp and the mountain settlement schools. In Sharp’s view, “the primary purpose of education is to place the direction of the present generation in possession of the cultural achievements of the past so that they may as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance.” He goes on to ask rhetorically, “What better form of music or of literature can we give them than the folk-songs and folk-ballads of the race to which they belong, or of the nation whose language they speak? To deny them these is to cut them off from the past and to rob them of that which is theirs by right of birth.”⁵⁸ Education here begins to sound like race indoctrination.

In the late 1910s, collectors of mountain songs were working in a time in which racial boundaries in America were being tested. Eastern European immigrants had flowed into the country in overwhelming numbers, prompting growing campaigns to Americanize the newcomers and to

block further immigration; jazz was taking off in popularity in the nation's cities, signaling, as historian Kathy J. Ogren writes, that "black culture, like black people, could not be kept on the margins of American society" and sparking intense debate among white critics; and African American artists and intellectuals were creating a black culture of new vibrancy and openness in what would become known as the Harlem Renaissance.⁵⁹ In this context, the calls to use folk song education to pass on WASPs' "racial inheritance" sounds like a bid to preserve the centrality of Anglo-Saxon culture against outside challenges.

The point is not that, in an age of nativism, Jim Crow, and lynching, Cecil Sharp and his fellow folk song enthusiasts were strikingly or unusually racist. More significant, rather, is that there was a racial undertone beneath the earliest self-conscious efforts to define America's folk song heritage. This racial aspect was but one part, though, of a multifaceted mythology about the "true" folk that by the late 1910s was percolating slowly into American culture. This myth defined a folk song as an extremely old song, usually a ballad, that had originated from Great Britain and was currently sung by rural, isolated mountain people who were white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

To label these criteria a myth is not to dismiss them as baseless. Certainly Appalachian mountaineers sang a striking number of old British ballads; but in the early 1900s they also played fiddle tunes, sang hymns, and crooned sentimental pop songs.⁶⁰ For every ballad Sharp collected, he ignored countless other songs offered by the mountaineers. Similarly, most mountaineers did live in relatively rural settings, and some truly were isolated from modern roads and conveniences. Many parts of the mountains, though, were rapidly modernizing, and the region as a whole was in the midst of jolting economic upheaval. The more Sharp traveled, the more this reality confronted his romantic conceptions. In a 1917 letter, Sharp recounted his disappointment in arriving to collect in a small North Carolina town. To his regret the folk seemed to have been tainted by living too close to Waynesville, a more modernized town of two thousand.⁶¹ "The log-cabins are primitive enough," wrote Sharp, "but their owners are clean, neat, and tidy, looking rather like maid-servants in respectable suburban families. It is sad that cleanliness and good music, or good taste in music, rarely go together. Dirt and good music are the usual bed-fellows, or cleanliness and rag-time! So we move further on tomorrow." The following year Sharp arrived with high hopes in a small Virginia town "twenty-five miles from the [nearest] station." But he found the local residents "dressed in fashionable garments, low-necked dresses, high-heels and well-powdered faces. . . . The fact is the

price of whisky has so gone up that 'moon-shining' has been exceedingly profitable and they are rolling in money. Songs were, of course, out of the question, and we retired [the] next day somewhat crestfallen." Finally, to some degree the racial component of the mountain myth was based on reality. Most of the mountain residents were white; but by no means all were. Even though Sharp and the early collectors documented only whites' songs, the 1910 census showed that 13.4 percent of the Appalachian population was black.⁶²

To suggest inaccuracies in the early collectors' conception of the folk only confirms that they were telling a story about America's folk roots that, to them, was true and useful. The picture of the mountains that the early folklorists meticulously documented and enthusiastically pronounced represented a choice on their part, whether conscious or not, to define America's folk music tradition in a certain way. Whatever inconsistencies the myth may have enveloped, in its time it had coherence and, for several decades, power.

The most significant effect of the myth of the white ballad singer was to help block African American folk music from gaining a central place in the canon of America's musical heritage. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American song enjoyed quite a widespread popularity, but the myths about the "true" American folk, coupled with raw prejudice, kept it from being anointed as America's folk music.

Interest in African American song actually predated interest in Appalachian mountain music. It was probably the first American music to be popular in communities outside of those in which it had originated. Nonblack audiences initially became interested in black song via the minstrel shows that drew enthusiastic audiences across the North in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. These shows' popularity depended on their claim that their dances, humor, and music authentically represented slave life. But since almost all the early minstrel performers were northern whites in blackface (African Americans did not begin to perform in blackface until after the Civil War), they had only very limited knowledge of actual African American traditions. Mostly, they overlaid spurious caricatures of blacks onto Anglo-American cultural forms. In fact, the melodies for two of the most popular early minstrel songs, "Jim Crow" and "Zip Coon," derived from English and Irish sources.⁶³

In the 1870s, though, northerners became fascinated by African American spirituals as sung by African Americans themselves. This surge of interest in spirituals originated with the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee Singers were organized by George L. White, a white north-

erner who worked for the Freedmen's Bureau and was both a music teacher and the treasurer at Fisk. Founded in 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee, as a school for African Americans, Fisk was on the verge of bankruptcy by 1870. Desperate, White proposed a fund-raising concert tour. His proposal met with opposition from within the university community, but in October 1871 he and his group of nine singers, eight of whom were former slaves, headed north. After initial hardship, the group made contact with the Reverend Henry Ward Beecher of New York. He sponsored an appearance at his Plymouth Church that launched the Fisk singers on an immensely successful series of concerts. Less than seven months after they had set out from Nashville, they had earned twenty thousand dollars to meet the school's expenses. In June 1872 they sang at the World's Peace Jubilee in the Boston Coliseum, and in 1873 they made the first of a series of triumphant European tours, including a performance before Queen Victoria.⁶⁴

The Fisk singers' concerts triggered a wave of faddish popularity. President Grant interrupted preparations for a cabinet meeting to receive the singers at the White House, and, it was reported, he "shook them affectionately by the hand, assured them he was informed of their enterprise and in full sympathy with it, and listened attentively as they sang 'Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land / tell ole Pharaoh let my people go.'"⁶⁵ In the 1870s, publishers began issuing books that gave piano arrangements of the most popular "Jubilee Songs" and chronicled the singers' rise to success.⁶⁶ Other black schools, meanwhile, followed Fisk's lead and sent choirs of their own on tours to raise money. Most successful were the Hampton Institute's singers, who began their years of touring in 1873. By 1909, their songbook had been through five editions. Indeed, the popularity of spirituals continued to spread during the nineteenth century. In 1899 song collector William E. Barton noted that songs introduced by the Fisk singers appeared "at all manner of occasions from funerals to yachting parties" and that they had been republished in a range of books, "from collections of Sunday school melodies to books of college songs."⁶⁷

