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Tim A. Ryan

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TIM A. RYAN
Northern Illinois University

“A Little Music Aint About the Nicest Thing a Fellow Can Have”: Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Country Songs

EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT FAULKNER’S FICTION IS ALIVE WITH THE SOUND of African American music. In *Soldiers’ Pay* (1926), characters first dance to a blues orchestra and then listen to the singing of a country church congregation (156-59, 256), while *Flags in the Dust* (1927) includes scenes in which Elnora sings snatches of gospel numbers as she works for the Sartoris family, a blind street musician performs blues songs in the town square, and young Bayard Sartoris enlists a Negro band to serenade the unmarried women of Jefferson (560, 573-74, 638-39, 659, 664-65). “That Evening Sun” (1931), meanwhile, famously takes its title from W. C. Handy’s “St. Louis Blues,” a song most memorably recorded by the “Empress of the Blues,” Bessie Smith. Numerous critics have addressed these and other blues moments in Faulkner’s fiction.¹ H. R. Stoneback further suggests that the characters and situations of “Pantaloon in Black” (1940) derive from “Easy Rider,” another Handy song, while Jane Isbell Haynes notes provocative parallels between blues ballads about the villainous “Stagolee” and the brief scene in *The Hamlet* (1940) in which V. K. Ratliff imagines Flem Snopes defeating the Devil (349).

In light of such extensive coverage of blues elements and African American musical traditions in Faulkner’s fiction, it is surprising that scholars have said virtually nothing about a body of Southern vernacular song with which the Mississippi author is likely to have been equally familiar: white folk or country tunes—or “hillbilly music,” as record companies called it in the 1920s and 1930s. Very few of the critics who have addressed the presence of popular culture in Faulkner’s work so much as acknowledge country music, and almost none discuss it in any specificity or detail. Among the exceptions, Hugh Ruppensburg notes

¹See, for example, Thadious Davis, Gussow, Peek, Gartner, Bennett, and Ryan.

that the nomadic Lena Grove's opening statement in *Light in August* (1932), "I have come from Alabama" (3), echoes the first line of Stephen Foster's "O Susannah!" (6), while the name of Joe Christmas's first love, waitress/prostitute Bobbie Allen, invokes "Barbara Allen," an "Anglo-American folk ballad of love cruelly ended" (xii). Erich Nunn's study of depictions of various musical genres in *Sanctuary* (1931) includes an invaluable analysis of the scene in which rural people pour into Jefferson's town square and hear "ballads simple in melody and theme, of bereavement and retribution and repentance metallically sung" on radios and phonographs (*Sanctuary* 112).

These rare critical discussions of country songs in Faulkner's fiction suggest that the author's novels of the early 1930s habitually associate rural and working-class white characters with such music. No scholar, however, has ever examined specific references to country music in *As I Lay Dying* (1930), a narrative from this period that focuses almost exclusively upon the very people who primarily made and consumed hillbilly songs. Richard Gray suggests that *As I Lay Dying* has a "balladic quality" (152), but ultimately makes only the general observation that its narrative "strategy is similar to that of a folksong or ballad, in which a particular story being remembered . . . is given an additional depth and significance by the sense of the numerous other tales that lie behind it" (153). Similarly, Mark Lucas notes only in passing that the novel broadly resembles "one of the most venerable" forms of folk song, "the disaster ballad" (145).

In fact, more than any other Faulkner novel, *As I Lay Dying* is rife with apparent allusions and/or uncanny parallels to a host of country songs recorded and released in the late 1920s. No less than the fiction of Sherwood Anderson and James Joyce or the poetry of Homer and T. S. Eliot,² the phrases, scenarios, themes, philosophies, and attitudes of Southern folklore in general—and popular songs by such artists as the Carter Family, Uncle Dave Macon, and Harry McClintock in particular—pervade the tale of the Bundren family.

In addition to its echoes of specific lyrics, the odyssey of the Bundrens—as they carry the body of Addie Bundren from the remotest rural corner of Yoknapatawpha County to the town of Jefferson for burial—reflects the gender politics of folk song traditions and dramatizes country music's relationship to twentieth-century culture. No less than

²See Luce for comprehensive discussion of literary allusions in *As I Lay Dying*.

the Bundren family's journey, the history of country music embodies tensions between an enduring regional—and often patriarchal—folk tradition on one hand, and an aggressively commercial, modern, national, and potentially egalitarian culture on the other. If it used to be common for scholars to read Faulkner's attitudes toward urbanism, mechanization, and pop culture as essentially hostile, critics increasingly recognize the complex and multifaceted nature of the author's treatment of modernization. John T. Matthews, for example, acknowledges that the Bundrens are constituted by the "dialectical history of capitalist agriculture, commodified economic and social relations, and the homogenizations of mass culture," but he complicates the traditional critical consensus when he adds that Faulkner's novel also dramatizes "mass movements that put individuals in touch with the energies of progress" ("Machine Age" 74, 81).

In *As I Lay Dying*, passages detailing Cash Bundren's desire for a "graphophone"³ and multiple allusions or parallels to country songs—a genre at once old-fashioned and newfangled, escapist commodity and engagement with reality—mediate the apparently insurmountable conflicts between tradition and modernity, passive consumerism and active creativity, downhome community and urban alienation. In fact, it is not so much that Faulkner's novel tells of a family's movement from rural backwater to modern city, as some have suggested,⁴ but that it resembles instead Edward P. Comentale's vision of pre-World War II recorded country music as a genre that "adapted the detachment and dislocation of the city to advance a more dynamic version of regional life" (7). After all, in its analysis of factors that might stimulate the development of a mass rural market for phonograph records, a 1923 trade publication suggested that, in addition to resolving "isolation, lack of amusements, [and] long winter evenings with little or nothing to do," recorded music might fulfill "the need for something that will influence the children to remain on the farm" (Kenney 136-37), rather than encouraging restless modern youths to flee the country for the city.

³Regarding Cash's use of this term rather than the conventional "phonograph," see Brown 94; Luce 87; and Matthews, "Faulkner and the Reproduction of History" 67-68.

⁴Such a reading, however, does align Faulkner's narrative with one of the most popular genres of recorded song in the 1890s, in which "the 'rube' or 'hick' encounters the big city and modern world" (Kenney 32).

