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## I've Always Been A Rambler: An Exploration of Authenticity in Contemporary Folk Music

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I've Always Been A Rambler: An Exploration of Authenticity in Contemporary Folk Music

Senior Project Submitted to  
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by  
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While this project is the product of only a semester's amount of work, and is shorter than a traditional research-based Senior Project, I have still put copious effort into it, and put it forward proudly.

## Introduction

There is no unique angle from which to approach writing about folk music; the term may be approached in countless ways, broadened and narrowed to fit the aspect of folk intended to be studied. Even American folk music studies, itself a subcategory of folk studies, is influenced so extensively by the many different cultural groups that constitute America that there are subcategories devoted to studying regional varieties of folk music. As ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl writes in *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction*, “The United States...is a vast system of interlocking, interacting networks, superimposed on a basic Anglo-American cultural foundation.”<sup>1</sup> This basic structural foundation is broad enough to continuously be flexible and reinterpretable. Nettl states that while the folklore of many cultures is represented in American folk culture, their individual functions have shifted and merged greatly over the past three hundred years. American folk culture is an exemplification of the metaphor of the United States as a melting pot: a new common culture is formed from pieces of other cultures. This perception is an oversimplification of a process that has been affected profoundly by complex power dynamics and systems of oppression. Nonetheless, the result is an intricate confluence of many bodies of folklore.

Another unique trait of United States folk music is its newness; Nettl writes: “Unlike European folk culture, which dates back more than a thousand years, America’s folklore is young. The colonial period of the seventeenth century is the starting point for American traditions, marking the transplantation of European cultures to the eastern seaboard.”<sup>2</sup> While

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno Nettl and Helen Myers, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction*, 3d ed, Wayne Books ; WB41 ; Humanities (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Nettl and Myers, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction*, 17.

again, United States folklore has numerous deep roots, it is unique in that its origin as an individual culture can be pinpointed to a brief period of time. Thus the commonly accepted notion of folk culture being inherently and exclusively old, to the point of timelessness, is not entirely applicable to the United States. There is no direct answer to the question of at what point its folk culture became its own creature – the true nature of all folk culture is constant evolution, and while nothing can become entirely removed from its influences, its methods and aesthetics will continuously mutate as long as practitioners and studiers of its canon exist.

As culture learns from itself and evolves, practitioners of artistic movements can get caught in the wake of change. Folk culture developed a strong aesthetic and musical framework in the first half of the twentieth century; in our current musical landscape, many artists draw directly from this framework, to varying degrees of success and popularity. The bulk of this project will be concerned with the folk musician Frank Fairfield, an ‘old-time’ folk musician born in 1986, who became known in various folk circles in the early 2010s. Fairfield, a vocalist who also plays guitar, banjo, and fiddle. Fairfield achieved a moderate level of acclaim culminating in an NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert, as well as a vocal and musical role on the Cartoon Network miniseries, *Over the Garden Wall*, and has been a frequent topic of discussion in online folk music communities. Fairfield was often both acclaimed and criticized to equal measure for his unique vocal affectations, Kaufmanesque constructed character, and Scruggs/three-finger style<sup>3</sup> of banjo fingerpicking. In mid 2015, around the premiere of his Tiny Desk Concert, Fairfield posted a lengthy status on Facebook announcing his retirement from not only

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<sup>3</sup> Three-finger style is also referred to as Scruggs style, after the stylistically influential bluegrass musician Earl Scruggs.

the music business, but from playing music in general. In this post he alluded to the soulless nature of being a professional musician and a public figure; he also alluded to the meticulous discussion of his techniques and character on Banjo Hangout, an online forum dedicated to banjo music and culture. While he rescinded the response after a handful of years (the post has been deleted and is only available embedded in a comment on a since-archived discussion on Banjo Hangout) and occasionally releases music and performs, his response showed a unique sensitivity to a type of criticism that one would generally expect to be far removed from an artist's awareness. In this project, I want to explore Frank Fairfield as both a 'failed experiment' in reviving the aesthetics and cultural dynamics of folk music, and a unique figure who engages in dialogue with his fanbase, closing the fan-performer gap that has become standard in the modern music industry. Through this reading, I will more broadly explore the ways in which folk culture has been subsumed by the culture industry, and how its ideology has carried through past its original aesthetic trappings.

## Part 1: Defining 'Folk'

The broadness of the term 'folk' necessitates us to narrow our definition. Even within the realm of folk music studies, there are many approaches. Nettl writes that Western scholars have approached the definition of folk in two distinct manners: defining based on the composition and "stylistic features"<sup>4</sup> of the music in question, and defining based on the groups that created said music. The former approach can be flawed, because methods of folk composition can be easily replicated by trained musicians and academic sources, which complicates the latter approach. Inversely, folk compositions have informed art music since its origins; in his article, "Folk Music, Art Music, History of Music," musicologist Bence Szabolcsi posits that although as bourgeoisie society developed, the division between villages and towns was widened, it would be impossible for the origins of each canon to not be informed by each other, simply due to cultural dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Thus, folk music and art music have a mutually informative relationship, and their differences are focused upon much more than their similarities.

There is a perceived standard that not only must folk musicians be untouched by classical or academic teachings in order to be authentic, but also that hardships in one's life even unrelated to their musical training are necessary in order to produce authentic folk music. This standard reaches beyond folk music circles; it can be seen in various cases of rock musicians and rappers whose work is valued based on their personal mythology of hardship. This can result in musical artists constructing artificial personal backstories, identities, and mythologies. The Rolling Stones are a popular example of a band that has become to to be perceived as working class, due

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<sup>4</sup> Nettl and Myers, *Folk Music in the United States*, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Bence Szabolcsi, "Folk Music, Art Music, History of Music," *Notes* 21, no. 4 (1964): 504, <https://doi.org/10.2307/894544>.

to the gentle construction of this image by the band-members, through imagery, lyrical content, and interviews. American music journalist Robert Christgau writes in an essay on his personal website:

[Mick Jagger] was attracted to music of a certain innocence as only a fairly classy--and sophisticated--person can be...not only weren't [The Rolling Stones] poor boys when they played [Prodigal Son<sup>6</sup>], they never had been--except voluntarily, which is different. Only two of them--bassist Bill Wyman, the son of a bricklayer, and drummer Charlie Watts, the son of a lorry driver--came from working-class backgrounds, and both were improving their day-job lots dramatically by the time they joined the Stones. The other three, the group's spiritual nucleus through the scuffling days, were in it strictly for the art.<sup>7</sup>

Christgau suggests that vernacular music such as folk or rock and roll is only perceived as innocent by those who are able to exist above or outside of it. While the Rolling Stones were not wealthy enough to be born into industry connections, a certain level of comfort existed that allowed the band members to romanticize the simplicity of blues and rock and roll. The divide between trained and untrained, or to be more specific, classically trained or vernacularly trained, is one dichotomy through which vernacular music is studied. Another dichotomy is demonstrated with the Rolling Stones: a class-based cultural divide.