The popularity of black songs, though, did not easily translate into acceptance of the singers. The Fisk and Hampton groups, for example, projected dignified images, dressing demurely and singing precise, formal arrangements of the spirituals. But northerners persistently identified them with minstrelsy. A Cincinnati paper advertised the Fisk singers by announcing, "A band of negro minstrels will sing in the Vine Street Congregational Church this morning. They are genuine negroes, and call themselves 'Colored Christian singers.'" Some of the imitators of the

Fisk group did not try to skirt the association with minstrelsy but rather capitalized on it. Historian Robert C. Toll notes that groups billed themselves as "genuine slave bands" and promised to appear in "full plantation costumes" and to sing the "quaint and weird" slave songs on "crude instruments of the south."⁶⁸

A few people, though, began to see spirituals not as quaint tunes in a songbook or as exotic showstoppers but as important parts of America's heritage that needed to be preserved. Probably the first person to give African American songs serious consideration as folk music was Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a white colonel in the Union army who became fascinated with the spirituals his black troops sang. In 1867 he published the texts of several of these songs in the *Atlantic Monthly* and urged that they be preserved as part of America's cultural legacy: "History," he wrote, "cannot afford to lose this portion of its record."⁶⁹ Also in 1867, William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published the first full-length treatment of African American song, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867). The book was the product of abolitionist zeal. Allen and Ware, both Harvard educated, had taught during the war in freedmen's schools in the South. Garrison, the daughter-in-law of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison and sister of architect Charles McKim, had at age nineteen transcribed black songs after the Carolina Sea Islands had fallen to Union forces. The young reformers were convinced of the significance of their finds. Wrote Allen, "These relics of a state of society that has passed away should be preserved while it is still possible." Subsequent advocates of spirituals struck a similar tone. In his introduction to Marshall W. Taylor's *Collection of Revival Hymns and Plantation Melodies* (1883), F. S. Hoyt described the black spiritual as "an important . . . contribution to the history of mankind," while the preface to the 1891 Hampton Institute songbook quoted Edward Everett Hale's assertion that spirituals were "the only American music."⁷⁰

Almost half a century, then, before Cecil Sharp began exploring America's British-ballad heritage, collectors identified an American vernacular-music tradition centered on an African American form. Enthusiasts worked to preserve the spiritual as part of America's folk heritage, and efforts to popularize the form achieved considerable success in the late nineteenth century. The Fisk singers were far better known than their contemporary Francis J. Child, and the spiritual had a currency in nineteenth-century popular culture that no American roots music had ever before enjoyed. How can one account for the respect and popu-

larity enjoyed by the music of a race so widely abused and ridiculed in nineteenth-century society?

Part of the answer lies in the spiritual as a form. In terms of cultural politics, the spiritual was a safe type of African American expression for early folk song collectors to canonize. It was, after all, a relic of slave days. Although many African Americans sang spirituals long after slavery, overall the songs went into steep and continuous decline among freedpeople after the Civil War. Former slaves quite consciously rejected the form. In 1874, in the preface to *Cabin and Plantation Songs As Sung by the Hampton Students*, Thomas P. Fenner, who had trained the first Hampton singers, highlighted the need to preserve spirituals by noting that the music was “rapidly slipping away. . . . The freedmen have an unfortunate inclination to despise it as a vestige of slavery; those who learned it in the old time when it was the natural outpouring of their sorrows and longing, are dying off.”⁷¹ Even the Fisk singers did not immediately embrace the spiritual. Although spirituals were sung in the school’s chapel, none appeared on their first program in 1871. Only when their first tour seemed on the verge of failing did two spirituals get added. Since audiences responded strongly to these examples, the group began to focus exclusively on religious songs.⁷² In struggling to preserve spirituals, then, nineteenth-century collectors identified African Americans with a form from which most African Americans wanted to distance themselves.

The content of spirituals also helps account for their appeal to nineteenth-century whites. On the surface at least, spirituals imply acceptance rather than direct, physical challenge to slavery. The songs suggest a decidedly otherworldly orientation, promising redemption not in the present but in the glorious world after death. “Go in the Wilderness,” to take just one example, says,

I wait upon de Lord,
I wait upon de Lord,
I wait upon de Lord, my God, **
who take away de sin of the world.⁷³

Spirituals tend to describe the hardships of this life in terms of sorrow more than anger or defiance. In part, therefore, the spiritual may have appealed to whites because it told newly free but still dominated blacks not to redress current wrongs. Even as the popularity of black spirituals among whites suggested an embrace of African American culture, it also represented an effort to keep it at arm’s length.

This ambivalence about black culture infused the language even of the pioneering collectors who strove to preserve the spiritual for pos-

terity. They do not seem to have been entirely comfortable with the songs they heard and certainly not with the culture that produced them. F. S. Hoyt heard “weird but charming melodies.” William E. Barton referred to the Fisk singers’ “quaint, weird songs,” while Robert Moton prefaced the fifth edition of the Hampton songbook with a reference to the songs’ “rude words, wild strains and curious though beautiful harmonies.” Thomas Higginson made hunting for spirituals sound like a botanist’s search for a specimen. Traveling to the South, he wrote, gave him the chance to “gather on their own soil these strange plants, which I had before seen as in museums only.” When he came across a promising song, he “carried it to [his] tent, like some captured bird or insect, and then, after examination, put it by.”⁷⁴ Even though these nineteenth-century collectors worked to preserve the African American spiritual as an important part of America’s heritage, they tended to depict black singers as exotic beings on the margins of society.

