"Backwoods": Rural Distance and Authenticity in Twentieth-Century American Independent Folk and Rock Discourse

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Abstract

The value placed on rural musicians is a consistent characteristic of independent popular music culture, particularly with respect to "lo-fi" aesthetics. Antipathetic to what they saw as excessively industrialised and commercialised popular music, urban folk and rock fans have recurrently sought satisfaction in musics of peripheral areas that were considered archaic or "primitive," conflating musical and geographical distance. Beginning by tracing the roots of this process in Romanticism and folk revivals, I examine the cases and receptions of artists such as Roscoe Halcomb, Hasil Adkins, Beat Happening and Guided By Voices.

My recently completed PhD research (Harper 2014) has been an effort to trace a genealogy of an aesthetic within popular music discourse often known as "lo-fi." This term, suggesting the opposite of hi-fi or high fidelity, became widely used in the late 1980s and early 1990s to describe a movement within indie (or alternative) popular music that was celebrated for its being recorded outside of the commercial studio system, typically at home on less than optimal or top-of-the-range equipment. By the mid-1990s, lo-fi had become something of a genre of rock music, associated with bands such as Pavement, Sebadoh, Guided By Voices and The Grifters. The recordings of the musicians associated with lo-fi were considered by the discourse around them to have a degree of sonic and technical "imperfection" that indexed and authenticated its less commercial origin and ethos, and which was thus not just tolerated but received positively (see e.g. Diehl 1994).

But the term lo-fi and the positive reception of technical or technological imperfections in recordings both extend beyond the 1990s category of lo-fi, and can be observed as a recurring theme in twentieth-century countercultural popular musics, spanning folk, punk, indie and even electronic music, and it has its origins in long-term traditions of Romanticism and realism. Nor are lo-fi and the broader musics of which it's a part an exclusively sonic concern. Artist narratives become a key aesthetic element, especially in a discourse that placed such a high value on personal and historical authenticity. More unexpectedly, artists whose authenticity was held to

inhere in their technical and/or technological imperfection were very frequently also appreciated explicitly on account of their rural or less metropolitan origin and the consequences this was held to have for their creativity, both generally and in particular details. Thus the sonic characteristics of lo-fi and indeed indie or independent music as a whole aligned with the dimension of geography. This article hopes to highlight some of the intersections, a side-effect of my thesis research, between these two areas.

This makes sense because one of the key components of the lo-fi aesthetic is the expression or reflection of distance, often to exoticising effect. One understanding of how lo-fi works expressed in popular music discourse is that it collapses distance, dispensing with the mediation of a music industry, or that it fosters an intimate connection with the listener through its spontaneity and sonic features that suggest closeness and presence, such as room acoustic or singing so close to a microphone that it results in distortion. Lo-fi suggests an invitation into the musician's home, and as such it is often associated with terms like 'bedroom pop' and of course the concept of the 'garage,' as in garage rock. The removal of any distancing mediation between musician and listener was described by Simon Frith as a core ideology of rock that establishes an inverse relation between technology and authenticity:

> "The continuing core of rock ideology is that raw sounds are more authentic than cooked sounds. This is a paradoxical belief for a technologically sophisticated medium and rests on an old-fashioned model of direct communication — A plays to B and the less technology lies between them the *closer* they are, the more honest their relationship and the fewer the opportunities for manipulation" (Frith 1986: 266-267).

Frith notices the paradox of this relation, and it is why closeness and intimacy are not all that is going on in lo-fi aesthetics. Distance must be *established* in order for its traversal to have any significance, and lo-fi recordings maintain a precarious equilibrium between distance and presence, bringing something far away and remote into close proximity. Certain sonic imperfections associated with low fidelity can even originate from literal distance: as Adam Collis notes, the greater the distance between sender and receiver in an analogue channel of communication the greater its

signal to noise ratio, be it longer wires or more atmosphere for radio waves to travel through (Collis 2008: 32). In lo-fi aesthetics, the noise added to a signal is not meaningless, not the 'unwanted sound' it is typically defined as, but an important signifier of the distance that both musician and listener have traversed.

Typically it suggests many more metaphorical kinds of distance — historical distance, for example. Older analogue recordings have typically deteriorated over time, or in the first instance were recorded on equipment with a fidelity inferior to that of today. It even suggests distance from the influence of modernity, taste and civilisation, perhaps a kind of naive distance from norms, and one of the terms of praise regularly applied to lo-fi and similar musics was that it was "primitive." There is also a kind of distance implied by the consistent interest of many music fans in obscurity, and lo-fi recordings were both obscure in that they were not particularly famous (and thus were absent from the mainstream rejected by popular music countercultures) and because they were obscured by noises such as tape hiss, electrical hum and environmental sound. Aligning with these forms of distance, and frequently conflated with them, was real geographical distance and some of its perceived consequences.