Folk culture has a history of being appropriated by the institution – the term ‘fakelore,’ coined originally by folklorist Richard Dorson in the 1950s, is used to describe media and stories that are manufactured but portrayed as authentic. While this term is used primarily in reference to folk culture as a whole, and is often applied to folk heroes and figures, it is a useful concept to describe the phenomenon of powerful entities using the aesthetics and tropes associated with

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<sup>6</sup> A song on the Rolling Stones' tenth album, *Beggars' Banquet*, released in 1968. The lyrics include the noted line: "What can a poor boy do/ Except sing for a rock and roll band?"

<sup>7</sup> Robert Christgau, "The Rolling Stones," Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics, n.d., <https://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/music/stones-76.php>.

folklore to further their political or capitalistic agendas. Another aspect of the term is the sanitization of previously existing folklore, or reconfiguring of its messaging. This phenomenon is apparent when examining musical artists that have been put forward in various cultural spheres in the past three decades.

If folk exists in opposition to formal/art music, then it can be defined as informal and vernacular. The term 'vernacular', defined by Merriam-Webster as "the mode of expression of a group or class," is also often used as a synonym for folk. Folklorist Archie Green explores the term in his article, "Vernacular Music: A Naming Compass":

Some critics find vernacular music to be an imprecise marker in that it stretches to touch urban and rural settings, popular and esoteric genres, time-tested and emerging traditions. Others like such ambiguity; they seek formulas that integrate folk and popular wares, that remove fences between community-based and professional performers.<sup>8</sup>

This statement comes in response to a claim that use of the term 'vernacular' is impossible to separate from a constructed dualism between vernacular and non-vernacular, i.e. highbrow or elite culture. If 'vernacular' only exists in opposition to what it is not, is 'folk' any different? Folk can be defined in contrast to formal or art music, but also through the way in which it is disseminated. The discussion of dissemination of media will be helpful when examining how the ideologies of folk culture have evolved over time.

Music is at its core a time-based performance art, without inherent physical form. Thus, it needs secondary systems to allow for commodification. This is achieved through physical recordings and reproductions, as well as through systems that allow the commodification of ephemeral cultural objects. The most basic Marxist definition of a commodity is "an external

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<sup>8</sup> Archie Green, "Vernacular Music: A Naming Compass," *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (1993): 35–46, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/77.1.35>.

object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind”<sup>9</sup>, which can be exchanged for other external objects. Commodities are comprised of both the material used in their production and the labor that is expended for its creation. Commodities can refer to physical objects as well as ephemeral objects and concepts; this is expanded upon greatly by Theodor Adorno in his discussions of the culture industry, which will be introduced later on in this project.

The buying and selling of music is a relatively new phenomenon, with musical instruments becoming mass-produced around the end of the 1800s, alongside sheet music, piano rolls, and later phonographs and cylinders. Thus, music functions uniquely as a commodity. Ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor writes in his article, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” that music as a unique entity, and the objects that facilitate the transmission of music (instruments, tape recorders, file-sharing software) exist as separate commodities, but their commodity statuses depend upon each other. “Music does not sit around exuding commodity status—it has to be *commodified*, and in ways that are different than other commodities, such as, say, corn or iron”.<sup>10</sup> This is realized by technologies that allow the materialization and subsequent reproduction of musical performances. Through these means, ephemeral musical moments can be replicated and re-consumed in ways similar to other forms of media.

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<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx and Ben Fowkes, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 125.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 2 (2007), 283.

Performances that were at one point unique to their individual events were able to be replicated in an increasingly accurate fashion. Taylor uses the example of the player piano as the first widely-disseminated attempt at recreation of these performance processes: “The final phase of development of player pianos was marked in the mid-teens by the "reproducing" piano, which played rolls that had been "recorded" by musicians, preserving the nuances of a live performance... composers availed themselves of the opportunity to make rolls for these instruments.”<sup>11</sup> Player pianos were soon seen as a status object for middle-class Americans, frequently advertised to multiple demographics. The physical and emotional benefits of owning a player piano, and thus having access to ‘recorded’ music at all times, were lauded.

The ideology of abundance, which translated to (and continues to be translated to) other forms of media replication, is referred to by Taylor as “the democratization of availability.”<sup>12</sup> He argues that this ideology worked strategically to market and sell more media players, solidifying the performance as an able-to-be-captured commodity. In his lecture on Adorno and the Culture Industry, Professor Gordon Welty explains the concept of commodity fetishism: “The consumer is paying, not for the product but for the packaging.”<sup>13</sup> While this is a simple explanation of a complex idea, it is essentially accurate; as cultural commodities become more and more widespread, they begin to lose their ‘aura’ (A term coined by media theorist Walter Benjamin referring to the unique quality of an original piece of artwork). In order to maintain the value of these objects as they are replicated, the value of their aura is supplanted with the value of their

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” 285.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, “The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of ‘Mechanical Music,’” 289.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon Welty, “Theodor Adorno and the Culture Industry” (Lecture, Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio, March 1984).

‘packaging,’ or their identity-forming significance. The term ‘culture industry’ refers to this widespread process of applying the commodity equations of capitalism to works of art.

In Theodor Adorno’s essay, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” he explains that music is able to psychically stimulate its listeners: “The delight in the moment and the gay façade becomes an excuse for absolving the listener from the thought of the whole, whose claim is comprised in proper listening. The listener is converted, along his line of least resistance, into the acquiescent purchaser.”<sup>14</sup> Music has the opportunity to be both pacifying and inflaming; under capitalism the inflaming aspects of music are subsumed by the pacifying aspects, which are emphasized and employed to assist with its commodification. Adorno goes on to remark that “In capitalist times, the traditional anti-mythological ferments of music conspire against freedom, as whose allies they were once proscribed.”<sup>15</sup> This process is exacerbated by the relatively new ability to record and duplicate musical performances.

Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the concept of ‘aura’ is skewed towards the visual; there is a clear divide in media theory between the visual and the aural. In his article in *The Sound Studies Reader*, Jonathan Sterne outlines what he sees as the clichéd way in which hearing and vision are traditionally juxtaposed. Some examples: “hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective...hearing places you inside an event, seeing gives you a perspective on the event... hearing is a primarily temporal sense, vision is a primarily spatial sense.”<sup>16</sup> Essentially, to hear is

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<sup>14</sup> Theodor W Adorno and J. M. Bernstein, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” in *The Culture Industry*, 1st ed., 1981, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno and Bernstein, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” 32.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–17.

to be immersed, to see is to be observing from the outside. While Sterne finds this dichotomy to be reductive and problematic, it is worth keeping in mind even simply because it has thoroughly permeated the world of sound studies. Musicologist Tia DeNora writes in her article, “Music and Self-Identity”:

Music moves through time; it is a temporal medium. This is the first reason why it is a powerful aide-memoire. Like an article of clothing or an aroma, music is part of the material and aesthetic environment in which it was once playing, in which the past, now an artifact of memory and its constitution, was once a present.<sup>17</sup>

It is true that music is temporal, and it is true that the structure of a piece of music outlives its recording conditions, but how does the recording and the collection alter one’s listening experience?