Black vernacular music became even more marginalized in the early twentieth century as the myth of the British ballad asserted itself. As the influence of Child’s canon spread, few folklorists and ballad enthusiasts paid sustained attention to African American music. The main collector to study African American songs in the early 1900s, Howard Odum, depicted them as the manifestations of a bizarre alien culture. With doctorates in both sociology and psychology, Odum gathered songs less to preserve an American heritage than to discover what made those strange Negroes tick. In “Religious Folk-Songs of the Southern Negroes” (1909), he wrote that “the songs of the most characteristic type are far from elegant. Nor are they dignified in theme or expression. They will appear to the cultured reader a bit repulsive, to say the least. They go beyond the interesting point to the trite and repulsive themes. Nor can a great many of the common songs that are too inelegant to include [in the printed collection] be given at all.” As with his nineteenth-century predecessors, Odum’s encounter with African American music did not open him up to black society: “Little need be said,” he stated, “concerning social and political equality. There is no absolute race equality in any sense of the word. Those who would assist the Negro should remember this and not exact too much of him, either in demanding his results or offering him the complete ideal of the whites.”⁷⁵

Early collectors exoticized African Americans in part to keep them at a distance and in part because black culture truly did differ markedly from the white middle-class life to which most collectors were accustomed. Even those early collectors who, unlike Odum, did not resort to outright racism to explain these differences could not completely recon-

cile themselves to what, from their points of view, were the more unusual aspects of African American culture. African American spirituals achieved an astonishing degree of popularity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—up to a point, difference fascinated white Americans—but these songs could not break into the canon of America's folk music. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, difference, especially racial difference, precluded complete acceptance.⁷⁶ Negro spirituals could be quaint, charming, even moving, but they could not cross the barrier to become America's folk music.

Apart from the African American spiritual, the British-centered Child canon received only one other significant challenge to its dominance before the 1920s. In the 1870s and 1880s, a young boy named John Lomax was captivated by the songs cowboys sang as they traveled past his father's two-room house on the Chisholm Trail. His interest in the music, though, lay largely dormant through years as an undergraduate at the University of Texas, registrar at the university, and English professor at Texas A&M. In 1906 Lomax, age thirty-nine, went to Harvard to do a year of graduate work. There the successors to Francis J. Child, Professors Barrett Wendell and George Lyman Kittredge, responded enthusiastically when Lomax mentioned his love of cowboy song. They helped him prepare a form letter to be sent to western newspaper editors requesting "native ballads and songs of the West" and arranged for Harvard Press to print one thousand copies, which Lomax laboriously addressed and mailed. After Lomax returned to Texas, Wendell and Kittredge helped him win a prestigious postgraduate fellowship, newly endowed at Harvard. Lomax became "Sheldon Fellow for the investigation of American ballads," an appellation that over the next three years brought him five hundred dollars each summer to finance research and song-collecting expeditions among the cowboys.⁷⁷

In 1910, Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, a collection of more than a hundred songs, mostly drawn from scrapbooks, newspapers, and the responses he had received from the thousand circulars he had mailed. Ranging from a little-known tune called "Home on the Range" to "Root Hog or Die," this material marked a significant departure from the "Lord Randal" and "Sweet William" ballads of the Child tradition.⁷⁸ In canonizing cowboy songs instead of ancient ballads, Lomax changed the face of the folk, replacing the sturdy British peasant with the mythical western cowboy who "lived hard, shot quick and true, and died with his face to his foe."⁷⁹ He also revised Child's and Sharp's assumptions about the age of folk songs. Whereas

Child preferred fourteenth-century ballads, cowboys did not even exist in significant numbers until after the Civil War. In contrast to Child and Sharp, then, Lomax pointed toward a recent, indigenously American vernacular-music tradition.

The relative newness of the cowboy songs led Lomax to collecting methods that differed from Child's. Lomax found that, although declining, the cowboy song was still very much alive. This realization led him, like Sharp, to seek out songs not only from printed sources but from living informants as well.⁸⁰ Also like Sharp, finding contemporary examples of the songs he treasured led Lomax to attempt not just to document a song tradition but to revitalize one. In Lomax's case, though, his emphasis on popularizing songs led him to dispense with academic standards to an extent that would have galled Child. In *Cowboy Songs* Lomax does not identify the sources from whom he collected songs, and he edits some of the songs without indicating that he did so. Unlike Child and Sharp, moreover, Lomax dispensed with printing song variants and instead combined different versions of songs without indicating which lines came from which source. Lomax openly admits, "I have violated the ethics of ballad-gatherers, in a few instances, by selecting and putting together what seemed to be the best lines from different versions, all telling the story. Frankly the volume is meant to be popular."⁸¹

Even though Lomax challenged the boundaries of Child's canon and disregarded his collecting methods, as a student of Wendell and Kittredge he still very much located his work within the Child tradition. In *Cowboy Songs*, for instance, he persistently identifies American cowboy culture with the British folk tradition. Lomax rhapsodizes, "Out in the wild, far-away place of the big and still unpeopled west . . . yet survives the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit that was active in secluded districts in England and Scotland." He goes on to connect the cowboy to the resonant mythology surrounding medieval England: "Dauntless, reckless, without the unearthly purity of Sir Galahad though as gentle to a pure woman as King Arthur, he is truly a knight of the twentieth century." Lomax credits the rugged cowboy with "a spirit of hospitality as primitive and hearty as that found in the mead-halls of Beowulf."⁸²

In addition to these rhetorical homages to old England, Lomax and Child actually shared strikingly similar conceptions of the folk. Lomax's cowboys sang in a different country and in a different era than Child's peasants, but like Child (and Sharp), Lomax stressed that the character of the cowboys' songs derived from their isolation from modern society: "Illiterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely—thrown back on primal resources for entertainment

and for the expression of emotion,—utter themselves through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers perhaps a thousand years ago.” Lomax also worked to preserve the aura of murky origins that helped make Child’s ballads seem authentic. “In only a few instances,” he wrote, “have I been able to discover the authorship of any [cowboy] songs. They seem to have sprung up quietly and mysteriously as does the grass on the plains.”⁸³ Lomax set out to expand more than to destabilize the Child canon.

Even in this more modest goal, Lomax had only limited success. His cowboy songs attracted some attention, but not enough to keep him from essentially giving up collecting for the fifteen years after 1916. Most of those years he spent heading the University of Texas’s alumni association (the Texas Exes) and selling bonds in a Dallas bank.⁸⁴ Cowboy music did not truly penetrate America’s popular memory until the 1930s when “singing cowboys” became the rage in movies and a series of cowboy-styled songs became radio hits.⁸⁵ Lomax’s work also failed to spur much activity on the part of folklorists and ballad enthusiasts.⁸⁶ Into the twenties, then, the folk song canon shaped by Child and Sharp held sway. Despite the alternatives posed by spirituals and cowboy songs, “true” American folk song was defined as British-derived.