"A Locus of Spiritual Values": Romanticism and Folk

Traversing the distance inherent in the emerging urban / rural dialectic of the West was a key interest of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Romanticism. In the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* in 1802, poet William Wordsworth, whose work often depicted rural figures in their native landscape, explained his desire to "imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men" (Wordsworth 1802: xviii). He noted that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 1802: xi) and that rural people embody this, "convey[ing] their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions" (ibid.: ix). As a result, "they who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and aukwardness" (ibid.: v-vi). Wordsworth contrasted this authentic yet awkward rural expression with that of urban life and creativity, and such relations would go on to inform even the names given to the

categories of countercultural and independent popular musics in the twentieth century as well as their aesthetic investment with greater authenticity and truth.

Throughout nineteenth-century Europe, Romanticism and realism combined with nationalism and primitivism in constructing an urgently valuable "Folk." According to Georgina Boyes, "the eighteenth-century 'discovery' of the existence and contribution of rural labor in contemporary life, [...] developing with and into Romanticism, [...] produced an intellectual climate in which the countryside and its workers were presented as a locus of spiritual values in a rapidly industrialising, urban age," as "simple, untainted, country-dwelling peasants – 'the Folk'" whose "spontaneous simplicity" opposed the "sophistication" of urban art music (Boyes 2010: 7). She explains that "the possibilities the Folk offer for the construction of cultural alternatives" supported this understanding, because "their existence as a source of 'otherness,' of a better and more natural state, offers a powerfully attractive rationale for their acceptance as fact" (ibid.: 17). The perceived decline from primitive purity in the folk revival's rhetoric was counterpoised to the growth, urbanism and perceived crassness of commercial popular music and the threat it posed to folk music.

As the imperative to collect folk songs spread from Europe to the USA, it was assumed that the primitive or archaic qualities of folk song increased in direct proportion to their geographic remoteness and relative lack of modernity. In the US, this meant the Deep South particularly. Folksong collectors John and Alan Lomax deliberately sought out locations uninfluenced by the popular music on the radio, and discovered singers such as Leadbelly in prisons. As Benjamin Filene notes, Leadbelly's rural origin and authenticity was represented in performance in New York City when, at the Lomax's suggestion, he wore cotton-picking overalls rather than the suit he otherwise preferred (Filene 2000: 47-75).

New generations of folksong enthusiasts continued to draw inspiration from the musics of the South after the Second World War, and especially in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This time, new musicians typically based in New York City or university towns sought to imitate and even recreate now-archaic popular styles of the south such as bluegrass, which they called "old time country." One of the leading proponents of the old time style were a band who chose a name that reflected the salience of their New York City location in a country context — the New Lost City Ramblers. One band member, John Cohen, expressed the city as thrown into relief

against the country when writing about a musician he had discovered and recorded in Eastern Kentucky, Roscoe Halcomb, on 1959's *Mountain Music of Kentucky*.[1] Cohen brought Halcomb to New York to record what would become the 1962 LP *Roscoe Halcomb and Wade Ward*, and drew attention to the city context of the recording at the beginning of the liner notes:

> "This recording was made in New York City when he was here to present his music in person to *the city people*. On one hand, Roscoe has been wrenched out of his own ordinary background and thrown into *the nervousness which seems to particularize the city* — and which brought out this same quality in him. Yet what are the qualities in his music that have made it so meaningful and pertinent to *us in the city*?" (Cohen 1962: 1; emphasis mine).

Cohen's comments on the imperfection of Halcomb's style bear a striking resemblance to those of Wordsworth:

> "In Roscoe's singing, there is a sophistication which derives from the unadorned, almost hare quality he brings to each songs. In terms of finesse, it is full of errors in its lack of refinements, but as a human and artistic statement, it has a brutal reality" (ibid.: 2).

He later emphasised the contrast between Halcomb and more recent, 'national' and 'commercial' styles of popular music:

> "At home, Rossie has been increasingly silent in the face of rock and roll and *the commercial music played everywhere*

[1] The liner notes reproduced photographs of the people of Kentucky, causing the fanzine *Little Sandy Review* to write 'Here are the faces of the mountain people - lank, gaunt, fierce, enduring; the very qualities of their music [...] For certainly endurance is the theme of these people and their 'hillbilly' music' (Nelson/Pankake 1960?: 17).