The commodification of art and creation of mass media has led to a stagnation in the evolution of aesthetics. As cultural and artistic movements get swallowed up and reproduced to serve capitalism and the culture industry, folk music stands out because it is inherently revolutionary – it is vernacular, of the people. However, customary for an artistic movement, it has extensive aesthetic connotations, that have self-referenced and evolved over the past century or so. As stated previously, folk has many meanings; academically it generally refers to traditional or vernacular art and tradition, not specific to a certain ethnic group or culture. Colloquially, in the US, it more often refers to the genre of generally American music associated with acoustic instrumentation, emotional lyrical content, and generally left-leaning politics. The word ‘folk’ is vague enough to have branched off in countless directions. While the first entries into the mainstream body of folk music were explicitly pro-union, seen in the works of Pete

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<sup>17</sup> Tia DeNora, “Music and Self-Identity,” in *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, ed. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynebee (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006), 141–47.

Seeger and Woody Guthrie, folk music later earned strong communist connotations during the early Cold War due to artists' explicit political messaging and communist sympathies.

The genre signifier, “folk,” being morphed and removed from its original meaning and connotations is seen overtly in Christopher Guest’s ‘mockumentary’ film, *A Mighty Wind*.<sup>18</sup> The film, which is about a reunion of three folk music groups, each managed by a recently deceased music producer, heavily satirizes the culture of contemporary folk music that has become subsumed by elitist trappings. The performances in the film feature traditional instruments and “traditional” songs, but are choreographed and staged in a way that removes the non-hierarchical communication/participation element of the informal gatherings traditional to the dissemination of folk music. In this film, folk music is organized and performed in ways that directly mirror and satirize the traditions of Western art music. The final performance, a memorial concert, features each band performing in a large concert hall, the stage decorated with large wooden representations of traditional folk instruments and New York City landmarks. Each musical group is shown devoted not only to their playing, but their visual languages as well (one gag in the film shows that the only original member of The New Main Street Singers, a resurrected ensemble, holds a guitar onstage but never plays it). The lyrical content of the songs performed<sup>19</sup>, written to parody various successful folk acts of the time, is largely concerned with romanticized images of camaraderie, romantic love, and folk hero mythology.

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Guest, *A Mighty Wind* (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> The lyrics of the songs “Old Joe’s Place,” ostensibly by The Folkmen, and “Never Did No Wanderin’,” by The New Main Street Singers, are respectively concerned with the camaraderie of gatherings and the difficulties of living a solitary life.

In order for a genre or movement to truly take hold commercially, its political message must be diluted, or incorporated into its branding or packaging. Woody Guthrie's well-known phrase painted onto his guitar in the 1940s, "This machine kills fascists," has become an example of this commodification (stickers, enamel pins, and even replication guitars and banjos featuring the phrase are widely available for purchase). Other prominent examples of this phenomenon occurring in the world of folk music include the proliferation of cheaply made record players designed to vaguely resemble older products. Crosley, an audio electronics manufacturing company established first in 1921, and reincarnated in the mid-eighties, began producing turntables in 1992.

Self-described on their webpage as "one of the biggest manufacturers and trendsetters of the new-millennium Vinyl Resurgence"<sup>20</sup>, Crosley's products take vague visual inspiration from slightly worn everyday objects, often encased in leather or faux-wood. Their lower-end models often more directly resemble briefcases and musical instrument cases. In product descriptions, they are often referred to as 'retro' or 'vintage,' the descriptions generally not elaborating. In the latter half of the past decade, Crosley has released a line of turntables exclusive to lifestyle retail brand Urban Outfitters, cementing their status as lifestyle objects. All of the above examples serve to exemplify the tenets of 'fakelore' that I have defined above.

I will continue this project by exploring Alan Lomax, Woodie Guthrie, Pete Seeger and other key figures in publicized folk music. I will then move onto more contemporary artists, those who are both accepted as 'folk' and not, in order to examine the ways in which folk culture

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<sup>20</sup> "About," Crosley Radio, n.d., accessed April 12, 2021.

is upheld, altered, and transformed. As previously stated, I will focus on contemporary folk musician Frank Fairfield.

A key text in this thesis will be author and artist Henry Adam Svec's *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, which is concerned with the ways in which the function of folk has evolved and can evolve over time. An ideologically informing text throughout my research process was Michael B. MacDonald's article, "Foucauldian Genealogy of Folk as The People and Aesthetic Multitude," which explores folk music's ultimate function as "...local, independent, and socially responsible cultural expression."<sup>21</sup> MacDonald argues that this function should and can be transposed onto any act of musical or artistic expression, beyond the reductive genre title. As the aesthetics of folk music are subsumed by the culture industry, it is important to recognize its unifying and revolutionary beginnings.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael B MacDonald, "Foucauldian Genealogy of Folk as The People and Aesthetic Multitude," *Counterpoints* 475 (2016): 31.

## Part 2: Documenting and Archiving Folk Music

Much has been written and said about Alan Lomax's place as a preserver of authenticity, or as the person who brought the many splinters of folk culture into the eye of the public. In terms of image, self-stylized or otherwise, he is a collector, a preservationist. In the American Folklife Center's<sup>22</sup> biography of Lomax, he is introduced as a "...folklorist and ethnographer, [whose career consisted of] collecting, archiving, and analyzing folksongs and music in America."<sup>23</sup> His practices have become pseudo-mythological; not unlike fictional heroes of American folklore, he spent his lifetime traveling the American south and Midwest, documenting images and stories with his camera, and capturing folksongs with disc and tape recorders. His use of technology to record and archive evolved as the technology did, and as of 2012 his collections of recordings have been digitized and are available online. He conceived of this availability before it was enabled by the internet; he conceived of a 'Global Jukebox,' a system of storing and sharing multimedia recordings that could be available to anybody, anywhere in the world. While his health declined in the 1990s, and he passed away in 2002, this concept was realized by the organization that he founded, and a 'Global Jukebox' does exist in the form of a free-to-access website<sup>24</sup>. Lomax's practice, and his conception of the dissemination of cultural artifacts and information, is both celebrated and held to scrutiny throughout academia.