The first real breakthroughs in generating popular interest in indigenous American vernacular music were spurred not by folklorists or ballad enthusiasts but by commercial entrepreneurs. Commercial record companies became involved in folk music almost by accident. In the spring of 1920, recording scout Fred Hagar and his assistant, Ralph Peer, recorded for Okeh Records a young African American vaudeville singer, Mamie Smith, as she sang “Crazy Blues.” Historian Bill C. Malone notes that Smith was “neither a blues singer nor a southerner (she was from Ohio).” But sales of “Crazy Blues” unexpectedly soared, and record companies became interested in making records that targeted rural southern blacks and urban blacks who had recently migrated from the country. In the early 1920s Peer began the unprecedented practice of leading regular field trips to the South to make commercial recordings of local singers.⁸⁷ As he accumulated recordings by African Americans, Peer labeled them “race records” and promoted them heavily. Quickly, Peer’s rivals at Columbia, Paramount, and Victor followed suit with their own “race” series.⁸⁸ Although race records always represented a small percentage of the companies’ overall sales (perhaps 5 percent), by 1927 the companies released nearly ten race records per week. They were sold in record shops, mail-order catalogs, saloons, book stores, barber shops, drug

stores, furniture stores, and cigar stands, and they quickly became important elements in African American community life.⁸⁹

In June 1923 Ralph Peer went to Atlanta, looking to record black talent for the Okeh company. While Peer was there, Polk Brockman, who sold Peer’s race records in the phonograph department of his grandfather’s furniture store, convinced him to record a white North Georgian performer named Fiddlin’ John Carson, who had built up something of a local following on Atlanta’s WSB radio. Peer found Carson’s rough singing distasteful, and although he agreed to send Brockman five hundred copies of the record to sell in his store, he issued the record “uncatalogued, unadvertised, unlabeled and for circulation solely in Atlanta,” says Malone. By late July, though, the first five hundred copies had sold, and Peer realized he had stumbled onto a potentially rich find.⁹⁰ He summoned Carson to New York to record more songs and began to look for rural white as well as black musicians on his future field-recording expeditions. In 1925 Peer recorded Al Hopkins’s string band and dubbed them the “Hill Billies,” a term that eventually grew to apply to the whole genre of rural white commercial music.

As had happened with race records, Okeh’s competitors—Columbia, Paramount, Brunswick, the American Record Company, Gennett, and Victor—soon followed Peer’s lead in searching out hillbilly music. In the late 1920s, companies did fieldwork in thirteen states. When recording in an area, they would establish headquarters in the nearest large city, usually setting up a temporary recording studio at the local radio station, concert hall, or (as when Peer first recorded Jimmie Rodgers) an old warehouse. Usually, recording scouts tried to book a full recording schedule in advance, relying on local agents to gather likely prospects or, occasionally, on a timely news article or advertisement announcing their recording plans. Upon arrival, the recording team would take down as many songs as possible in a few days and then pack the fragile wax discs in dry ice, ship them back to the company factory, and move on to another town.⁹¹ The discs, meanwhile, were pressed into records and shipped to market. Aside from mail-order catalogs, distribution in the 1920s was largely regionalized. Whereas early books of folk songs such as the spirituals collected by Allen, Ward, and Garrison, the cowboy songs of John Lomax, or the mountain music of McGill, Wyman, and Brockway sought a diffuse middle-class market, commercial companies in the 1920s aimed hillbilly records at a distinct niche—primarily southeastern, working-class whites.⁹²

This system seems to have worked well, for sales of hillbilly music boomed in the mid- to late twenties. Historian Charles Wolfe estimates

that the Columbia hillbilly series alone sold eleven million records between 1925 and 1932, and he adds that if the other companies "did only half as well in sales in the South, probably as many as sixty-five million old-time song or tune performances flooded into the culture" in this period. Even if these figures are somewhat inflated, they show that the commercial record companies were, in a numerical sense, far more successful at popularizing their vision of American folk music than had been Cecil Sharp, Olive Dame Campbell, and the other documenters of the Child canon.⁹³

In addition to being more commercially viable, the record companies' canon of folk music differed in other key ways from that of the ballad enthusiasts who had explored the rural South before them. Not invested in having a British-centered canon, the commercial companies could record a wider range of contemporary vernacular music. Whereas ballad enthusiasts collected almost exclusively from the older, more static domestic singing tradition, commercial collectors recorded the relatively newer and more fluid repertoire of songs played in public gatherings.⁹⁴ The commercial workers' canon also extended much more easily to include a variety of African American music. Race-record listings included not only spirituals and sermons but blues, jazz, work songs, and storytelling sessions; if it would sell, companies would record it. This economic imperative, though, did not drive the companies to treat African American and white folk music as parts of a shared or interconnecting tradition. Even though blacks' and whites' songs were often recorded by the same people on the same field trips in the same cities, every company in the twenties treated its race and hillbilly selections as completely independent series that had separate numbering systems, separate advertisements, and separate markets.

Aside from including African American music, the commercial companies also differed from the proponents of the Child canon in their orientation to white music. Early folklorists like Sharp climbed mountains searching for unaccompanied ballads, the form they considered the most authentic and pure. The first commercial record scouts, however, mostly recorded instrumentals, especially fiddle tunes, which the companies saw as a safer sell.⁹⁵ In the later 1920s, the commercial companies did begin to focus on vocal music, but for the most part they still stayed away from the unaccompanied British ballad. They did so not out of antipathy for America's British heritage but because they had no use for a conception of the past as rigidly circumscribed as that set out by the Child canon.