Many of the sources in this study of popular music discourse are relatively ephemeral publications, sometimes called 'fanzines,' which are often printed without given dates or page numbers. Where possible, all relevant bibliographic information has been provided, and where a date is not given, my estimation of the year has been followed by a question mark.

> *around* [... But] it is possible that nationally commercial homogenized and canned music may enter into the consciousness of everyone without destroying the old music — which remains as a more personal affair attached to home and ancestral traditions" (ibid.; emphasis mine).

Cohen thus conflates nationally available music, commercial music and "canned" music in opposition to more personal "the old music" — time and commercial power or compromise with space.

"The Wild Man": Hasil Adkins

It should be remembered that the commercial or non-commercial status of the musics revived by counterculture, either stylistically or economically, is entirely relative. The old time country music imitated by the New Lost City Ramblers was frequently popular in its time as a commercial product. And the early 1960s rock 'n' roll that Cohen positioned in contrast to the special value of Roscoe Halcomb became a site of similar archaic authenticity for the emerging post-punk or indie discourse just two decades later, and was even focussed on a similar geography — nearby West Virginia — in the figure of Hasil Adkins.

Adkins was one of a number of rural or smaller-town musicians whose recordings made during the 1960s, then comparatively little noticed, were reissued during the 1980s to much music press enthusiasm concerning their eccentricity — with others including The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, the Shaggs and Roky Erickson. The apparent realism of the recording medium itself served to enhance the "strange but true" exotic authenticity of these geographically distant artists, as did classically primitivist assumptions of naivety and a lack of self-consciousness on the musicians' part.

A compilation LP of Adkins's various 1960s singles, *Out To Hunch*, was released in 1986 by Norton, a new label co-founded by Billy Miller and Miriam Linna, a former member of the Cramps. Adkins had already been an influence on this New York City band who mixed punk with early rock 'n' roll and horror themes and who had covered Adkins's song "She Said" in 1981. In doing so the band's lead singer Lux Interior sang with a Styrofoam cup in his mouth throughout in an apparent

attempt to mimic Adkins's speech. As one chronicle of the band puts it (offensively), "the track features Lux affecting a convincing toothless redneck vocal by the simple mechanism of stuffing a Styrofoam cup into his mouth" (Porter 2007: 90). An indication of how the Cramps heard Adkins as well as an obscuring of his signal, the styrofoam cup served as both a (speech) impediment and a heightening of ethnic otherness. The Shaggs, too, were geographically othered by their voices — amongst the many imperfections and peculiarities located in their music by popular music discourse, one writer noted "strong New Hampshire accents" (Fisk 1980/1981?: 2).

A newly recorded follow-up to *Out To Hunch* was titled *The Wild Man*, and Adkins was repeatedly labelled as a "wild man" well into the 1990s, a term that allowed the discourse around him to conflate his rural origin, the energy of his music and a distance from social and musical norms (e.g. Lipton 1995). In the pre-colonial era, the hairy "wild man" archetype of art, literature and folklore was the 'Other' of civilization (Bartra 1994), a liminal figure originating in the forest and representing the margins of medieval society by straddling the line between civilized human and irrational beast (Yamamoto 2000: 144-196), symbolising, as Timothy Husband writes, "the abstract concept of 'noncivilization' rendered as a fearful physical reality" (Husband 1980: 5). After the medieval era, the wild man "elicited envy" because "he indulged his impulses at will and without guilt [...] the woodlands were now celebrated for their freedom from the trammels of convention and the corruption of man's society" (ibid.: 30).

As on the 1969 record *An Evening With Wild Man Fisher*, in which Frank Zappa recorded the eponymous schizophrenic Los Angeles street performer, *Out to Hunch* served as an exotic documentary of the wild man in his natural and authentic environment. As the fanzine *Fuzbrains* wrote:

> "When you talk of the roots of Rock 'n Roll [sic], you might as well include the dirt that surrounds the roots. Right in this damp, dark area is where Hasil Adkins strums out his primitive sound [...] Recorded on primitive equipment, this record is not recommended for those C.D. listeners" (Anon. 1986?).

Out To Hunch was a collection of recordings with a number of obvious lo-fi characteristics, particularly phonographic distortion and loose timing, and this review

associates them and Adkins's cultural and historical distance with dirt, blurring together the cultural and technological primitive, and the very matter of non-civilisation, in projecting a supreme authenticity.