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<sup>22</sup> A research center, and an offshoot of the Library of Congress.

<sup>23</sup> "Alan Lomax Biography," The American Folklife Center, n.d., <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/alanlomaxbio.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "The Global Jukebox," The Association for Cultural Equity, n.d., <http://www.culturalequity.org/resources/gjb>.

Henry Adam Svec begins his book with the claim that Alan Lomax and his recording and dissemination of folk music represent a technological genesis for the practice and genre of field recording. “Sound recording allowed for the inscription of signals that the alphabet could not encode, including the noises of bodies”<sup>25</sup> (Svec 33). Though the disclaimer that his field recording practice does display a “racialized primitivism” in its valuing of the field recording as purest spiritual conveyance is given, this racial notion of the ascended Other is intertwined with fascination with “those who appeared to be outside of modernity.”<sup>26</sup> Here we can see the beginning of a notion of authenticity in relation to folk music and aesthetics developing: Lomax sought not to recontextualize these folk practices into modernity, but to preserve and encapsulate them as purely as possible. Lomax’s connection to the tape recorder and the loudspeaker speak to notions of cyborg theory; Svec cites numerous examples in which Lomax refers to his technological practices/companions as kin, lovers, brides. He is also cited as referring to himself as a “suction pump,”<sup>27</sup> a faceless intermediary between the non-textual folk practice and the Western archive.

It could be argued that the archive or collection is detrimental to the preservation of the systems of learning employed in folk culture, with its traditions of oral transmission of information. These traditions are beneficial to its ability to slowly evolve – with a fixed image easily accessible in the archive, folk music becomes trapped in time. Contrarily, the empowering aspects of preserving cultural information could also be argued, as it represents actions against

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<sup>25</sup> Henry Adam Svec, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, Recursions: Theories of Media, Materiality, and Cultural Techniques (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Svec, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> Svec, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, 39.

the dissolution and assimilation of cultural practices. Both arguments have their proponents, and neither is fully truthful, but both arguments rely on The Archive as an acting force, one that is consistently in dialogue with the cultures whose information it stores.

Ursula K. Le Guin presents an interesting speculative evolution of the archive in her fictional textbook and anthropological record, *Always Coming Home*. In this novel, which documents a people known as the Kesh, who exist in a distant future; this future is distant enough that the traces of our contemporary society are few and far between, and are seen as a deviation rather than a norm. The Kesh people, a non-industrial culture who have a decentralized sociopolitical structure, find no value in the physical preservation of cultural objects; oldness does not have an analogous relationship to importance. Existing alongside the Kesh is a self-maintaining network of computers, implied to be a self-actualized evolution of Le Guin's perception of the internet<sup>28</sup>. This network, known in the book as the City of Mind, is composed of its collection of information, and its purpose is to continue to exist: "Its observable activity was entirely related to the collection, storage, and collation of data, including the historical records of cybernetic and human populations back as far as material was available."<sup>29</sup> While exchanges between the human population and the City of Mind are rare, they are mutually beneficial to each society's operating goals: the City is able to continue documentation of information, and the Kesh are able to extract vital information if necessary. The City is somewhat

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<sup>28</sup> The book, published in 1985, nonetheless predicts the mutually beneficial relationship between humanity and information-sharing technologies; one cannot exist without the other.

<sup>29</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin et al., *Always Coming Home*, California Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 150.

of a metatextual commentary on the anthropological and archival process; in the chapter of the novel that explores it, a Kesh archivist is interviewed:

‘...The City’s freedom is our freedom reversed...The City keeps. It keeps the dead. When we need what’s dead, we go to the Memory<sup>30</sup>. The dead is bodiless, occupying no space or time. In the Libraries we keep heavy, time-consuming, roomy things. When they die we take them out. If the City wants them it takes them in. It always takes them. It’s an excellent arrangement.’<sup>31</sup>

Le Guin’s extrapolation of the archive is telling of its present state and how it engages with a linear understanding of time. As the archive becomes less and less physical, its nature changes, but there will always be some sort of distinct difference between a moment and its preservation. It is worth asking: how does The Archive transform, deform, or evolve the material stored within it?

To a contemporary folk musician, the distortion present in one of Alan Lomax’s recordings, strongly apparent now compared to current recording technology, is just as much a hallmark as the actual musical and lyrical content. One might remember hearing a recording of Lead Belly<sup>32</sup> – then is the recording, complete with distortion, what produces the memory artifact? Distortion as an artistic choice is factored into much of contemporary music, and has been discussed at length. It factors into our discussion of folk music primarily because as the aesthetics of folk are reproduced commercially, degradation, timelessness and nostalgia are factored into its reproduction more so than its sociopolitical function. Here is where the question

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<sup>30</sup> The terminal through which the network is accessed and with which it is interacted.

<sup>31</sup> Le Guin et al., *Always Coming Home*, 152.

<sup>32</sup> A Black folk and blues singer; one of Lomax’s primary subjects of documentation.

of authenticity surfaces again. What constitutes an authentic reproduction? Svec writes on Lomax,

[he] was concerned with ‘the folk’ and the most faithful means by which it might be documented, transmitted, and fed back into itself...he figured the centralized, corporate mass-media system of his time as a monolithic and polluting force, but he tried to effect a hybrid reversal of this unidirectional flow by recording folk music with top-of-the-line technologies and then relaying the documents back to both mass audiences and the folk themselves via radio, film, and even the personal computer.<sup>33</sup> (Svec 32)

Svec goes directly onto question “What kind of information is important in a folk song? What counts as informational? Is it the notes, the words, or is it something deeper, something corporeal...?” (Svec 32). Lomax’s notion, that music was comprised just as much of what surrounds it as how it is notated, can be transposed onto his archival recordings; the information present in the static of Lomax’s tape recorder is an experiential signifier as well. While Lomax was notably interested in documenting the context of the singers and musicians he recorded, through storytelling and photography, the unintentional artifacts in these recordings are just as telling of context.

In order to examine the role of folk traditions and aesthetics in contemporary popular culture, it can be helpful to also examine country music, a genre that refers to a parallel evolution from the same sources as contemporary folk music. Country music differs from folk music in that it has been coopted and aestheticized differently by the culture industry. Country music, according to musicologist Christian Schmidt, “...thrives on its self-conscious distance from the perceived artificiality of popular culture and aims to establish itself as the true music of the

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<sup>33</sup> Svec, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, 32.

common American folk.”<sup>34</sup> While folk music evolved to be primarily a political vessel, country music consisted more of narrative-driven songs. Realistically, there is very little difference between the two genres, and no difference in origin. However, country music has unique cultural connotations, and has gathered generally conservative and rightist political affiliations, as opposed to the leftist affiliations of folk music. I bring country music into the mix because it could be argued that folk culture has persevered through rapidly evolving means, leaving its solidified visual and aural aesthetics to be fully incorporated into popular culture. Country music is a unique manifestation of this incorporation. Svec argues that participatory media persists in the digital age in forms that need not take on the aesthetics of folk music; the camaraderie and mythologies of contemporary country music are an example of this phenomenon. Alternatively, Schmidt argues that popular culture is an empty, relational category, defined only in opposition to high/folk/mass culture. Terms such as ‘folk,’ ‘folk-rock,’ ‘country,’ ‘country-western,’ or ‘country-folk’ exist primarily for the recording industry to be able to differentiate and cordon off subdivisions of recorded music.