* * * * *

If Rappersburg's annotations for *Light in August* and Nunn's discussion of *Sanctuary* demonstrate that Faulkner was generally aware of folk ballads and country music, the precise sources of the author's knowledge of particular songs remain open to question and critically unexamined. Bonnie Allen's name in *Light in August*, for example, could have been inspired by the appearance of "Barbara Allen" in myriad folklore anthologies, or by regional oral traditions and musical shows at Oxford's Opera House (at one time owned by Faulkner's grandfather), or by radio performances and recordings of the piece by such artists as Vernon Dalhart, Newton Gaines, and Bradley Kincaid ("Barbara Allen"). At the time of Faulkner's emergence as a novelist in the mid-to-late 1920s, various cultural forms and new media were making folk songs all but omnipresent.

Soon after the advent of American radio, country music became an integral part of the nation's aural landscape. Following an initial half-hour program of square dance music in 1923, Fort Worth's WBAP was, by 1927, airing a regular Friday night country show. Then, in 1924, WLS in Chicago inaugurated what would become the National Barn Dance program, and, in 1926—the year of Faulkner's debut novel—George D. Hay, a former reporter for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* (a paper the Mississippi author read regularly⁵), proudly renamed his country show on Nashville's WSM "The Grand Ole Opry" (Malone 36, 37, 68, 72, 78). As Bill Malone notes, in these "early unregulated days of American broadcasting," such programs "were picked up by listeners as far away as New York, Canada, Hawaii, and Haiti" (36), never mind Mississippi.

If phonograph records could not compete with radio's ability to transmit country music across vast distances, they provided performances that listeners could enjoy repeatedly. The unexpected popularity in 1923 of a 78 rpm phonograph disc of Fiddlin' John Carson's unpolished rendition of "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" encouraged enterprising companies to rush "into the South and Southwest with their field units, recording almost indiscriminately any country musicians they could find" (Malone 42). A yet more significant watershed occurred

⁵For details of Faulkner's familiarity with the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, see Blotner 92-93, 164, 213, 440 and Brown 127.

in 1927 when Ralph Peer—utilizing the new electrical recording technology during field sessions in Bristol, Tennessee—made the first phonograph records of two of the most important acts in country history: the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers (Malone 62-64). Over the next five years, the recordings of the Carters and Rodgers—and those by such artists as Buell Kazee, Dock Boggs, Charlie Poole, Clarence Ashley, and the Stoneman Family—constituted a "Golden Age of Hillbilly Music," until the Great Depression all but shut down the phonograph industry for several years and, in particular, decimated the market for country songs (Malone 44, 106).

This first great era of country music on record coincided precisely with the most prolific period of Faulkner's career, during which the author established and developed his chronicle of Yoknapatawpha County in such works as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and numerous short stories, as well as in *As I Lay Dying*, *Sanctuary*, and *Light in August*. Tales of Faulkner's later antipathy to recorded music are legion,⁶ but it is probable that a man who identified "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" as his favorite song (Blotner 536), and who reputedly enjoyed listening to Bessie Smith's blues records on a wind-up phonograph (Haynes 441), also routinely encountered country songs during the late 1920s and early 1930s, whether on radio or record.

Even if Faulkner never did tune in to the Grand Ole Opry or delight in Jimmie Rodgers's "blue yodel" on 78s, he had ample opportunity to become familiar with the lyrics of traditional ballads and vernacular songs via numerous volumes of folklore that appeared during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The publication of Harvard professor Francis James Child's multi-volume *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* between 1882 and 1898 stimulated interest in traditional songs and folklore on both sides of the Atlantic. In the years immediately preceding the composition of *As I Lay Dying*, prominent anthologies of black and white American musical traditions included Dorothy Scarborough's *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs* (1925), Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson's *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), Carl Sandburg's *The American Songbag* (1927), Reed Smith's *South Carolina Ballads* (1928), Newman White's *American Negro Folk-Songs* (1928), and Arthur Kyle Davis's *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* (1929).

⁶Regarding the middle-aged Faulkner's avowed dislike of radio and records, see Blotner 1220, 1291, 1698, 1713, 1774-75 and Williamson 254.

The most significant such publication as far as Faulkner is concerned is Arthur Palmer Hudson's *Specimens of Mississippi Folk-Lore* (1928). There is no evidence that Faulkner ever joined the Mississippi Folk-Lore Society founded by Hudson in May 1927, but the creator of Yoknapatawpha County was on close terms with this University of Mississippi professor and his circle. Hudson, who taught at the university from 1919 to 1930, sometimes played golf with the young Faulkner, and—with other members of the faculty—published a humorous rejoinder to the satirical advertisement that the budding writer posted in the *Mississippian* in January 1924 offering to insure students "Against Professors and Other Failures" (McHaney 126, Blotner 350-51, 354-55). Hudson's wife, Grace, was also friendly with Faulkner, and even typed up the manuscript of his first novel (Blotner, 440; Snell 178).⁷ Other members of the Mississippi Folk-Lore Society included D. H. Bishop—another University of Mississippi English professor, who recommended Faulkner, his former student, for the position of local postmaster—and Grace's mother, Mrs. Calvin S. Brown, who was a close friend and onetime neighbor of the Faulkner family (Hudson, *Specimens* i; Blotner 250-51, 277, 279, 327).⁸

It is hardly conceivable that the inquiring Oxford author would not have learned something about local balladry and oral tradition from Hudson and his associates. Charles Peavy draws attention to the numerous references to Southern folklore in *The Sound and the Fury*, while Thomas McHaney suggests that some of Faulkner's later writings invoke passages from Hudson's 1936 collection, *Folksongs of Mississippi* (126-27), a revised and expanded version of *Specimens of Mississippi Folk-Lore*.⁹ Although there is no concrete evidence that Faulkner

⁷Blotner notes that the Hudsons later visited Faulkner during a 1951 folklore recording trip and played the author some of their tapes from the field (1389-90).

⁸Calvin Brown later penned the invaluable *A Glossary of Faulkner's South*. A 1945 letter that Faulkner wrote to Palmer suggests, furthermore, that the author remained in close contact with all three of his former professors who had been founding members of the Mississippi Folk-Lore Society (*Selected Letters* 198).