As the case of Peer illustrates, the record producers recognized that

hillbilly music's popularity depended on its connection to a sense of tradition, but they preferred to leave this tradition murkily defined. On his field trips, Peer portrayed himself as looking for old-time traditional singers. In a 1927 interview with a Bristol, Tennessee, reporter, for instance, Peer signaled to area performers what sort of music he and the Victor company wanted: "In no section of the South have the pre-war melodies and old mountaineer songs been better preserved than in the mountains of East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia . . . and it was primarily for this reason that Victor chose Bristol as its operating base."⁹⁶ Peer recognized, though, that old-timey music need not actually be old, and certainly not as old as a fourteenth-century ballad. Primarily he wanted to record artists who were comfortable enough with traditional music to sing songs in the older *styles* that attracted hillbilly music's audiences. Rather than insisting that his performers sing specific songs from a certain period, Peer focused on getting singers who generated a certain sound that he felt would be popular. As a result, historian Nolan Porterfield notes, performers such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family (both of whom Peer "discovered" and frequently recorded) drew on both "old half-forgotten relics of the past" and "original songs that sounded like the old ones."⁹⁷ In Peer's canon, these types were equally acceptable. His eclecticism signaled an important shift from his folk-collecting predecessors: instead of enshrining specific songs as "authentic," Peer looked for adept and appealing practitioners of certain styles and elevated them into stars.

Peer and the other record company executives were able to take this new direction because, unlike previous collectors, they were not self-consciously trying to pursue and popularize a specific canon. They simply sought profits. Peer, for instance, above all concerned himself with copyrighting material. When the Victor company tried to hire him to build up its hillbilly catalog, he wrangled with them not over salary or artistic control but over song rights. Later he recalled, "I had considered the matter very carefully and [realized] that essentially this was [a] business of recording new copyrights and that I would be willing to go to work for them for nothing with the understanding that there would be no objection if I controlled these copyrights." Victor accepted Peer's terms, so his music-publishing firm, Southern Music Company, owned the rights to all the songs he chose to record.⁹⁸

Peer's financial stake in the songs he recorded led him to adopt collecting methods that would have horrified a rigorous folklorist. To draw royalties, for instance, Peer insisted that his artists copyright the arrangements of the traditional songs they sang, even if the songs themselves

were in the public domain. Peer's focus on copyright led him to encourage his performers to compose new songs, which drew higher royalties than traditional tunes. Peer recalled, "I always insisted on getting artists who could write their own music." Indeed, Peer relates that when he first recorded Jimmie Rodgers, "we ran into a snag almost immediately because . . . he was singing mostly songs originated by the New York publishers—the current hits. Actually he had only one song of his own." Peer "told Jimmie what I needed to put him over as a recording artist," and Rodgers promised to write a dozen new songs before their next session. Peer's stress on original material bore fruit. In the late 1920s Rodgers became a star—a "household name" in the small-town South—not for his versions of traditional songs but for his own hits such as "T for Texas" and "My Lovin' Gal, Lucille."⁹⁹

Peer had no qualms about moving hillbilly musicians into the realm of popular music. In fact, he often tried to give a more pop-sounding accompaniment to Rodgers's songs. In one inauspicious effort he backed him with a lush sextet from New York, what Rodgers called an "uptown ork [orchestra]." Rather than belittling popular music, as did most folklorists, Peer saw the riches of the popular field as his ultimate goal. "I was always trying," he recalled, "to get away from the hillbilly and into the legitimate music publishing field. . . . What I was doing was to take the profits out of the hillbilly and race business and spend that money trying to get established as a pop publisher." At the end of 1928, Peer transferred control of his Southern Music Company to Victor and included in the agreement a clause whereby Victor agreed to assign him rights to all songs "of popular nature that might be recorded."¹⁰⁰

With their indifference to British ballads, their openness to recent and original compositions, and their emphasis on copyrighting and selling what they collected, Peer and the other recording scouts represented a significant break from Child's academic folkloristic legacy. Even so, these commercial recorders launched trends that influenced more folkloristic song collecting. By breaking with Child's British-ballad orientation, they opened up the world of African American music and showed the diversity and richness of indigenous white folk music traditions. Equally important, their lack of interest in canon building suggested a new purpose for recording technology. Before, recording had been treated purely as a documentary convenience. Howard Odum may have recorded Mississippi blacks as early as 1904; Charles F. Lummis had recorded almost four hundred Spanish American songs in California by 1905; John Lomax used a recorder to take down cowboy songs in 1910; and Cecil Sharp, too, experimented with (and abandoned) recording in

Britain in the early 1900s.¹⁰¹ All these collectors, though, primarily used the recording machine as a tool that let them take down a song and transcribe it accurately later; it enabled them to produce finer, more precise song texts.

Commercial scouts like Peer, however, had no interest in publishing a book of texts. To them, recordings were an end, not a means. When they recorded a song, they did not see it as an incremental addition to a larger canon. They were, as Bill C. Malone says, "unwitting folklorists," who saw recordings as products—products that could be mass-produced and marketed and pushed into popular culture.¹⁰²

Most of the more academic folk song collectors studiously ignored the work of the commercial recorders.¹⁰³ But increasingly they could not avoid confronting the implications of the commercializers' work. In the late 1920s, as Al Hopkins and the Hill Billies entertained President Calvin Coolidge at a press reception (1926) and Jimmie Rodgers starred as "The Singing Brakeman" in a nationally distributed movie (1929), two folk song collectors were at work, each of whom understood better than most the possibilities and the perils involved in setting aside the Child canon and capitalizing on the vogue that "the folk" were beginning to enjoy in popular culture.¹⁰⁴ One was Carl Sandburg, the poet, journalist, and biographer fresh from the rich success of *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years* (1926), the first two parts of what would become a classic six-volume biography. Sandburg had collected songs since, as a restless nineteen-year-old, he had left his Galesburg, Illinois, home on a romantic hoboing journey west (he hoboed back four months later).¹⁰⁵ On the trip, Sandburg had begun taking down song lyrics in a pocket notebook, using his own notation system to catch the melodies. By the 1920s he was in the habit of gathering songs from friends, labor leaders, folklorists, and the people who attended the endless series of lectures he gave at universities and civic clubs across the country. He usually closed each program with a quarter- or half-hour set of music, giving what he called "verbal footnotes with each song."¹⁰⁶ In 1926 he began work on a volume that would capture and preserve the rich variety of songs he had heard and collected. The following year he published *The American Songbag*.