Contemporary country music is predicated upon the assumption that it is in conflict with those other forms of culture. If we expand the (somewhat reductive) argument that folk culture has diverged into two separate streams, contemporary country music is certainly the less revolutionary of the two. The ‘of-the-people’ nature of folk music can be either seen as unifying or inherently oppositional. Svec references a lost piece of writing by Pete Seeger, entitled “Progressive and Fascists Both Sing Folk Songs”: “Seeger considers how the Nazis relied on

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<sup>34</sup> Christian Schmidt, “Famous in a Small Town’: The Authenticity of Unpopularity in Contemporary Country Music,” in *Unpopular Culture*, ed. Martin Lütke and Sascha Pöhlmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 147.

‘static’ and ‘naïve’ folk visions, whereas the progressive movement of which he was a part [responded] most keenly to the expanding, militant side.”<sup>35</sup> His piece shows how folk culture can be disseminated throughout any political mindset.

Folk and country can also be transposed onto American establishment politics, showing the further dissemination and dilution of the folk aesthetic. Neo-folk artist Justin Vernon performed at multiple events for Bernie Sanders’ 2020 presidential campaign; Nashville country artist Trace Atkins performed the national anthem at the 2020 Republican National Convention. As outlined by music historian Lester Feder in a 2007 episode of NPR’s *All Things Considered*, country music’s conservative roots can be traced back to the Nixon presidency, to match up to Democrat George Wallace’s courting of the white southern working class. Those who found identity or cultural pride in country music often found it in opposition to other forms of music that promoted cultural pride in Black listeners. Feder notes the distinction between “country music as a musical style and country music as a marketing category.”<sup>36</sup> The latter has been informed by conservative politics, while the former has less distinct political ties, even circling back towards leftist politics, as seen with The Dixie Chicks, who have become a choice example of anti-war country musicians.

My main argument, that folk process/ideology has split from the aesthetics generally associated with folk music, is often expressed similarly when discussing the function of media technology and the internet. Svec devotes an entire chapter to this (“Another Authentic Folk Is Possible”); musicologist Robert Glenn Howard uses the blog culture of the late 2000s to explore

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<sup>35</sup> Svec, *American Folk Music as Tactical Media*, 107.

<sup>36</sup> Debbie Elliott, “The Conservative Evolution of Country Music,” *All Things Considered*, February 18, 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7484160>.

this in his article, “Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web.” Both writings emphasize the continuous relationship between folklore and technology, a relationship that is often discounted due to our cultural perception of folk culture as old, or outside of modernity. In reality, modern United States folk culture has been enmeshed with technology since Alan Lomax, who it could be also argued was the catalyst for folk’s relationship with recording and archiving technology. Although the shape of the internet has changed significantly since Howard’s article was written, continuations of his argument can be extrapolated. Howard discusses the convergence of communities around shared references and discourse emerging on online platforms; he writes:

These expectations are not born of institutional authority, nor are they the products of mass culture. Instead, they emerge from the bottom up, from the volition of everyday actors filtered through the technological mechanisms made available by global economic structures. By focusing on the community processes that create, maintain, and re-create these expectations, researchers can better document these communication processes as they reforge the tools of the technology industries into shared meaning. Here, the vernacular and institutional hybridize into everyday expressive behaviors.<sup>37</sup>

The bottom-up nature of content and discourse in online environments very straightforwardly mirrors the non-hierarchical way in which vernacular culture has evolved – however, the fact that it occurs on a platform that is closely mediated by governing and corporate entities (the discourse discussed is referred to by Howard as “technology-dependent but other-than-institutional”<sup>38</sup>).

The participatory nature of the internet has been harnessed by political figures and mass media in ways similar to how the of-the-people nature of folk music and culture has been harnessed. Howard conducts an in-depth examination of the official blog/website for John

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<sup>37</sup> Robert Glenn Howard, “Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web,” *Journal of American Folklore* 121, no. 480 (Spring 2008): 194.

<sup>38</sup> Howard, “Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web,” 195.

Kerry's 2004 presidential run. The use of informal language and tone in blog entries, as well as the given ability to interact with the site through commenting and forum participation, is an early echo of political figures' use of Twitter and other social media platforms to interact with their community of supporters. Kerry's blog utilized the aesthetics and structures of then-contemporary blog culture, but transparently moderated its comments section, and removed links and content that was even slightly incendiary. In replicating the structures of the vernacular online, Kerry's blog (and many similar cases that followed) was able to appeal to members and consumers of online culture, but the openness was proven detrimental to the professionalism expected of a presidential candidate, and would prove detrimental as well to any political and capital gain. Even more contemporary examples, such as 2020 presidential candidate Mike Gravel's use of teenage social media managers to blindly run his Twitter account – this foray into vernacular web culture was nothing more than a novelty, and led to a disconnect between the figure and his social media presence.

While maintaining the argument that idealized online interactions represent a contemporary reframing of folk culture in their decentralized, nonhierarchical nature, it is revealing to examine the ways in which musicians who draw from pre-internet aesthetics and traditions utilize online tools of interaction. The aforementioned websites, Banjo Hangout and Fiddle Hangout, have continued to use the blog and forum format that has largely disappeared with the emergence of larger social media entities such as Facebook and Instagram. These entities are structured to value the individual, and present an idealized transposition of a person's real-world identity, as opposed to focusing on specific topics of discussion. The structure of these

'Hangout' forums has resulted in an intense emphasizing of the merit of traditional technique, as will be seen in the case of discussions of Frank Fairfield's music and character.

### Part 3: Frank Fairfield

My discovery of Frank Fairfield and his career was in fact the genesis of this project. I had been vaguely familiar with him through his NPR Music Tiny Desk Concert from 2015, and his role as the Toymaker on Patrick McHale's animated series *Over the Garden Wall*. Both of these roles are significant – NPR has been a major figure in the more elite side of 2000s and 2010s folk revival music, and *Over the Garden Wall* pulls indiscriminately from pieces of early American culture to create a postmodern fairy tale. What initially began as an exploration of the language and dynamics of internet forum and comment culture became instead a study of authenticity in contemporary folk music, solely due to the bizarre case of Frank Fairfield's career.