⁹Much of Hudson's material first appeared in a lengthy article in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1926, and—had it not been for the effects of the Depression—the University of North Carolina would have published *Folksongs of Mississippi* in the same year that *As I Lay Dying* appeared. Regarding the publication history of Hudson's research, see *Folksongs of Mississippi* vi-vii, ix.

perused the earlier anthology—published for members of the society just a year before the composition of *As I Lay Dying*—it is striking that one of Hudson's primary informants was a Mrs. G. V. Easley, "the wife of a farmer living twenty-five miles southeast of Oxford" (Hudson, *Folksongs* ix), which is to say, a woman whose situation and location resemble those of the fictional Addie Bundren.¹⁰

Specimens of Mississippi Folk-Lore vividly demonstrates that any given country song existed in multiple versions, and it further reveals that conventional distinctions between oral folk tradition and modern commercial culture had already become thoroughly blurred—if not largely meaningless—by the time Faulkner composed *As I Lay Dying*. Many of the traditional lyrics that Hudson and his colleagues painstakingly collected and transcribed from Mississippi informants derive from centuries-old English and Scottish ballads. That many of them also appear in Child's anthology and other regional folklore collections indicates that they had been preserved orally and transmitted fairly faithfully in numerous locations for generations. By the late 1920s, many of these songs were also widely available as modern phonograph recordings. The traditional ballad that Hudson presents as "The Wife of Usher's Well," collected from Saltillo in Lee County (13, 168), had been recorded, with only minor textual variations, as "Lady Gay" by a Kentuckian Baptist minister, Buell Kazee, early in 1928. At the same session, Kazee also performed "The Butcher's Boy," a song that Hudson's team collected in a version by Mrs. Easley (31-32, 170), and which Kelly Harrell and Henry Whitter had previously recorded in 1925. Today, anyone familiar with the *Anthology of American Folk Music*—Harry Smith's landmark collection of commercial roots recordings of the late 1920s and early 1930s—will instantly recognize the lyrics of many of the songs in Palmer's volume, including "The House Carpenter," "Our Goodman," "Charles Giteau," "Sir Hugh, or The Jew's Daughter," "Tocowa," "Poor Ommie," "Jimmy," and "Old Blue" (19-21, 17-18, 79-80, 59, 49-50, 41-42, 102). Given his background and cultural context, it is barely conceivable that Faulkner would not have recognized them too.

¹⁰This description places Easley close to Faulkner's Frenchman's Bend, through which the Bundrens pass on their way to Jefferson, although, as Luce emphasizes, the geography of Yoknapatawpha County in *As I Lay Dying* is inconsistent with that in other works (77-78).

As I Lay Dying ends with Cash imagining the Bundrens clustering around the new family phonograph, its novelty constantly renewed by a stream of mail-order records (261). This conclusion implicitly invites speculation as to the particular songs the family members will select and enjoy together. Will the avowedly luckless agriculturalist Anse find solace in “Got the Farm Land Blues,” and will his new wife, adjusting from town habits to rural ways, appreciate that musical tale of “hard times in the country,” “Down on Penny’s Farm”? How could such an avid woodworker as the eldest son, Cash, resist the lure of a record entitled “The House Carpenter”? Might not the bitterly resentful Jewel pointedly choose “A Lazy Farmer Boy” as a sly critique of the family’s indolent patriarch? Since young Vardaman desires an electric locomotive he has glimpsed in a toyshop window, will he lobby for Jimmie Rodgers’s “Waiting for a Train”? Pregnant and unwed, would Dewey Dell dare order a song entitled “Single Girl, Married Girl”?¹¹ Regardless of Faulkner’s knowledge of particular country songs, then, the customary scenarios, recurring topics, and popular verses of commercial hillbilly recordings of the late 1920s illuminate the implications of the ending of *As I Lay Dying*. Even if the author had only a passing familiarity with the country music scene of his day, Faulkner and the first generation of country recording artists produced works that engage with the same essential theme: a determinedly traditionalist South’s rapid initiation into modernity, and the effects of this initiation upon gender, family, and human identities.

* * * * *

The most explicit instance of *As I Lay Dying*’s debt to country music is that its plot—specifically its account of spousal death, burial, and rapid remarriage—is virtually identical to one stanza of a song recorded by Uncle Dave Macon in April 1926 and released on the Vocalion label that summer. The sixth verse of “Way Down the Old Plank Road” runs:

My wife died on Friday night, Saturday she was buried
 Sunday was my courtin’ day, Monday I got married

¹¹With the exception of Rodgers’s “Waiting for a Train,” all of these songs appear on the *Anthology of American Folk Music*.

Although the Bundrens take ten days to transport Addie's coffin to Jefferson for burial, and, upon their arrival, the widowed Anse secures a new wife within hours, Macon's blithe lyrics about his spouse's death and instant replacement clearly anticipate both the overarching narrative and the climactic twist of Faulkner's novel. Whether the author owned Macon's record, heard him perform the number on the Grand Ole Opry, or simply was familiar with a folk tradition that informed the song is virtually beside the point.

A passage in *Specimens of Mississippi Folk-Lore*, in which Palmer cites a colloquialism he collected from Faulkner's hometown, suggests, in fact, that Macon's coldly humorous account of spousal disposability and replaceability had a basis in broader Southern oral traditions:

An elderly lady of Oxford once related that when she was a girl a young man, now wealthy and prominent in Mississippi, who had grown up in one of the backward neighborhoods . . . proposed marriage to her in this startling native figure: 'Miss Emily, I shore would like to buy your coffin for you.' When it is remembered that in such primitive communities . . . which are harder on women than men, a patriarch often outlives three or four wives, it will be seen that the figure expresses one of the most distinctive and inevitable privileges a husband could normally expect to exercise, and that such a gruesome synecdochical offer could hardly be misunderstood by one of the native girls. (xii)

Just as Macon's song encapsulates the essential storyline of *As I Lay Dying*, the proposal remembered by Miss Emily¹² echoes specific elements of the narrative's treatment of spousal death and burial. Like the backwoodsman who became a wealthy Oxford citizen, the younger Anse is sufficiently affluent and eligible to court the town-bred Addie, boasting of his ownership of a "new house" and "a good farm" (171). Like the proposal in Palmer's story, furthermore, Anse and Addie's marriage ultimately hinges upon an arrangement regarding burial rites: years after their betrothal, Addie is careful to exact a promise from her indolent husband that he will have her buried in Jefferson (173). No less than Macon's song and the proposal collected by Palmer, *As I Lay Dying* lays bare a rural culture in which the hard lives and early deaths of women were so commonplace that courtship and marriage necessarily involved considerations of female mortality.