At the same time, another, less popularly renowned collector was at work. Robert Winslow Gordon had first collected folk songs as an undergraduate at Harvard, where he had been a freshman in 1906, the same year John Lomax did graduate work there. Gordon went on to pursue graduate work under Lomax's mentors George Lyman Kittredge and Barrett Wendell, working for eight years on a folklore dissertation that

he never finished. In 1923 he became the editor of the "Old Songs That Men Have Sung" column for *Adventure*, a middlebrow action and adventure pulp magazine. Gordon used the column to solicit and print folk songs from readers around the country, and over the next four and a half years he received more than four thousand letters.¹⁰⁷

Gordon's dream, though, was to be free from any job besides song collecting. No collectors up to that point had managed to dedicate themselves so single-mindedly to the task, but in 1925, funded by his salary as an *Adventure* correspondent, a contract for ten articles from the *New York Times*, and a twelve-hundred-dollar Sheldon Fellowship from Harvard, Gordon went to Asheville, North Carolina, and began recording. Over the next three years, despite perpetual financial hardships, he made almost a thousand recordings, mostly in North Carolina and Georgia. His most significant achievement in this period, though, was to convince the head of the Library of Congress's Music Division, Carl Engel, to raise funds for a national folk song repository. In 1928 Engel announced the founding of the Archive of American Folk-Song in the Library of Congress and named Gordon its first director.¹⁰⁸ For the first time, America had an institution devoted solely to preserving its vernacular music.

Both Sandburg's and Gordon's work suggested the possibility of combining self-conscious effort to define an American folk song heritage (a goal absent from the work of commercial collectors like Peet) with a determination to reach a broad popular audience (an aim largely foreign to Child and his followers). Sandburg's *American Songbag*, for instance, clearly aims at a popular audience. In presenting its 280 songs, it completely ignores academic standards. It does not list the folk sources from whom Sandburg collected the songs, nor does it specify which songs came from other collectors. Instead Sandburg frames each piece with a homey note and occasional line drawings of galloping horses or a hangman's noose. More than academic precision, Sandburg cared about producing a book of "singable songs."¹⁰⁹ Accordingly he included piano accompaniments for every tune so that the book, as his publisher Alfred Harcourt wrote, "could be stood up on the piano in fraternity houses and homes for ordinary folk to play the accompaniment and the rest of the crowd to sing."¹¹⁰

Gordon shared Sandburg's interest in popularizing and in fact spent three days with the poet contributing songs for *American Songbag*. After these sessions, Gordon excitedly wrote to Carl Engel about his hopes for future work with Sandburg: "What we have in mind is directly in line with my theory that scholarship *can* and *should* combine with general popularity. . . . One of the curses of the past has been, I think, that real

contributions have been hidden away in recondite journals where they were seen only by those who needed them least."¹¹¹ Gordon certainly was not dismissing the importance of scholarship—he favored what he called a "popular-scholarly" synthesis—but he, like Sandburg, envisioned an expanded audience for folk music.¹¹²

The key to broadening folk music's appeal, both Sandburg and Gordon felt, was to spread the word that America had an indigenous musical tradition, that American music was more than British music recycled. Neither man rejected the Child canon out of hand. On the contrary, *American Songbag* includes "Barbara Allen," "Lord Lovel," and several other Child classics. In 1927 Gordon wrote an article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "The Old Ballads" in which he praises ballads as "the unquestioned aristocrats of the folk-song world. They have the most poetry, the highest literary values." Even so, both Sandburg and Gordon stressed the need to move beyond the Child canon. In the same article, Gordon referred to ballads as songs whose remnants "linger" but have "no real life in them." He saw them as "not fully representative" of America's folk song heritage: "They are true folk-songs but of a limited and peculiar type," he wrote. "They occupy one tiny corner of an immense field." In a 1926 letter he described it as a "disgrace to our national scholarship" that American songs were accorded less respect than British examples. Gordon set out to rectify the balance in his series of *New York Times Magazine* articles, doing pieces on, among other forms, American banjo tunes, outlaw ballads, lumberjack songs, and fiddle tunes.¹¹³

Sandburg, too, stressed the need to awaken Americans to the richness of their country's heritage. In his introduction to *American Songbag* he pointedly called the book an "All-American affair" and lamented that "there are persons born and reared in this country who culturally have not yet come over from Europe." Sandburg tried to reel in these cultural expatriates by showing that America's songbag overflowed not just with British ballads but with "Prison and Jail Songs," "Hobo Songs," "Mexican Border Songs," and "Bandit Biographies."¹¹⁴ The effort to awaken a sense of native heritage among Americans took on the tenor of a crusade for Sandburg. In 1928 he wrote to H. L. Mencken about *American Songbag*'s success: "My gratification about the book is merely that of a patriot who has seen his duty and done it."¹¹⁵

In expanding beyond the Child canon, though, the most significant move Sandburg and Gordon made was to include African American songs in their vision of America's musical heritage. Whereas Child's followers had ignored black music and commercial companies had segregated it in separate "race" labels, both Sandburg and Gordon treated Af-

rican American songs as central to the tradition they outlined. *American Songbag's* exuberant text never directly addresses where exactly blacks belong in the "wide human procession [that] marches through these pages," but the book matter-of-factly includes a section on African American "Blues, Mellows, Ballets," and it intersperses other black songs in the categories "Railroad and Work Gangs," "Prison and Jail Songs," and the "Road to Heaven."¹¹⁶

Gordon worked more explicitly to define an African American folk song tradition. He recorded hundreds of black tunes in the South, and he included articles on Negro shouts, chants, work songs, and spirituals in his *New York Times Magazine* series. Gordon treated African American music as a coherent tradition. He praised Negro spirituals, for instance, as "the most extensive and varied body of folk-song that is alive and growing in any civilized country today." In a significant step he placed African Americans at the center of America's folk song heritage, noting that "the negro of the South is perhaps our best folk-singer."¹¹⁷

Even as Gordon worked to move black folk song in from the margins of America's folk song canon, he was not willing to depict African Americans as the progenitors of American musical forms. Although he was continually impressed by black musical expressions, he tended to depict them as having emerged out of styles that whites had originated. Of the Negro singer Gordon wrote, "Some of his [song types]—perhaps most of them—he derived in the beginning from the whites, for he is a marvelous assimilator." To buttress this theory, Gordon focused much of his early fieldwork on looking for the "white roots to black spirituals." In 1927 he concluded,

In their basic structure such songs are not distinctively negro, but white. In the white churches were sung "spiritual songs" of the identical type before the earliest date yet definitely ascertained for any negro spiritual. The negro adopted, assimilated, made over. But his basic technique, very many of his actual words and couplets, even in certain cases his original tunes, he undoubtedly obtained from listening at white church meetings. In fact he took the very name "spiritual" from whites.¹¹⁸

Even though he embraced black music, there were limits to Gordon's acceptance of racial difference.