What makes Fairfield fascinating as an artist and a character is the ways in which his career has been overtly influenced by, and even dictated by, online discussion concerning him. Most of the publicity surrounding Fairfield took place around 2010, 2011 and 2012. This was around the time that pop-oriented folk rock groups such as Mumford & Sons and The Decemberists were becoming popular in the mainstream music scene. Fairfield falls more into the category of what I will refer to as "NPR folk," a subtype of the early 2010s folk revival skewing closer to traditional, 'old-time' music, with less of the pomp and aesthetic flair of more commercially-oriented bands such as Mumford & Sons or The Lumineers. His music is often referred to as 'old-time,' a vague genre term for the pre-bluegrass, early folk music of Appalachia, music that primarily employs banjo (one of Fairfield's primary instruments alongside guitar and fiddle). Fairfield was involved with Tompkins Square Records, a label whose body of work consisted of old-time music, both new and archival. This involvement

already cemented Fairfield as a musician attempting to emulate the careers and aesthetic stylings of folk musicians of the past.

Fairfield's constructed personality is reminiscent of other, more pop-oriented musical artists. Being immersed in the music industry requires character creation and world building, as consumers are as much invested in artists as figures as they are in their musical content. Gregory Alan Isakov, a contemporary folk musician whose work is significantly more commercial and indie rock-influenced, employs a number of the same characterization techniques as Fairfield. The overarching aesthetics of his press material, album art, performance setups, and wardrobe could be described as 'vintage.' His promotional material uses camera filters that evoke the distortions of older photography, and he often performs in the round with his band members, evoking the circular nature of the hootenanny, or folk gathering. Isakov's success (he has maintained popularity within folk circles for almost two decades) comes from his ability to stray away from traditionalism when necessary. While Fairfield performs almost exclusively traditional old-time folk standards, Isakov's music is primarily original. His song structures generally utilize chord structures more reminiscent of indie rock traditions, and his arrangements are often extensively orchestrated and washed with reverb and distortion. Isakov is successful in applying the filter of folk aesthetics to a musical style that is much more contemporary than Fairfield's, creating a bridge between his characterization and his musical content. This led to his product being exceedingly consumable<sup>39</sup>, and the world-building employed in his overlying brand works to create a commercial-mythological folk figure.

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<sup>39</sup> A song on his 2019 album, *This Empty Northern Hemisphere*, was featured in a commercial for McDonald's.

In a 2010 interview with music publication Pitchfork, Fairfield refers to the difference between what he perceives as corporate music and popular music:

Real music is what I consider to be uncorporatized [*sic*] music, the music that just happens. I feel like that's not a very well-known thing today. What we have today is a product... I feel like there's the people's music, and there's corporate music. I love popular music. I think all of this is popular music. The banjo was one of the most popular instruments in the country for quite a long time. I play popular songs. This is not some obscure, unusual music. This is popular music. And I feel like we don't have popular music today. We have corporate music.<sup>40</sup>

Fairfield is clearly pushing back against his notion of the culture industry, through his use of the term “corporate” to convey the music-product. Corporate music, or music that is created primarily as a commodity, is seen by him to be a completely separate entity from “music that just happens.” While there are many cases in the history of folk music of musical works written either by professional musicians or corporate musicians being incorporated into the folk lexicon, what he argues makes folk music unique is its lack of established history; in the same interview, he makes another comparison, this time between “music” and “art-music”:

The history of music is nothing more than the history of art-music or classical music, the music that was commissioned by aristocrats. Essentially any history we have is just a history of aristocrats. We don't have any history of people. ... That's what I love about that term art-music. It separates itself from music-music, the music people have always made.<sup>41</sup>

While the divide between aristocratic and populist music is a romanticizing and reductive argument, one that clearly influences his music and performing persona, it is not misinformed. As stated previously, this divide is narrower than is generally thought, but art music tends to hold the power when analyzing music. Academic works that focus on folk music devise patterns of

<sup>40</sup> “Missed Opportunities: Frank Fairfield’s New Old-Timey Music,” Pitchfork (Condé Nast, 2010), <https://pitchfork.com/features/the-out-door/7777-the-out-door-1/?page=3>.

<sup>41</sup> “Missed Opportunities: Frank Fairfield’s New Old-Timey Music.”

examination through the traditions of musicology and anthropology; folk songs that do not necessarily have a firm chordal structure are notated according to Western tradition. This trend can often lead to the perception of folk music through its modal and chordal characteristics, without as much awareness of its metatextual radical nature and cultural contexts. Folk music is reduced to a unique way of performing music. Similarly, the aesthetics that develop as a secondary characteristic alongside folk music can be seen as inherent or necessary to it.

This understanding of folk music can be seen in Fairfield's musical and performance styles. In this section, I will examine various discussions of Fairfield on Banjo Hangout, a website that features banjo-based content, classified ads, and a forum. The website has existed since 2000, and its forum has retained the form of early-internet specialized discussion boards. While some entries have been lost, more have been archived in various locations; it remains a relatively comprehensive resource of banjo-specific online discussion (there is a sister site called Fiddle Hangout, which functions the same way). There are numerous threads on Banjo Hangout and Fiddle Hangout devoted to Fairfield, sometimes scrutinizing a particular performance, sometimes just gauging the community's general opinion on the musician. He continues to be a controversial figure on the forum; many posts about him begin with a disclaimer stating awareness of the community's perceived general dislike of him.

One of the most-discussed aspects of Fairfield's music is his idiosyncratic vocal intonation; the way he sings is often brought up when discussing his authenticity. In a 2015 thread on Banjo Hangout devoted to Fairfield's three-finger style, Aaron Zischkale, the thread creator, posted:

His voice is another performance aspect of his that never bothered me. I imagine he's replicating what he loves--all those old 78's with the garbled high-pitched voices. I think it works with his repertoire--I've got no problem with a small, simple voice under a big swell of sound. A myriad of great indie bands throughout the 90's come to mind, like My Bloody Valentine. It's understated, I think it's a good aesthetic choice.<sup>42</sup>

This sentiment is notable, as it differs from others' opinions on his voice, recognizing it as an aesthetic choice. This is where it becomes clear why his voice might be off-putting to those listening, especially those familiar with the oeuvre of United States folk music: Fairfield is not only emulating the style and performance of musicians from the 1920s and 1930s, he is emulating the way in which their recordings come across now, distorted and low-fidelity. In a response to Zischkale, forum user Don Borchelt writes that

Fairfield is only adding just enough nasal tone to evoke some of the feeling of the old cylinder and 78 recordings that represent the golden age of American popular music. Early pop singers like Al Jolson and Rudy Valee, blues singers like Ma Rainey, and early country singers like Jimmy Rodgers all had a nasal tone in their delivery. I read somewhere that some of that came from the need to project in a music hall setting before the days of electronic sound amplification.<sup>43</sup>

Whether Fairfield is attempting to emulate the nature of early recordings and the ways that they are effected by their recording mediums, or if he is simply emulating a vocal technique used out of necessity before amplification technologies were available, he is affecting his delivery with techniques that are not necessary or natural in contemporary performance. While the use of out-of-date technologies or effects that emulate their character and distortion has been widespread in popular music for decades, it can be seen by a forward-minded folk community as regressive and

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<sup>42</sup> Aaron Zischkale, "Frank Fairfield 3-Finger Style," *Banjo Hangout*, June 4, 2015, <https://www.banjohangout.org/archive/304633>.