¹²This title and name, of course, are identical to those of the heroine of one of Faulkner's most enduring short stories, "A Rose for Emily."

What is particularly striking about the ways in which Faulkner's novel echoes both Macon's song and Palmer's informant is that *As I Lay Dying* reverses the emphases of such antecedents, wresting agency from the male speaker or suitor, and bequeathing it instead to the female protagonist. In Faulkner's novel, it is Addie, not Anse, who provides the graveyard humor and articulates an overriding concern with funerary rites. In the narrative's flashback to the couple's courtship, the woman responds to the man's clumsy overtures with mordant comedy and sharp authority. Although Anse is sufficiently provincial to be intimidated by his potential bride's urban origins, he tentatively suggests that he may be able to talk his way into acceptance by her family. "They might listen," Addie responds, "But they'll be hard to talk to. . . . They're in the cemetery" (171). By joking about her deceased kinfolk, Addie both preempts and implicitly invites the customary marriage proposal by which a man promises to purchase his spouse's coffin. Anse, however, lacks the grimly honest sense of humor, the knowledge of such a tradition, or the will necessary to make such an offer. Where the clumsy rural bachelor is capable only of awkward hints about why he has come to see Addie, the latter asks him bluntly, "Are you going to get married?" and—as she later remembers it—"I took Anse" (171).

If Addie's acceptance of Anse's timid proposal seals her into a life of childbearing and childrearing in which she is largely bereft of power or fulfillment, spousal burial obligations ultimately provide her with agency and leverage. Addie clearly has no expectation that Anse will be willing to expend resources upon the purchase of a coffin, even if it is "one of the most distinctive and inevitable privileges a husband could normally expect to exercise" (Palmer xii). As Dianne Luce notes, Anse rejects the newfangled fashion for store-bought caskets and remains committed to the pre-World War I tradition of homemade coffins (12). Anse's abnegation of this thoroughly modern duty, however, leaves an opening for Addie to dictate the nature of her funeral rites. By exacting a pledge from her husband to "take me back to Jefferson when I died," Addie enacts what she terms her "revenge" (173). Not only does she shun the Bundren plot at New Hope in favor of her old family cemetery, but she obliges the sedentary Anse to embark on a rigorous forty-mile journey, with a coffin, across flooded rivers and through the heat of July.¹³

¹³For discussion of Addie's subversion of patriarchy and revenge against Anse, see Fowler and Roberts.

Addie further emasculates Anse by having a son perform the funeral duty that the patriarch has shirked. Where the husband fails to buy a coffin befitting his spouse, Cash, the eldest Bundren son, meticulously and painstakingly builds a casket for his mother. Even as she is fading away, Addie has "her head propped up so that she could watch" through the window (23), silently supervising her son's carpentry from her deathbed to be sure "he would not skimp on it" (24), while Cash dutifully "brings each board up to the window for her to see it and say it is all right" (43). Addie thus actively participates in a process by which a son usurps the role of the father. Anse seeks to rationalize his old-fashioned and miserly attitudes when he asserts that Addie "will rest quieter for knowing . . . that it was her own blood sawed out the boards and drove the nails," but his statement also tacitly acknowledges that the son has fulfilled what was, no less than burial in Jefferson, Addie's "wish" (19).

If, however, Addie arrogates Anse's role as provider of a coffin for his spouse, the patriarch has the final say, echoing the punch-line of "Way Down the Old Plank Road," when, "kind of hangdog and proud too," he introduces his children to the new "Mrs Bundren" in the final lines of the book (261). Although Addie briefly triumphs over her husband by exploiting his unwillingness to embrace modern consumerism—his failure to buy a coffin—once he arrives in town Anse reasserts the patriarchal status quo by enthusiastically acquiring such commodities as false teeth and a new wife.

* * * * *

Even as Macon was singing with callous glee about burying one wife and marrying another, the Carter Family—one of relatively few country outfits of the era in which women played a prominent role—were recording numerous songs about female experiences in traditional farming communities and about women whose obsession with death and burial rivals even Addie's. Where *As I Lay Dying* appears to owe a direct debt to "Way Down the Old Plank Road," the novel's relationship to the lyrics of the Carters is rather more oblique. Nonetheless, whether he knew them or not, Faulkner's depiction of Addie provides startling echoes of the female-centered scenarios of the family's records. What is more, while the Mississippi author could not have been privy to the ongoing real-life drama of the musicians from Maces Spring in Poor

Valley, Virginia, the tensions between the dreamy, rambling Carter patriarch Alvin Pleasant (“A. P.”) and Sara, his long-suffering, pragmatic spouse, closely parallel the dynamics of the Bundren marriage.

One of the first songs recorded by the Carter Family—or, at least, by its female members—encapsulates the limited options and roles available to rural women. When the customarily unreliable A. P. failed to show up for the second day of the band’s inaugural 1927 recording session in Bristol, Sara and Maybelle Carter—A. P.’s sister-in-law and the group’s instrumental prodigy—laid down two numbers without him, including the pointed “Single Girl, Married Girl” (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 100). This song contrasts the life of the finely dressed single girl—who has the freedom to go wherever she pleases and to spend money on herself—to that of the married girl, whose activities are dictated entirely by the “baby on her knees.” Excluded from the liberating possibilities of consumerist autonomy because of the demands of motherhood, the married girl simply “rocks the cradle and cries.”