Writers thrilled to Adkins's rural American origin in ways that many would find offensive today. John Leland wrote that one EP "sounds like authentic mountain man music, a raw soundtrack for incest and [...] bestiality. In super lo-fi" (Leland 1986: 41). Also using the dirt trope, Byron Coley, referring to a live gig, called Adkins "a cave-crawling West Virginian one-man band [...] looking like a guy you just caught with a mouthful of your best goat. Haze tore up the club with a set of primitive hunch-rock that had even the staidest dinks doing belly rubs in the dirt" (Coley 1987: 39).

Yet while in the 1980s the shocking aesthetics of punk and post-punk had given counterculture's interest in the exotic rural primitive a particularly extreme and bizarre cast, a belief in the innocence and authentic benevolence of popular music of rural origin persisted even in leading punk magazines. In *Maximumrocknroll*, the record *Mood Music* by Sins was described as: "Sleazy garage punk from San Berdoo. This is the kind of band that seems to thrive in America's non-cosmopolitan hinterlands, and it has a kind of basic honesty that is often lacking in musical centers like LA, NYC and San Francisco [...] the lyrics have an untutored quality without sounding stupid. Pick it up" (Bale 1982: ??).

"Love of the Heartland": Beat Happening

This was certainly a prevailing theme in the reception, during the 1980s, of one of the first American bands to embody what would become famous as the naive indie style — Beat Happening. Based in Olympia in the state of Washington, the band matched their simplistic musical style — they famously did not have a bassist — with playing coded as amateurish, newly archaic rock 'n' roll idioms and childish themes in their lyrics. As one reviewer wrote, sarcastically but accurately reflecting the aesthetic narratives surrounding the band, "you don't need to be able to hit a note to be a singer. That's part of the malignant adult world of pop" (Mico 1988: 20).

But again, the band's aura of authenticity, simplicity and innocence was often implied or given as the result of their social and geographical position within provincial America. Drawing an equivalence between their location and their

creativity, the same reviewer asserted that "Beat Happening work on the periphery because they *live* on the periphery, outside the recognised centres for mainstream chart resistance" (ibid.). Another drew on concepts associated with trips to the American countryside: "this little honey will make your drabbest cabin-fever dinner feel like a picnic in Friend-o gulch" (Coley 1989: 81). Calvin Johnson, the band's lead singer, was described as a "dopey bumpkin bopping about the sleepy woods" (Stirling 1988: 9). The fullest manifestation of this reception trope comes in a review which is reminiscent of the nationalist ideologies of folk music from several decades earlier:

> "They do [...] possess the heartfelt love of the heartland and all with good hearts at that. You see, it's rather difficult to describe in any way, but Calvin, Heather, and Bret are the virtual epitome of a certain type of American. The tolerant, loving, honest, fair (did I say loving?), and simple folk that composes the model American" (*Buttrag* 1988?b: 19).

In an aesthetic atmosphere such as this, it is unsurprising that a band with drums and an overmodulated guitar clearly in the rock tradition are so often described as a new authentic locus of, specifically, "folk," sometimes "folk punk" (Ingels 1984: 27). Applied to Beat Happening, the term perhaps carries connotations broader and older than those typical of the musical genre, of "folk art" and "the folk." As it was in previous decades, a key reason Beat Happening could be described as a folk inflection of punk was their geographical distance.

The label run by Johnson, K, was described as "a mostly cassette label brilliantly documenting contemporary folk music (i.e. not people that sound like Joan Baez, playing today, but a real people music for people by people)" (*Buttrag* 1988?a: 3) and as "downhome records and cassettes by musicians and non-musicians, a different kind of punk" (*Sound Choice* 1985: 11). The colloquial American phrase "down-home" implies not only, in this case, the home but a simple, unpretentious and wholesome lifestyle or philosophy of the sort associated with the rural US. The term combines both the intimacy of the home-recording context and distance, the ethnicity or locality of certain ethics which easily become aesthetics, and suggests a certain romanticisation of, even perhaps nostalgia for the family homestead and older ways of doing things, both in one's own lifetime (as a child) and in a cultural past. Another

colloquial double-meaning might be found in a term used to describe where another lo-fi act, Daniel Johnston, came from, 'backwoods America' (Bent 1988): a term echoing not only the forests of the bumpkin Johnson and of the wild man, but sounding like 'backwards' and thus suggesting primitivism and the inverse aesthetics of punk together.