<sup>43</sup> Zischkale, "Frank Fairfield 3-Finger Style."

unnecessary. Moreover, Fairfield employed these techniques more extensively in his live performances, while his recorded works are generally high-fidelity.

In mid-2015, in a since-deleted post on Fairfield's public Facebook page, a statement ostensibly from Fairfield announced his retirement from his music career. The post is written in a casual style, and was a surprise to those who followed him. The post, in full, is presented below:

Hello all you happy people. Frank here. My apologies in advance to anyone who chooses to read this "self, self, self... my feelings... first person" drivel. Just thought I should make it official and at least let the few of you know that finally, after long last, I'm done with the music racket. I never intended to get mixed up in it to begin with, yet somehow I fluked [*sic*] into something resembling a career in the great folly of my early twenties. I was certainly not cut out for it then and I'm not cut out for it now. I don't feel I have a thing to offer. One also gets pretty sick of being as mediocre a musician as I under the diligent scrutiny of all the banjo hangout bloggers in the blogosphere multiverse. There are a few scattered dates already booked throughout the year which I'm obliged to see through. Hopefully after that I won't have to play another damn note of music (if what I've ever done should even be deemed "music") as long as I live. It's not like I'm nobly stepping down... gracefully going out on top... the "music biz" and I are parting ways. It has about as much use for me as I have for it. Realistically, probably less. I can't fool myself into thinking that I'm making some brave decision to search another road... I was at a cul de sac anyway, there was nowhere else to go. I've got a great job now, doing some good, hard, manual labor. I'm very busy and very content. I have some record reissue projects in mind that I would still like to work on at some point, so I may be loosely related to music in the future. But for now, as Tosti said: "Goodbye, forever..."  
-Frank<sup>44</sup>

The tone taken in this post is consistent with the cynical and weary voice heard in interviews with Fairfield. To his credit, he is notably informed of the larger connotations of being a contemporary folk performer. Fairfield's disillusionment with the overtones of being a professional musician show the artificiality of piecing a brand together from aspects of folk culture in order to appeal to the largest audience possible. He is equally frustrated with the scrutiny of fellow musicians as he is with the "music racket." The doubt revealed in the self-

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<sup>44</sup> Frank Fairfield, "Hello All You Happy People...", *Facebook*, 2015.

awareness of his statement is indicative of a lack of confidence in his constructed identity, and the pressures of adhering to it in order to be commercially successful.

While Fairfield is aware of the larger connotations of public performance, it is still clear that he has a romanticized view of the life of a musician, or at least a reductive, traditionalist view of what is ultimately fulfilling. His announcement that he has “a great job...doing some good, hard, manual labor” is immediately reminiscent of the view that artists such as the Rolling Stones have had of working class life, seen as an antidote to the complexity of white-collar careers. This romanticization is present in stories throughout history: Voltaire’s *Candide*, for example, presents a chain of events in which practicality and manual labor is revealed to be ultimately fulfilling. Simplified, the novel presents members of the upper class who, through the extensive consequences of philosophizing, land on the notion that “[work] is the only way to render life tolerable.”<sup>45</sup> The closing line of the novel, “...but let us cultivate our garden,”<sup>46</sup> is a maxim that proclaims physical labor and harmony with the Earth is the ultimate source of contentedness. Fairfield closes his Facebook post with a statement that conveys the sentiment of this maxim, and he expresses his contentedness. Information concerning Fairfield’s social class is unavailable, but it is possible to assume at least a moderate level of comfort that allows him this romanticization.

While perhaps it is necessary to account for dramatics, it is interesting that Fairfield is not intending to cease his involvement with the music industry, but with music as a whole. While it is impossible to know what his inner relationship with music is, it is clear that to some extent he

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<sup>45</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*, Dover Thrift Editions (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Voltaire, *Candide*, 94.

equates the performance of music with being a public figure. The notion of oral lore that permeates folk culture is here transposed to Fairfield's relationship with his followers; some performers may compartmentalize their musical practice in order to not be influenced by the thoughts of their fanbase, but Fairfield views his fanbase as a gathering of likeminded musicians and cultural equals. An aspect of attempting to construct an all-encompassing identity as a folk musician from another time includes consciously determining what his relationship with his fanbase looks like.

The backstory of Fairfield's career and manner of performing identity is explored in a 2016 episode of musician Josh Rutner's podcast, "Album of the Week." The episode focuses on Fairfield's eponymous 2009 album. Rutner explains Fairfield's dedication to the "bygone," and the justification of his romanticization of it:

Fairfield is no mere cosplayer of the bygone; he embodies the aesthetic in everything from his high-waisted pants and buttoned-up button-downs to his sparsely-decorated apartment where gramophone grooves trump television channels. Born in southeast Texas, the son of a Mennonite minister, Fairfield had worked many odd jobs to stay afloat, but he came to find busking—playing on the street for whomever passes by—a more satisfying way to make a living. He shrugs off the overly romantic view, so often lobbed his way, that he is born of the wrong era—a man out of time. 'I just think everything is as it should be and everything is just fine,' he says. His way of moving through life relies on letting what comes come—not forcing anything. He speaks softly in a gentle tenor mumble and sings with a quiver in the voice—a tremble in the tone that you don't hear much nowadays.<sup>47</sup>

This description puts forth a version of Fairfield that is not constructed in order to be successful in the music industry, but that rather has dedicated his whole being to the notion that ways of existing traditional to the past are more comfortable. His origins as a street musician undoubtedly have contributed to this mindset. The act of passively performing music for money is the purest

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<sup>47</sup> Josh Rutner, *Frank Fairfield (Frank Fairfield, 2009)*, Album of the Week, n.d., <http://www.joshrutner.com/aotw/2016/8/17/episode-31-frank-fairfield-frank-fairfield-2009>.

form of musical commodification. Unencumbered by the dissolution of aura that comes with recording and reproducing, the songs performed by Fairfield are able to exist to their fullest potential, no matter how many times they are played. Each performance is informed by the last, and each song is an outward echo of the “bygone,” an echo that helps to cement Fairfield’s identity.

