

FOLK FEMINISM: THE WOMEN OF THE AMERICAN FOLK REVIVAL

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation approaches the American folk music revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s from a feminist perspective, offering the concept of *folk feminism* as an analytical framework for understanding the way women found empowerment within and through the masculinist world of folk performance. With attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality within the New Left and in the broader context of the early Cold War and civil rights movement, this research intervenes in hegemonic narratives of the folk revival to argue that women not only achieved forms of social liberation through folk fandom and performance, but also played a critical role in laying the aesthetic and political groundwork for the entire folk revival in its early years. Contrary to historiography that couples the folk revival with whiteness, this research emphasizes Odetta Holmes, a Black woman, and Joan Baez, whose father was from Mexico and whose mother was born in Scotland to English parents. It traces how Odetta's rare positionalities—on the margins of mid-Fifties society but at the center of progressive music—combined with her personal performance style would eventually allow her to move the folk movement into the 1960s, at which point Baez rose to fame in her footsteps.

Acknowledgements

I claimed a still-under-construction loft apartment in downtown Newark, New Jersey nearly eight years ago as I prepared to begin my PhD. I then drove to Arizona, where I spent a happy summer working on what I hoped would become a coherent, environmental studies documentary film project on the Grand Canyon with the extremely generous summer funding of Rutgers-Newark's Presidential Fellowship. That support from the Graduate School, in addition to yearly TA- and GA-ships and the Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the American Studies program, allowed me to pursue life as a scholar in the New York City area and then in California. I remain grateful beyond words to Rutgers for giving me this vote of confidence and the immense and rare privilege of financial security in my pursuit of this degree.

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welcomed me to the American Studies program as its then-director and guided me with infectious enthusiasm through the work of Cultural History. I enjoyed meeting him around the nooks and crannies of Manhattan for discussions of my latest chapters alongside the kind of mini-NYC explorations I lived for during those years. Dr. Whit Strub has provided careful and exceptionally clear feedback throughout this process, teaching me more than anyone how to express myself as a historian, think contextually, and comprehend the academic challenges before me along the way. Kathleen Hulser graciously joined my committee as my fourth reader after I attended one of her wonderful walking tours on the women of Greenwich Village as part of the annual Village Trip Festival in 2021. She has brought invaluable perspective as a feminist public historian to this work. I will always feel fortunate that I got to work with scholars of this caliber.

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A vibrant community keeps the American folk movement alive to this day, and I need to thank a very long list of fellow music enthusiasts, writers, and scholars who helped me at varying stages of this project. First, there are the folkies themselves who met a nervous young scholar with an inchoate topic with open arms: Ethel Raim deserves special thanks for being the first person to do so at her home in the Bronx; then, in Woodstock, there was a misty Catskills afternoon with Happy and Jane Traum at their home, as well as a memorable talk with Alix Dobkin, who sadly passed away in 2021; Alix led me to a visit with her friend and neighbor, ballet dancer Anne Olin, who worked in and around the Village folk clubs; then a neighbor of my own in California introduced me to her sister, Portland-based folksinger Kate Power. Though these women do not feature prominently in this dissertation, the opportunity to meet with each one of them brought the folk world to life for me. In addition, I want to thank London-based journalist and fellow folk fan Liz Thomson, who founded the ongoing Village Trip Festival in 2017, published *Joan Baez: The Last Leaf* in 2020, and has been a wonderful advocate all around for my research. Furthermore, I am grateful to Ben Harbert, Elijah Wald, Garnette Codogan, and Gina Arnold, music writers and scholars who encouraged me and shaped my thinking. This research, like most research, was a community effort that I simply put down in words.

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And, finally, Daniel: In one of our first conversations on this “paper” that had taken over my life, I cornered you and asked you what you thought about Odetta at the Café Bizarre. You panicked and said you didn’t think you could help me with any of this intellectual stuff. But you did.

Thank you all.