Sara Carter was caught similarly between a desire for freedom and her domestic obligations. As Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg’s biography of the band emphasizes, the family’s young matriarch was, at heart, a fiercely independent woman, who “hunted and fished” and “wore pants and smoked cigarettes” (61). She must have been profoundly disappointed when a record company talent scout passed on the family band at a 1926 audition simply because he was uncomfortable with the idea of a woman leading a white country ensemble (76-77). Following the group’s later successes, A. P. became master of “one of the biggest farms in the Valley,” but, to his wife’s understandable frustration, “remained one of the least interested . . . agriculturalists” (124). As A. P.’s niece recalls of her uncle, “Maybe he’d plow one row, and then he’d quit. He just didn’t have any staying power” (125). He could be equally casual in the recording studio. During the first day of the band’s 1927 session, recording engineer Ralph Peer was astounded at A. P.’s habit of wandering away from the microphone in the middle of a song. “You didn’t do very much,” he complained afterward, to which the Carter patriarch cheerfully conceded, “No . . . I just bass in every once’t in a while” (99-100). A. P. was at his happiest when freely roaming the mountains and valleys in search of songs that he could copyright and record, while “Running the house . . . fell to Sara alone” (145). Unsurprisingly, the band’s female vocalist soon began an affair and

subsequently left home with A. P.'s cousin, Coy Bays (160). In Sara's absence, the eldest Carter daughter, Gladys, had no choice but to "become—at thirteen—the de facto cook, seamstress, and hand of discipline in her father's house. 'I never had a chance to play music,' Gladys once said. 'I had to feed hogs, milk cows, and wait on young'uns'" (167).

The lyrics of "Single Girl, Married Girl" and the experiences of the female members of the Carter Family parallel the conditions against which Addie and her daughter, Dewey Dell, struggle in Faulkner's novel. During her pre-marital life as a schoolteacher, Addie suffers from isolation and an intense need for connection to others, but she comes to view marriage and motherhood not as a solution to, but as a violation of, her aloneness (*AILD* 172). Addie becomes little more than a drudge to a notoriously lazy husband who is no more industrious than A. P. Carter, being convinced "that if he ever sweats, he will die" (17), and who cares "for nothing except how to get something with the least amount of work" (22). Sara and Addie clearly could have benefitted from the example of "The Man Who Wouldn't Hoe Corn," a song which appears in *Specimens of Mississippi Folk-Lore* and was recorded by Buster Carter (no relation) and Preston Young in 1931 as "A Lazy Farmer Boy." In response to the titular character's suit, the song's female protagonist bluntly says:

You're courtin' here, you're courtin' in vain,
You lazy young man I won't entertain.
I really believe the handle of a plow
Will suit better than a wife just now. (57)¹⁴

Just as her husband's limitations drove Sara into the arms of Coy, the frustrated Addie has an affair with Whitfield, resulting in the birth of Jewel. After Addie's death, the men of the family immediately expect Dewey Dell to cook, milk the cow, and look after Vardaman, the youngest child (60), just as Gladys was required to manage the Carter household following Sara's departure. As if this were not enough with which to contend, Dewey Dell must also resolve the problem of her clandestine pregnancy. In a final desperate effort to maintain her

¹⁴Carter and Young's version is: "Why do you come to me to wed / If you can't raise your own cornbread? / Single I am and will remain / For a lazy man I won't maintain."

independent status, she—like the single girl in the Carter Family song—“goes to the store and buys,” but Dewey Dell’s attempts to control her future via the new consumer economy by purchasing an abortifacient are twice thwarted by uncooperative male pharmacists. She, like her mother before her, is destined to rock the cradle and cry.

The female protagonists of several songs recorded by the Carter Family also resemble Addie in that they cannot envision resolutions to their domestic frustrations other than death. Like Faulkner’s creation, the rural women in these texts compensate for lack of control over their lives by imagining expiration, burial, and the emotional pain experienced by surviving kin. Betrayed by a lover, the speaker of “Little Darlin’ Pal of Mine” (1928) declares that there are “just three things I wish for / That’s my casket, shroud, and grave,” a sentiment unsettlingly close to the dictum of Addie’s father that “the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (169).¹⁵ The protagonist of “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?” (1928) envisions being laid to rest in “some flowery bound retreat,” while the speaker of “Bury Me Under the Weeping Willow” (1927) embraces death and interment beneath the eponymous tree and “under the violets blue” in hopes that an errant partner “will weep for me.” Where these women fantasize about their funeral rites and hope for fond and perpetual remembrance by their bereft kinfolk, Addie uncompromisingly dictates the nature of her burial and stage-manages a funeral that—in between Cash’s broken leg and Darl’s incarceration at an institution—the Bundren men will never be able to forget and from which the family may never fully recover.

Addie’s other brief triumph is that she asserts herself from beyond the grave, her single monologue appearing in the narrative long after her physical death. Several songs recorded by the Carters following the

¹⁵A similar thought is implicit in Skip James’s Mississippi blues song, “Cypress Grove Blues” (1931): “I would rather be dead and six feet in my grave. . . . You’re just getting ready, honey, for the cypress grove.” Lindsay Vreeland has also suggested to me that the recurrent catchphrases of characters in *As I Lay Dying* suggest the convention for vernacular songs to be organized around repeated refrains or choruses. These include Vardaman’s “Cooked and et” and “My mother is a fish” (57, 66–67, 84, 101, 102, 195, 196); Cash’s “It dont bother [me] none” (196, 207, 208, 239) and “It aint [on a] balance[d]” (96, 108, 144, 145, 165); and Anse’s variations on such formulae as “No man so mislikes it” (19, 29, 30), “I dont begrudge her” (78, 117, 163), “Was there ere a such misfortunate man” (157, 163), and “I [or “We”] wouldn’t be beholden” (19, 117, 206, 207).

publication of *As I Lay Dying*—but almost certainly deriving from folk sources with a long history—similarly flirt with the idea of posthumous communication. The speaker of “Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven” (1934), for example, wishes that the telephone operator could connect her with her deceased mother, while the protagonist of the same year’s “I’ll Be Home Some Day” asks a dying neighbor to “take a message to the other side.” As with other instances in which Faulkner’s novel echoes folk sources, the emphases are reversed: in the Carter Family songs, it is the living who seek communion with the dead, whereas Addie speaks after death and to the reader, rather than to any of her kin.

If Faulkner’s narrative frequently resembles the female-oriented ballads of the Carter Family, Anse’s final triumph replicates the dominance of male artists in country music of this era. Although Addie’s chapter constitutes the novel’s memorable centerpiece, Anse—like A. P. in the studio—need only “bass in every once’t in a while” to reclaim the story. For all the traces of “Single Girl, Married Girl,” “Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone,” and “Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven” in *As I Lay Dying*, the dispassionate male perspective of “Way Down the Old Plank Road” defines the novel’s conclusion. The narrative also suggests, however, the possibility that the future lives of the Bundrens will include a more egalitarian chorus of voices and viewpoints.