Overall, Gordon's and Sandburg's more inclusive canon of American song illustrates how much had changed since Child formulated his academic, manuscript-derived, text-based canon of white, British ballads. But Gordon's unwillingness to credit fully blacks' creativity points to a

pattern that runs through both his and Sandburg's work: as far-reaching as Gordon and Sandburg were, each remained in some ways wedded to the traditional ways in which folk song collectors had worked since before the turn of the century. Old-fashioned aspects latent in their work in the end prevented them from moving folk song out of the insular world of academics and antiquarians and into popular culture.

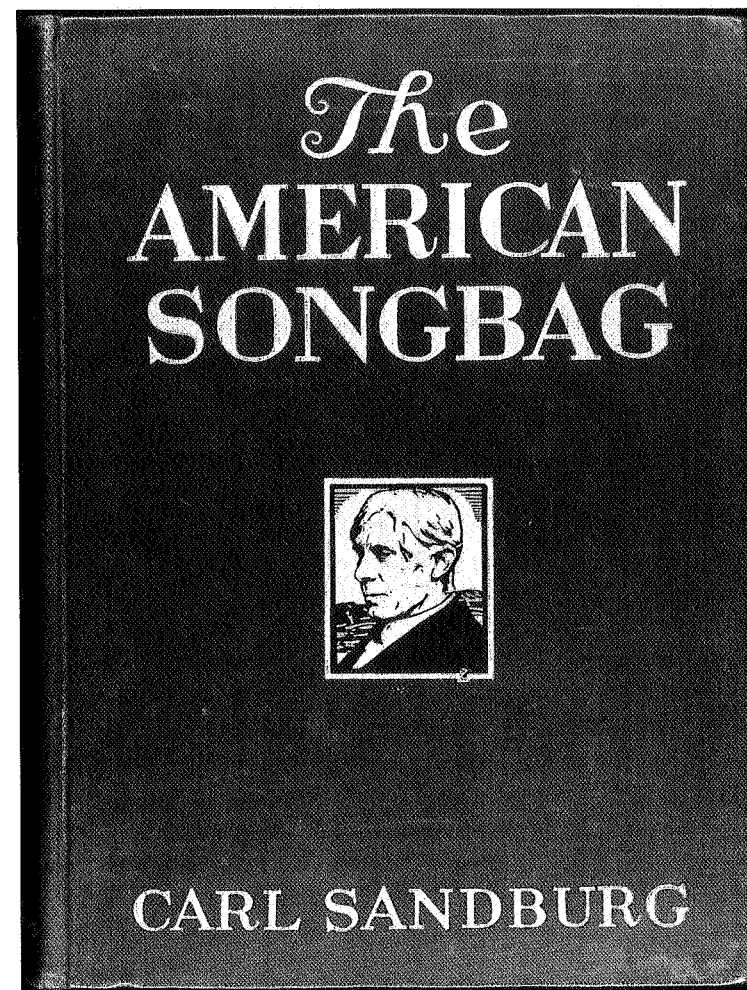
In their approach to preserving American folk songs, both Gordon and Sandburg represented a complicated mixture of innovation and anachronism. Gordon, for example, was perhaps the first collector to recognize the phonograph's potential as a tool in building a folk song canon. In a grandiose proposal to "survey the entire field" of American folk music, Gordon recognized that such a trip would be worthwhile only if he returned not with texts but with "actual phonograph recordings of the songs in the exact dialect and intonation of the singers."¹¹⁹ The future of collecting, he saw, lay with recordings because they were the only means by which he could secure a present-day hearing for the songs he collected and leave an accessible legacy to the future. Gordon's ambitious plans for his field trip fell apart, undermined by both fundraising problems and the technological limits of contemporary recording equipment, but he continued restlessly to tinker with recording technology, hoping to find "something that [was] capable not only of reproducing acceptably for an audience" but a form that would be "permanent."¹²⁰ Within a decade, after advancements in recording technology made portable recorders more feasible, the phonograph began to realize the potential that Gordon had foreseen for it.

Technological limitations and tight wallets, though, only partly account for the failure of most of Gordon's projects to get off the ground. Gordon had trouble winning backers for his far-reaching plans because he had not mastered the modern tools of promotion. Despite his avowed interest in popularizing folk song, Gordon showed a singular inability to publicize and rally support for his causes. Like Francis Child, Gordon remained oriented toward improving and expanding his collection. In his few interactions with popular audiences, such as his stint with *Adventure*, Gordon tended to focus less on sparking their interest in folk song than on gathering from them material for his collection.¹²¹ He had not grasped what Ralph Peer, as shown by his careful handling of Jimmie Rodgers, plainly had—that in a modern media culture, for folk music to gather momentum and to take on a life of its own, it needed a star. A canon based on anonymous songs and texts was too bloodless, lacking the human element that could turn a scholarly enthusiasm into a revival. Gordon treated collecting as a private obsession instead of a popular crusade.

Gordon's absorption in his own collection translated directly into difficulties as chief of the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk-Song. He arrived in Washington completely focused on using his new-found position as a salaried archivist to collect songs with the freedom for which he had yearned. As his biographer, Debora Kodish, writes, when Gordon came to the library, "he remained occupied with the same kind of research that had brought him this far. He believed he had earned the right to do things his own way" and held onto his "aims, goals, methods, and principles intact."¹²² Gordon, therefore, made no effort to put the library's bureaucracy to work for him. For long stretches he pursued his own projects on his own timetable and neither updated his superiors on his progress nor tried to galvanize his small staff. Gordon felt that the importance of his work justified such independent habits, but in a bureaucratic institution like the library, these habits began to jeopardize the very work Gordon treasured.