While it could be argued that Frank Fairfield did not succeed as a performer of folk aesthetics within the culture industry, it could also be argued that the dialogue between him and his fanbase/criticizers represents a modern reframing of the nonhierarchical nature of folk culture. Fairfield failed to maintain himself as a celebrity figure, and thus enabled a direct stream of interaction and influence from his listener base. The act of choosing to forgo a career as a musician seems to have come out of an insecurity on Fairfield’s part, but his investment in and knowledge of the traditions of folk culture prohibited him from detaching himself from the public. The fatal flaw of Fairfield’s attempted characterization is that the scene in which he was involved values an authenticity that progresses alongside contemporary culture. The lifestyle additions that Fairfield employs are of little value to someone who is only concerned with proper performance technique. Fairfield is a talented vocalist and instrumentalist, with a clear knowledge of and love for American vernacular music; he continues to perform occasionally with a trio, and maintains his vocal affectations and playing techniques. While I refer to Fairfield as a failed experiment in recontextualizing the aesthetics of folk, I believe that this interchange was successful in replicating the overlying traditions that have persevered in vernacular culture throughout American history.

## Conclusion

This project has sought to explore the commodification of folk music, and how ideas of authenticity are skewed as the aesthetic trappings of musical cultures are subsumed and simplified by the culture industry. It has sought to show how the tenets and ideologies of cultural and artistic movements persist past the subsumption of their aesthetics into the culture industry. The role of the archive in facilitating this process was explored, as was other processes by which folk culture is assimilated into the culture industry. Subsumption attempts of the political nature of folk were explored through an examination of political usage of the internet, under the presupposition that blog and forum culture is a contemporary translation of folk culture. Old-time musician Frank Fairfield was examined as an example of a musician who attempted to maintain authenticity while simultaneously participating in the music industry, to an arguable degree of success. To conclude, I want to introduce a firsthand example of a community effort that I feel successfully enacts both the dynamics and aesthetic trappings of American folk culture.

Ear Trumpet Labs is a boutique microphone manufacturer based in Portland, Oregon. Their microphones are hand-soldered using pieces of recycled metal such as bicycle gears and copper piping, taking on an eclectic, vintage aesthetic. Their design language, coupled with the fact that they are tuned for live performance and recording, makes them popular in contemporary bluegrass and folk circles. According to Ear Trumpet Labs' website<sup>48</sup>, artists such as The Decemberists, the Milk Carton Kids, and Old Crow Medicine Show have used them in recording

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<sup>48</sup> "Media & Artists," Ear Trumpet Labs (Squarespace, n.d.), <https://www.eartrumpetlabs.com/listen#our-artists>.

and performing<sup>49</sup>; they are also used in the Broadway musical *Hadestown*, adapted from folk musician Anaïs Mitchell's concept album retelling the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The basement out of which Ear Trumpet Labs is run also features a speakeasy<sup>50</sup> that has been remodeled to host performances by underground folk artists. I personally had the opportunity to attend many of these performances from 2015 to 2017. Each concert featured an air of camaraderie and openness absent from other, larger, folk venues in Portland. The performers would encourage audience participation, and sing-alongs and jam sessions would occur consistently after each show. While the draw of these concerts relied heavily on the popular aesthetics of indie folk revival of the 2010s, these aesthetics were not employed simply on a shallow level. It was clear that Ear Trumpet Labs had a genuine love for folk culture, both in terms of its aesthetic trappings and its cultural function. The hosts and the participants were dedicated to facilitating an inclusive and pedagogic environment, one that replicated the dynamics of the hootenanny. Through a continuous mixture of folk standards and new compositions being performed, the latter pieces often containing lyrics concerning modern topics such as queerness and social media addiction, I personally felt that an authentic experience was generated.

Even as capitalist music efforts work against the evolution and decentralization of folk music, there will always be figures who are willing to share their knowledge in traditional manners. Authenticity is a word with many meanings; there is no true objective authenticity. However, within the world of a musical culture that has proven to value the oral dissemination of

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<sup>49</sup> As well as the aforementioned indie folk artist Gregory Alan Isakov.

<sup>50</sup> The simulation of an illicit Prohibition era bar has seemed to encourage camaraderie among the attendees.

knowledge, the most authentic efforts are those that successfully work to make this knowledge available.

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Bernard Cohen, Department of Music, 2021

## Artist's Statement

The recorded portion of my senior project consists of an album titled *Resort*, as well as additional pieces of music and visual art. The album is vaguely narrative driven, exploring parent-child relationships during climate catastrophe, and the decay of the mind's ability to process these apocalyptic events. Intentionally throughout this project, climate change and its effects are blatantly aestheticized and romanticized to create a sinister-optimistic dreamlike album. I began this project with a phrase that wouldn't leave my head: "With rising seas, the whole world's Resort." The concept of "Resort" is one that comes from a fixation on the aesthetics of climate change. The hedonism of late capitalism, and with it pervasive hyperreality, is situated to oppose the reality of its deterioration, creating a unique media language.

The album consists of ten main songs in a rough sequence. Throughout the production process, I heavily utilized simple, free MIDI plugins, to convey simplicity and timelessness without relying on conventional methods of aural deterioration/distortion such as simulated tape warble or bitcrushing. I also employed ethical sampling techniques, mainly consisting of the resampling of self-created audio.

I relied upon many free or pirated mastering programs/plugins; I wanted to seek the distortion that comes from misuse of tools meant to make music sound more professional. All of the visual components of this project were created with a similar ethos. I used tools such as [letsenhance.io](https://letsenhance.io/), a website which used neural networks to enhance low-resolution images. I found that through multiple uses of this tool on images which I curated and reduced in quality, a dreamlike, painterly effect came through.

The album is currently hosted on Bandcamp, free to listen to on their platform. The link is below:

- <https://youlookamazing.bandcamp.com/album/resort>

Aside from the album, there are three sets of songs included:

- An ambient overture meant to be played before the album, created using Akira Rabeleis' free generative art software, Argeiphontes Lyre,
  - <https://youlookamazing.bandcamp.com/album/resort-unpreoccupied>
- two songs that remix the vocals on "Changing the Island", the first song on *RESORT*,
  - <https://youlookamazing.bandcamp.com/album/makes-u-flee>
- and a pair of singles which employ many of the same production techniques as the album, but which don't fit in thematically with the other works. These songs were created towards the end of my process.
  - <https://youlookamazing.bandcamp.com/album/hellhole-body-ustaywild>

All works were created between December of 2019 and May of 2020. All production and mixing was done by Bernard Cohen. All lyrics and vocals, aside from a feature by my friend Rowan Horton on "Clear Buckets", were written and recorded by Bernard Cohen. All pieces of visual art were created by Bernard Cohen.