* * * * *

If there are only tantalizing traces of Carter Family ballads in Faulkner’s narrative, the passage in which the Bundrens attempt to convey Addie’s coffin across a river involves what appears to be a direct allusion to Harry McClintock’s popular country hymn to indolence, “The Big Rock Candy Mountains,” recorded for Victor in September 1928 and released later that year. Where the sixth verse of “Way Down the Old Plank Road” encapsulates *As I Lay Dying*’s storyline, McClintock’s song speaks to its primary thematic concern: tensions between rural, traditional, and working-class values, on one hand, and the promises of urban modernity and bourgeois consumer capitalism, on the other.

Both “The Big Rock Candy Mountains” and the river crossing in *As I Lay Dying* invoke lower-class fantasies about a utopia characterized by endless ease and plenty. The hobo in McClintock’s song tells of a secret paradise where cigarettes grow on trees, streams of alcohol trickle over the rocks, hens lay soft-boiled eggs, and there “ain’t no short-handled

shovels / No axes, saws or picks.” In fact, the Big Rock Candy Mountains are renowned as the place “Where they hung the jerk / That invented work.” During the attempt to cross the river in Faulkner’s novel, meanwhile, Anse’s long-suffering neighbor, Vernon Tull, is reluctant to wade onto a flooded bridge, but, with gentle insistence, young Vardaman leads him by the hand into the water. Tull says that the small boy’s offhand invitation into perilous conditions is “Like he was saying about a fine place he knowed where Christmas come twice with Thanksgiving and lasts on through the winter and the spring and the summer” (139). In Tull’s mind, then, Vardaman seems to promise a trip to McClintock’s hobo paradise, or a place much like it.

In this scene, Vardaman embodies the promises and possibilities of the modern world as understood by an emerging generation, whereas Tull’s skepticism suggests older rural people’s ambivalence about the new urban consumer culture. Tull characterizes Vardaman as Anse in miniature, a boy who will grow up like his father to value leisure over work, and who seems to project a future of endless respite. However, where Anse believes in “a reward for us above, where they [rich townspeople] cant take their autos and such” (110), Vardaman apparently hopes for the kind of earthly joys enumerated in “The Big Rock Candy Mountains.” Tull’s association of Vardaman with perpetual Christmas clearly relates to the obsession that animates the youngest Bundren throughout the story: the possibility of owning an electric train set that he has seen in a toy shop window on an earlier visit to Jefferson, and which, Dewey Dell promises him, “will be there Christmas,” and “wont be sold because it belongs to Santa Claus” (250, 100). In addition, Tull recalls earlier in the narrative how his wife described Vardaman’s face in sleep as resembling “one of these here Christmas masts” (73), which—as Joseph Blotner’s gloss notes—Faulkner later explained as a reference to “comic masks worn by children at Christmas and Halloween” (266), thus further cementing Vardaman’s association with festive playthings. Although Vardaman is a chip off the old block in terms of his antipathy toward work, he clearly longs for the pleasures of consumer culture, specifically identified with the town, whereas Anse, for all his laziness, claims to fear and mistrust the encroachments of the modern world.

Although Anse and Tull are ostensibly resistant to the newfangled urban consumerism for which the child yearns, they secretly share some

of Vardaman's desires. If Anse decries the road that brings modernity to his doorstep (35-36), he promptly embraces the role of consumer in Jefferson. Equally, if Tull satirizes Vardaman's inappropriate lack of fear in the face of the flood, the boy does lead the timorous man safely across the waters, as if his serene faith in "a fine place . . . where Christmas come twice with Thanksgiving" renders him impregnable to nature's threats. Despite Tull's satirical tone, furthermore, the flood passage implies that—just like the hobo in McClintock's song—Vardaman possesses mystical knowledge about the location of a hidden paradise where lower-class people can enjoy all the forbidden fruit of modern materialism. At the very least, Tull can only envy the equanimity that Vardaman displays in these perilous circumstances, and he identifies the source of the boy's serenity as a single-minded focus upon Christmas, the time of toy trains and comic masks.

* * * * *

Between Tull's wariness of modern commodity culture and Vardaman's dreamy embrace of it stands Cash, who desires the ultimate in home-entertainment technology of this era—a phonograph—but who also worries that such a compelling luxury will fundamentally alter his identity. In this respect, Cash, more than any other character, embodies the novel's examination of tensions between old and new, rural identities and urban subjectivities, traditional producer and modern consumer.

Critics conventionally read the Bundren family's encounter with modernity, urbanism, middle-class aspirations, and consumer culture as purely corrupting, exploitative, and/or ruinous. Susan Willis, for example, suggests that *As I Lay Dying* shows how "populations that cannot be brought into capitalism as producers are assimilated at the level of consumption" (589). Cheryl Lester, meanwhile, argues that the story of the Bundrens demonstrates "the pressures and limits that simultaneously solicit and reject them as middle class subjects, while neutralizing . . . the counter-hegemonic or alternative pressure they might otherwise exert as working class subjects" (31). Kevin Railey similarly asserts that, by identifying with and aspiring to be middle class, the Bundrens succumb to a society that "enforces a trivialization of human desire, allowing people to become fully enfranchised only if they attain material appearances that make them just like everyone else" (94).

Willis concludes that the Bundrens end the novel as “a family unit that need never confront its lack of cohesion and tension-fraught relations because the steady flow of mail order records sets the rhythm of their daily life” (592).