Preface

I am driving down a road lined with farms in rural California when “Mr. Sandman” by the Chordettes comes on. The opening “bung, bung, bung,” ascending in three different but, somehow, identical voices instantly brings me back to a time two decades ago when I performed with a group of girls in my hometown in suburban Maryland, all of us wearing red sequin vests, custom-made by one of the group’s moms. I distinctly remember singing the high soprano part of this song on a set of risers by the water fountain in our local, now- abandoned, mall. As I contemplate the fact that I was in a kind of millennial girl group, I realize that this is the third or fourth sickly sweet, upbeat song I have heard in a row with lyrics about dreams:

*Mr. Sandman, I’m so alone
Don’t have nobody to call my own
Mr. Sandman, turn on your magic beam
Mr. Sandman, bring me a dream*

I have not known how to start this project on the women of the folk movement. I have not even known what I hope to say or what I want to ask. My latest search for a way in involves trying to transport myself to what I believe to be the beginning, listening and listening to compilations of top-charting songs of the mid- to late-1950s. I have heard these songs my whole life in various nostalgic contexts—roller rinks, movies, *Kidzbop* CDs—but for the first time, I am really listening. I am listening with feminist ears for *just one* that might in some infinitesimal way conjure up an image of a woman who lives for something—literally anything—other than belonging to a man.

“Mr. Sandman” is not the one; these women, like so many others in these songs, are describing a sad reality that only a fantasy man can salvage. Two fantasy men, actually: the mythical one who soothes young women to sleep by sprinkling magic sand in their eyes, and the husband-like one who will appear, God or Sandman willing, in the ensuing dreams. Pretty much all of us know the stories of the Fifties; we’ve watched *Mad Men* and for some reason—maybe the way Nick at Nite bled over into TVLand if we were still up watching at some abysmally late zombie hour—we know the outlines of *Leave It To Beaver*. It seems that the music reflects those stories. Betty Draper and June Cleaver are alive and well on these charts.

Even as research, these songs are starting to get to me. I skip “Mr. Sandman.” “Lollipop,” also by the Chordettes, comes on. *Or was this the one I was singing in the mall?* I turn the music off and drive home in silence.

*

In the beginning, when you are driving around aimlessly like I am, your mentors ask you often *why* you care about your topic, *why* you chose this. Answering that question is how you define your scholarly focus. But the answer to that question is not a neat or comfortable one for me: I love to sing. I love to play guitar. I love music, and the love of music led to an obsession with musicians. The obsession with musicians led to an obsession with Bob Dylan before I knew anything about much of anything, and the obsession with Bob Dylan led me to a PhD program as close as I could get to New York City where he himself got his start. The PhD program (at Rutgers, Newark), starting at the end of the Obama presidency,

spanning the length of the Trump presidency, and now ending for me in the era of Biden, taught me all my obsessions needed interrogating.

Out of all the books I had gathered on the American folk revival by the start of this project in 2017—and there were many years’ worth—I had not a single one by an academic about the women. I had Suze Rotolo’s memoir *A Freewheelin’ Time*. Beautiful as it is, I had only devoured it as a teenager longing to get that much closer to Bob through the eyes of his first famed love. I suspect many a reader did Suze this disservice, reading her book for Bob instead of for her. I suspect this same insatiable curiosity is the force that has filled many bookshelves with an array of books and records expanding like endless ripples around Dylan, connecting back to him in varying degrees of separation. Some of us won’t tell you that at the end of the day, every day, it’s all about Bob; but those of us who are honest will. We love the mystery of who he is, the poetry of what he has given us. He exists on a tier of his own in our minds.

What I am trying to say is: I am a Bob Dylan superfan. And I understand the voracious fascination of superfans. I have walked Jones Street and murmured, “Oh man, this is where the *Freewheelin’* cover was shot” more times than you want to know. In my most lost times, I truly mapped life around the man. I mean, I literally moved to the Grand Canyon once simply because his 1963 spoken word poem “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie” ends with the lines,

*Where do you look for this hope that you know is there
And out there somewhere
And your feet can only walk down two kinds of roads
Your eyes can only look through two kinds of windows
Your nose can only smell two kinds of hallways*

*You can touch and twist
And turn two kinds of doorknobs
You can either go to the church of your choice
Or you can go to Brooklyn State Hospital
You'll find God in the church of your choice
You'll find Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State Hospital
And though it's only my opinion
I may be right or wrong
You'll find them both
In the Grand Canyon
At sundown*

I understand that buzzing sensation of getting one more piece of information about Bob. I understand driving to his past and present homes, from the Catskills to Malibu, just to be somewhere in his physical orbit. I understand why someone would go through his trash, though, no, I never have. Therefore, to bring this back to the scholarship, I truly get how there are innumerable books on him, how he can conquer a bookcase and a mind a bit like a virus, to use a timely metaphor. This could make me an extremely unreliable narrator for any academic project approaching him. In fact, I completely resisted this project for the first few years of my PhD work, knowing on some subconscious level it would require me to deal with too much of myself. I worked on an ill-fated documentary film about the Grand Canyon.

