Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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Part One

I MUST BE THE DEVIL’S DAUGHTER
“Country Blues,” Dock Boggs

Come all you good time people is the only way it starts. The banjo may have been playing forever — waiting for the singer to arrive, or indifferent to his presence —: a stage. Or the singer is the instrument of the (infernal) banjo. Still, it is impossible to decide whether the voice or the banjo comes first, though both does not seem to be an option. The dynamics are too irregular, too separate, for simultaneity. The third instrument, recording static, holds them together.

One or the other, the voice or the banjo, might be in a different world. Or they are not in the world together, or they are each in a world that is not this one — three worlds.

Forty dollars won’t pay my fine. The song goes around and around, insisting that it play all night (for it is always night in the song, always night when the song plays, though the song is always playing — the song doesn’t stop; we stop listening to it). Money can’t reach it, and we can’t believe the singer can reach heaven, though he sings to us from the afterworld, where corn whiskey and pretty women surround him, sweet heaven when I die. Meanwhile, before or after, pretty women is a-troublin my mind. He’s in a prison cell, he’s in a hole in the ground, dead drunk and buried by us good people, (he’s) grinning his empty grin at us. It shines through the soil we throw on his face.

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1 This cover is influenced by versions and visions of Boggs by Greil Marcus, particularly in Invisible Republic (1997) and his “Old Weird America” course at The New School.
2 transcription fails delivery: pee-ee-ee-ee-puuuuull...
3 Lee Smith’s The Devil’s Dream presents Satan’s laughter as music, played by and playing the players of the song.
4 See/hear Lou Reed’s version of Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “See That My Grave Is Kept Clean,” in which Reed plays (on guitar) the recording static from Jefferson’s 1928 record, as collected on volume three of Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music (1952). Reed’s revisitation appears on The Harry Smith Project: Anthology of American Folk Music Revisited Vol. 2 (2006).
**Trouble Songs**

*When I’m dead and buried / My pale face turned to the sun…*

The singer calls us around while he has plenty of money. As long as his pockets are full, we drink along. When the money’s gone, so are we. He’s gone too, all alone with a woman drinking to his memory:

*Last time I seen my little woman[,] good people,*

*She had a wine glass in her hand,*

*She was drinking down her troubles*

*With a low-down sorry man.*

Her trouble is a man, and she’s drinking with a trouble man, and she’s drinking her troubles, and he watches her as he de-materializes. She joins the invisible chorus of betrayal, along with a woman who promises to bail the singer out of jail, but never gets around to it before she leaves the song. We, good people, join the chorus as we leave, and we can never leave, and our voices dry up in our throats. Boggs too is both here and not here, as we are there and not there.

*If I don’t quit my rowdy ways / have trouble at my door. There it is now, Boggs’s fingernails scratching the banjo’s face, digging at the dirt scattered there. If I’d a-listened to my momma[,] good people / I wouldn’t a-been here today.* Wherever he is, we can find him in the soil of the song, that too-shallow grave we pass right through if we don’t watch our step. If we do (watch our step), that death’s head keeps nodding away at us. *Come all you good time people…*

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5 the comma makes sense, but Boggs eschews (or transcends) the comma.

6 *Got me singing yeah!* as Marvin Gaye had it (“Trouble Man”).