To some extent, Cash’s story *is* that of an industrious rural producer who is corrupted and crippled by modern society, and finally reduced to passive and conformist consumerism. Cash begins the novel as a meticulous craftsman, uncompromisingly dedicated to “the olden right teaching that says to drive the nails down and trim the edges well” (234). He is also a sort of inventive country musician whose carpentry provides a constant soundtrack for the first section of the narrative. The rhythmic “Chuck” of Cash’s adze punctuates the first chapter, and the “steady, competent, unhurried” sound of his tools sawing, knocking, snoring, licking, and nailing as he builds Addie’s coffin dominates the story until the Bundrens take to the road (5, 50, 8, 9, 14, 15, 19, 46, 59, 75-76).¹⁶ By the end of the novel, after he has broken his leg, and Anse—in lieu of professional medical help—has blithely coated the fractured limb in cement, Cash’s potential for creativity is in profound jeopardy. Doc Peabody suggests that Cash will “have to limp around on one short leg for the balance of your life—if you walk at all again” (240). Despite his disability, however, Cash now looks forward to enjoying “about the nicest thing a fellow can have” (259), for the new Mrs. Bundren conveniently brings a portable phonograph to the marriage. Cash happily anticipates the regular novelty of “a new record . . . come from the mail order and us setting in the house in the winter, listening to it” (261), even as he fears that he “wouldn’t never get no work done a-tall for listening to it” (259). The family will purchase and, in an inert stupor, listen to songs—including, perhaps, “Way Down the Old Plank Road,” “Single Girl, Married Girl,” and “The Big Rock Candy Mountains”—that do no more than reflect their experiences, desires, and subjectivities. The “talking machine” stands to turn the Bundrens into mere listening machines (190), passive consumers of simulacra of themselves. In

¹⁶In his biography of folk singer Woody Guthrie, Joe Klein describes Woody and fellow musician Matt Jennings “hammering and sawing at their instruments like a pair of carpenters” (47). A saw, of course, can also be a musical instrument, and several novelty 78s of the 1920s featured saw solos, including Sam Moore’s “Mother Machree” (1921). Advertisements for musical saws regularly appeared in such publications as *Popular Mechanics* in the 1920s.

William Howland Kenney's formulation, the northern urban recording industry "extracted musical performances from white southern musicians and sold them back as industrial commodities" (136). Once a productive carpenter and quasi-musician, Cash becomes a sedentary purchaser of other people's handiwork.¹⁷

Few scholars have questioned such a conception of *As I Lay Dying*. Matthews is a notable exception, acknowledging that the tone of the novel is "predominantly regretful" in its depiction of modernity's impact upon rural society, while asserting that Faulkner's narrative simultaneously implies that "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction possesses certain powerfully liberating possibilities" ("Faulkner and the Reproduction of History" 74). Ted Ownby similarly notes that the Bundrens are able to "take refuge from their troubles in the pleasures of consumer goods" and that "Faulkner could be sympathetic and even positive about the potential for consumer culture to offer individual liberation from traditional forms of confinement" (139).

If such revisionist readings remain tentative or qualified, they suggest that *As I Lay Dying* is not reducible to a wholesale condemnation of the effects of modernity upon rural people, and that critics habitually overemphasize Cash's concerns about commodity culture while neglecting the profound pleasure he takes in recorded music (259, 261). Characteristic of the author's intricate fictional world, the novel is not rooted in either/or oppositions but provides a nuanced and multifaceted exploration of the protagonists' involvement in a complex and ongoing process of mediation between country folkways and modern influences, a process that has the potential to be both liberating *and* destructive. *As I Lay Dying* is, then, a more extensive treatment of the brief scene in *Sanctuary* in which country music on radio and phonographs pervades Jefferson's town square. As Nunn says of this passage, "Faulkner's description of the country folks' affective response to the music they

¹⁷Numerous commentators in the early twentieth century warned against the baneful effects of phonographic culture. John Philip Sousa, for one, complained that recorded music "encouraged a passive relationship to the world of music" and "transformed what he believed to be the intensely human and interpersonal world of music into a soulless machine" (Kenney 57). Critical analyses of *As I Lay Dying* commonly echo such a view of modern technological consumer culture. Lester, for example, argues that Cash loses his "social identity as a carpenter," and she reads his broken limb as an indication of "the vulnerability, atomization, and instability of his emergent material life" (39).

hear through the new forms of mass media . . . reveals a blurring of the boundaries between folk and popular, between lived experience and commodified performance” (83), and the “rural folks’ encounter with modernity is mediated through sound” (79).

Recent scholarship on commercial vernacular music also suggests that the reconstitution of the Bundrens around the phonograph has additional and more salutary implications than conventional readings of *As I Lay Dying* allow. Records and radio broadcasts had the capacity to enlarge and enhance rather than diminish rural people’s experiences of the world. As Comentale notes, “many tuned in [to the radio] for the new worlds it could reveal rather than the old one it might affirm” (108). Greil Marcus, furthermore, argues that commodified music did not transform lower-class rural Americans into passive automatons, but, instead, enabled them to experience themselves and their culture in empowering new ways: “They bought the discs as talismans of their own existence; they could hold these objects in their hands and feel their own lives dramatized. In such an act, people discovered the modern world: the thrill of mechanical reproduction” (121). “Why was it,” Marcus asks,

inexpressibly more exciting to hear a song you could hear next door or at a dance next Saturday night coming out of a box? Precisely because you could have heard it next door, or even played it yourself—but not with the distancing of representation, which made a magic mirror, and produced the shock of self-recognition. (121)

Equally, Kenney suggests that recorded musical performances stimulated “emotions, fantasies, and memories that helped Americans reenvision themselves simultaneously in different spheres of their country’s and their own past, present, and future” (xviii). As Jack Temple Kirby describes the rise of commercial roots music, “the ‘inarticulate’ southern ‘peasantry’ and ‘proletariat’ . . . had at last become articulate to everyone. . . . heard at home, nationally, and even abroad. . . . [P]aradoxically, on the threshold of its death, the old mule-powered, overpopulated rural South acquired a powerful vocality” (230).

Faulkner’s novel, no less than country music of this era, is centrally concerned with the newfound eloquence of a marginalized and supposedly inarticulate peasantry, and with their dynamic participation in—rather than their exclusion from or subjection to—the modern world. The sharp juxtaposition between the bumpkin appearance of the Bundrens to the townspeople and the complex profundity of their

determinedly modernist interior monologues echoes in Peer's description of his first sight of the Carter Family: "They wander in, he's dressed in overalls and the women are country women from way back there. They look like hillbillies. But as soon as I heard Sara's voice, that was it. I knew it was going to be wonderful" (Peterson 41).