Although under the aegis of the Library of Congress, the Archive of American Folk-Song in its early years depended entirely on private funding.¹²³ When the Great Depression hit, funds began to dry up. The library was having trouble convincing new donors to fund the archive's work, and Gordon did little to help the cause. He almost forced the archive to forfeit a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies because he ignored the ACLS's schedule for completing a recording and photostating project. The head of the music division, out of money, frustrated with Gordon's behavior, and under the impression, rightly or wrongly, that Gordon was doing little in the archive, informed him in March 1932 that he would not be retained at the end of the fiscal year.¹²⁴

Unlike Gordon, Sandburg was a master of self-promotion. He realized that in trying to popularize American folk songs, presentation was at least as important as substance. Even though 180 out of 280 songs in *American Songbag* had been published previously by other collectors, Sandburg gave them fresh appeal by arranging them under lively headings—"Picnic and Hayrack Follies, Close Harmony, and Darn Fool Ditties," "Lovely People," "Tarnished Love Tales or Colonial and Revolutionary Antiques"—and by using an evocative writing style to place each song in a setting as vivid and dramatic as a film's. He introduced "The Midnight Train," for instance, with an image of "railroad trains hurtling with smoke, fire, and thunder across peaceful landscapes at night, rushing remorseless as fate along the iron rail pathways." To set up "Turkey in the Straw" he wrote, "On mornings when frost was on the pumpkin and the fodder in the shock, when nuts were ripe and winter apples ready for



The folklorist as media personality: Front cover of Carl Sandburg's American Songbag, 1927. (Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

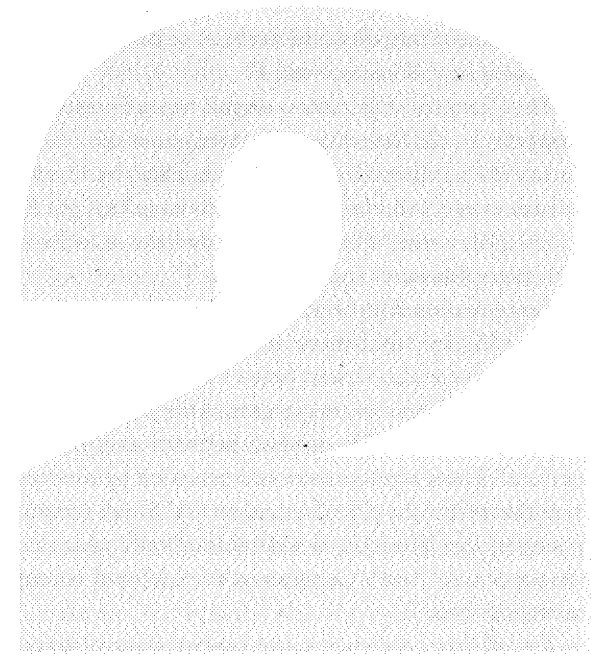
picking, it echoed amid the horizons of the Muskingum river of Ohio and the Ozark foothills of Missouri.¹²⁵

Vibrant writing alone, though, could not deliver Sandburg's folk tunes into mainstream popularity. Unlike Gordon, Sandburg seems to have realized that he needed a star to serve as the exemplar and expositor of folk traditions. He chose himself. In the steady stream of poetry, journalism, film reviews, biographies, children's stories, and songbooks he produced in the 1920s, Sandburg constructed himself as the plain-

speaking common man—the “voice of the Middle West,” said British novelist Rebecca West—who “has learned his country by heart.” He traveled the country on his lecture tours, spouting homespun yarns, poems, Lincoln anecdotes, and, of course, songs. The Lincoln biography, published in 1926, propelled him to new levels of popularity for a literary figure. In its first year, the 962-page two-volume work sold forty-eight thousand copies at ten dollars each and made Sandburg a national celebrity. Instead of recoiling from this rush of fame, Sandburg employed new image-building media to capitalize on it. In 1926 he gave a half-hour radio speech in Chicago for Lincoln’s birthday. That same year he both took advantage of the Lincoln book’s success and promoted the forthcoming *American Songbag*, by making a recording of Lincoln songs for RCA Victor.¹²⁶ Sandburg the folk song collector helped Sandburg the folk song popularizer by being folk singer and folk hero as well. When *American Songbag* came out in 1927, it did not have a quaint log cabin on its cover but a picture of Sandburg.

Although he had a sure instinct for modern publicity and promotion, Sandburg remained decidedly old-fashioned in his song-collecting methods. Unlike Gordon, he failed to see that the future of collecting pointed toward new technologies. In his methods Sandburg was still fundamentally part of the old songbook tradition. In gathering songs, he either drew on published sources, solicited donations from friends, or scribbled down notes and lyrics as he heard a folk singer sing them. Then he published his collection in a book aimed at amateur pianists. Sandburg’s 1926 recording of Lincoln songs indicates that he understood that phonograph records could enable a popularizer to reach a mainstream audience, but he does not seem to have foreseen the power recordings could have when used in fieldwork. For him, collecting remained a writing-based task. He did not realize that if field collectors pursued recordings, not song transcriptions, new possibilities opened up for popularizing folk traditions. With the unprecedented sense of immediacy that field recordings provided, audiences could embrace not just specific folk songs but the folk themselves.

By the late 1920s, Ralph Peer and the commercial race and hillbilly series, Robert Gordon and the Archive of American Folk-Song, and Carl Sandburg and his best-selling *American Songbag* had all made some inroads into America’s popular culture. As the thirties began, though, not one of them had managed at the same time to articulate a canon of American folk music, use modern technology to document systematically and preserve this body of song, and employ the techniques of modern mass communication to popularize his vision of America’s musical roots.



CREATING THE CULT OF AUTHENTICITY THE LOMAXES AND LEAD BELLY

The winter of 1932 was bleak for John Lomax. In the past year his wife had died, and, with personal distress compounded by the strain of the depression, he had been forced to leave his bank job, telling his boss that he could no longer fulfill his duties adequately.¹ Needing a fresh start, he resolved to return to the vocation he truly loved, collecting American folk music. He decided to do a lecture tour to reintroduce himself into folk song circles and to promote his *Cowboy Songs* book, which, although more than twenty years old now, had been reprinted in 1929. By the spring, after a desperate letter-writing campaign to hundreds of colleges, high schools, and clubs around the country, he had enough engagements to justify a car tour. He enlisted his son John Jr., then twenty-four, to accompany him and aid in driving, selling books, and setting up camp.² In March 1932 they left from Dallas. Following the lecture schedule Lomax had arranged, and accepting whatever new engagements presented themselves along the way, they made their way by June to New England, where they picked up Lomax’s youngest son, seventeen-year-old Alan. The three Lomaxes then embarked on a cross-country tour