"So Natural": Guided By Voices

In the 1990s, one of the bands most often associated with the height of lo-fi as a kind of rock was Guided By Voices. Again, their geographical isolation — this time in Dayton, Ohio — was seen as a major cause of their authenticity. But another unusual aspect of the band that appeared to emphasise their sincerity was their age when they were discovered — they were in their late thirties and thus, to some degree, archaic. One writer compared them to a "tribe that had no previous contact with civilization," (Meyer 1994) another said "they're so natural! They move awkwardly and exuberantly onstage [...] Catch them now, in the raw, before they're spoiled" (True 1993). The band were also regularly portrayed as working class, in opposition to "alternative glamour": "They look like guys who might come over and look at your carburettor if you pulled into an Ohio gas station" (Ross 1993). One reviewer encapsulated the sense of innocence projected — patronisingly — onto the band by closing with "bless their goddamn cotton socks" (McConnell 1994).

Beginning to unpick this image of Guided By Voices, Marc Woodworth wrote, again seeing a dialectic of town and country: "I imagine there were dark-clad Brooklynites [...] who were all too happy to champion a band of oldsters from the hinterlands [...] who made music that was an acquired taste that these hipsters could imagine they'd acquired [...] I imagine them thinking, *here are these old guys from nowhere, these amateurs, making music without once looking over their shoulders* [...] Who but a hick stuck in the wasteland could care so little for what was happening, what was allowed and disallowed, what was cool and what wasn't?" (Woodworth 2006: 64-66). Other indie bands associated with lo-fi have been described as originating from "nowhere" or variations thereon. Pavement, from Stockton, California, were said to be from 'Nowheresville' (Davis 1992), from "out of nowhere (or somebody's basement in California)" (“S” 1990?) and "from kind of out of nowhere [...] Pavement burst from some isolated cocoon" (*Buttrag* 1989?). The

expression was still in use in 2009, when one blogger sarcastically described a new lo-fi genre called chillwave: "a key element in the chillwave era was that the members of your band/project were required to be unknown/from an obscure place," and suggested that these bands consist of "Jim Nobody from Nowhereville USA" (Carles 2009).

"Elsewhere": Geography as Cultural Capital

This geographic dimension of indie rock has been observed by Ryan Hibbett as operating within and beyond the borders of the US. For Hibbett, geography serves as another marker of the cultural capital he sees as central to the category of indie rock, especially in the subgenre known as post-rock.

> "To begin with, these bands [Sigur Rós, Dirty Three, Mogwai and Godspeed You! Black Emperor] are geographically marginal — from Iceland, Australia, Scotland, and Canada, respectively — and thereby dislocated from the British-American rock tradition. As with other types of music — for example, country and rap — regional identification contributes in indie rock to the formation of meaning and value. Unlike these others, however, which boast firm roots in centralized locations (Nashville; East/West Coast), indie rock is perpetually in search of an artistic 'elsewhere'; from Athens to Seattle, from the unlikely 'factory-belt' origins (Belleville, Illinois) of Uncle Tupelo to Glasgow, indie fans are quick to drop one 'scene' in pursuit of the next" (Hibbett 2005: 64).

It might be added that the majority of the newspapers, magazines and other bodies that produce indie rock's discourse are based in cities like New York City, London and Berlin. And the international extent of the geographically marginal was also an aesthetic component of independent music in previous decades. During the 1980s, the New-York-based *Option* magazine, for example, became fond of the British pop duo Cleaners from Venus, who saw comparatively little reception in their native UK. Indeed, the independent music discourse of the 1980s had a considerably more

internationalist outlook than the indie rock discourse that succeeded it, largely because much of its aesthetic investment lay in the sheer variety of less commercial musics that were available.

But as we have seen, on many occasions it was when a particular image of geographical distance and its sonic consequences could be reflected in the music and its presentation that recordings were particularly acclaimed. The imperfections of lo-fi were matched and paralleled by differences in geography that in turn were held to index distance from commerce and modernity. Thus narratives of geographic distance and isolation — from "the city" particularly — supported judgements of high authenticity and value. Yet it was hardly an equal power relation — the geographic marginality of lo-fi musicians was often held by urban audiences to attest to a primitivism and archaism, inferiorities that were often caricatured in (re)performance — recall Leadbelly's cotton-picking costume or the styrofoam cup meant to replicate Hasil Adkins's accent. Even as it was brought to the ears and cities of its fans, lo-fi was imagined to speak with a localised accent — it was the noise that intervened in its signal and that authenticated both place and its distance.

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