The recordings of the first golden age of country music vividly embody the dynamic interaction between rural tradition and a rapidly changing culture. Malone suggests that, compared to the songs of Jimmie Rodgers—whose output emphasized new compositions, varied instrumentation, and cosmopolitan influences from blues to pop—the "mountain music" of the Carter Family was rooted firmly in hoary tradition, Southern conservatism, and Calvinist Protestantism (62). Despite the undeniable differences between their styles, however, Rodgers and the Carter Family made records together, and Country's "First Family" negotiated between rural roots and the modern marketplace no less than did the "singing brakeman." As Comentale points out, audiences of the 1920s considered the music of the Carters to be "smooth and up-to-date," rather than "old-timey," and heard in it the potential for "reconciliation between older ways of life and new, more dynamic modes of being" (92, 90). Zwonitzer and Hirshberg similarly attribute the Carter Family's popularity to its members' ability to "recast the traditional music of rural America for a modern audience. And like their music, the Carters themselves had to negotiate the gap between the insular culture of preindustrial Appalachia and the newly modern America" (10)—a gap similar to that which the Bundrens must negotiate.¹⁸

In light of such accounts of commercial vernacular music, Cash's trajectory involves a potentially empowering mediation between old and new. *As I Lay Dying* is not only a record of the "death knell of the pre-modern rural South" (Leyda 58), but also a portrait of the newfound "powerful vocality" of country people in the emerging age of mechanical reproduction (Kirby 230). The eldest Bundren son begins the novel as both a frustrated musician and an anachronism. Without an instrument, Cash can make only thunderous noise with his tools—just as Luster in Faulkner's previous novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, vainly tries to

¹⁸For further discussion of the negotiation between traditional and modern in the recordings of the Carters and Rodgers, see Peterson 35.

imitate the sounds of a musical saw with a regular carpenter's saw (287)—while his practice of making boards with an adze is, as Calvin Brown points out, a “type of hand-work” that “was already archaic at the time of action of this story” (19). By the book's conclusion, however, Cash, courtesy of modern technology, is able to enjoy actual music, produced by people like him, whenever he is inclined, and—partly because of the graphophone's potential to broaden his horizons—may be in the process of developing both “a more comprehensive understanding of himself and his world” and “a more flexible, imaginative vision” (Vickery 57).

* * * * *

If the formal design of *As I Lay Dying*—its sequence of fifty-nine radically subjective interior monologues—emphasizes isolation and alienation, the novel's conclusion implies that modern technology, in the form of the phonograph, has the potential to resolve the fatal aloneness felt by each of the Bundrens. Until its conclusion, the alternatives to solitude that the narrative provides are predominantly intrusive and oppressive, whether Addie's sense of her individuality being “violated over and over” by her children and husband (172), or Darl's apparently clairvoyant knowledge of his family's inner selves and secrets, which, as Warwick Wadlington notes, constitutes a distortion of human reciprocity (111). The phonograph, however, provides a way for the members of the family to understand each other more fully without threat to their privacy. Commercial recorded music, particularly hillbilly music, narrates family and social disasters, and dramatizes the collision between rural tradition and urban technological innovation, thus demonstrating to each of the Bundrens that others have endured and continue to endure both the trials of nature and the shock of modernity. Dewey Dell, for example, has no one in whom to confide about her sense of bereavement, her experience of clandestine romance, her fears about pregnancy, her sadness at having been abandoned by her lover, or her frustrated attempts to participate in modern consumerism, but the Carter Family on the Bundren family phonograph might sing again and again of these subjects, not only to the daughter but also to the father and brothers who have not encountered such uncompromising expressions of women's experiences before. In Kenney's summation, “Many women used the phonograph to give expression to a range of perspectives,

sensibilities, and ambitions that males had not foreseen for them" (89). The prevalence of haunting, incoherent voices in the Bundren home that "sound as though they were speaking out of the air about your head" at the beginning of the story (20)—the result of wind currents and weird acoustics—are on the verge of being replaced at the novel's end by the lucid and progressive voices of the talking machine.

Although the new "duck-shaped" Mrs. Bundren is seemingly less a replacement for Addie than is the mechanical graphophone she brings with her (260), this is not an entirely pernicious state of affairs. Responses to a survey carried out by Thomas Edison's company in 1921 suggest that recorded music consistently helped listeners cope with bereavement. As Kenney puts it, consumers who listened to music with which they associated departed family members "simultaneously experienced grief over the deaths of loved ones and a sense of their psychic resurrection" (9). Comentale, furthermore, describes how the "radio ousted Mother as the singing preserver of domestic life and reorganized family, furniture, and routine around its miniature dials" (106)—and much the same is true of the Bundren phonograph. Addie—who fell from urban independence into rural alienation—could not provide her children with a coherent model or viable guidelines for engaging with the modern world; commercial country music potentially can.

If any single country song most fully embodies *As I Lay Dying's* complex depiction of both the benefits and handicaps of modernity, mourning for the lost past and embrace of the uncertain future, and the replacement of the dysfunctional human mother with the inorganic pleasures of music, it is "Can the Circle Be Unbroken." This secular adaptation of a traditional hymn is most commonly associated with the Carter Family, but—although the band may have first performed the song years earlier—their version did not appear on record until 1935. Two country recordings of the song, however—one by Carson Robison and Bud Billings (a.k.a. Frank Luther), the other by Frank and James McCravy—appeared in 1928, predating *As I Lay Dying's* composition. Where these earlier renditions are now largely forgotten, the Carter version "was their big seller of 1935, and it would go on to be one of their best-known and best-loved songs" (Zwonitzer and Hirshberg 178). The song's speaker is a bereft child, who begs the undertaker to "please drive slow" because she cannot bear to be parted from her deceased

mother, just as the Bundren family, against all advice, stubbornly extends Addie's grotesque funeral procession over ten days. In Comentale's reading of the Carter recording, the dead mother represents the traditional South, haunting her children and "threatening to drag them down into her own grave" (101). Feeling betrayed and abandoned, the speaker has no choice but to take her place in the "lonely home" of the modern world (101). Yet, "while the lyrics tend toward the grave, the group itself is strangely vital, at once singing, strumming, scratching all the way home—gleefully engaged in their own music making" (100). Comentale might as well be describing the Bundrens in Faulkner's novel, pushed by Addie's departure into the alienating modern world, but gathered as a family around the graphophone to take pleasure in country songs about this singular experience.

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