Slowly I learned that I had to write about myself; at least, I had to do that first before I felt I could do much else with any level of dignity. So, I turned to my first love, music, and took a little break to record an EP of my own songs. Then I opened my boxes of books on Bob Dylan, on the Sixties, on the Beats and Rock 'n' Roll. You bet *On the Road* was in there. But I was an American Studies scholar in 2017, and my obsession with Bob Dylan quickly crashed against a logical awareness that there

were too many books on Bob Dylan and that I had gathered them my whole life without realizing that. Secondary books were mostly about white artists connected to him in some way or white women who had been their girlfriends. I am a woman and I am white, with an Arab father and a U.S.-born mother. I was born in 1990 in Detroit, a place I don't remember, and shuffled around America after my first twenty years growing up in the D.C. suburbs trying to figure out my own place in this country. Arizona, grad school, Newark, Trump, Coronavirus, and all the experiences therein opened my eyes to the racism, sexism, and general elitism that could be easily, absurdly missed by a sort-of-Muslim white girl of great privilege, which is what I am. This is a strange country with strange icons. I know I am a pawn in the game of American popular culture. I know in my very bones there is more to this story, that obsession surrounding anything is usually just the smoke high above a much more important fire.

*

So that's where I'm at. A list of all the people who aren't Bob Dylan. Then a list of all the people who aren't his famous best friends, the ones who star alongside him in books and films and on stages. Then the awareness that there are really a lot of men around here on *all* these lists, that I have only ever understood the women of the folk movement whom I have come across as girlfriends, muses, and a strange means of seeing myself in some way in this picture *with* all these men. That is messed up. That is not fair to me or to the women. Where are the women? I have decided to give them a name, to force myself to focus on them: female folkies, the women of folk, female folksingers...The Folk Women.

What a lot of us Dylan superfans won't tell you is that we don't just *love* him; we want to *be* him. The loving and the wanting-to-be fuel each other. Why do you think I first picked up a guitar? To be honest, at age 16, it was Taylor Swift. But then it was Bob. It still is. I have stood on stages (small ones) singing my own songs, knowing there is no greater power, no greater desire fulfilled, than this. Then I have stood in audiences overtaken by awe for men wielding guitars, spewing poetry, all echoes of Bob to me. For so many years now, I have occupied this maddening space between female songwriter and Dylan superfan. I have had many a musical man tell me in so many words that my music is no good; then I write a song about the ire of that experience and go right back to worship. I think I am confused. I do not think I am alone. Something tells me that my gender is at the core of this sense of conflict between inner-performer and inner-groupie, between Bob and Suze, between wanting to watch Bob and wanting to be Bob. Everything is telling me I need to force myself to learn about the Folk Women to get to the root of this. I need to understand what they did for the folk revival, and I need to understand what the folk revival did for them, and what it all did for the world I live in now, for American culture and society. Why do I care about this topic? I warned you the answer is uncomfortable, not very scholarly. The answer is just another question: Why do I *not* care about this?

*

And so, I am subjecting myself to hours of Fifties music, driving around trying to find the start, attempting to create a genealogy of the female folk performers and folk audiences of the early 1960s. What did all the Folk Women have in common?

Well, for one thing: growing up in the Fifties, hearing these songs. For reference, to name a few relatively well-known names, Judy Collins was fifteen-years-old when “Mr. Sandman” came out in 1954; Joan Baez was thirteen; Joni Mitchell, in Canada, was eleven. You can find pictures of all three of them as girls in authentic, long skirts with crinoline underneath—the kind my mom made me and my sister for early-aughts Halloween and sock-hops, glorious reenactments of the prom scene in *Grease*. There are so many layers of mythology to cut through to get to these women. In order to understand the performers they became—and the change or lack thereof they impacted—I am starting with their childhoods and early teens, attempting to enter their musical and broader sociocultural landscapes. Please stay with me, even if it does not all immediately connect to the last great concert you attended, your current favorite song, or your childhood dreams. I think it will.

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Introduction: The Folk Women

Topic, Thesis, Scope

This dissertation takes as its subject the female performers of the American folk revival of the late-1950s and the early-1960s.¹ In it I argue that the nationally recognized performers Odetta and Joan Baez served as avatars of an emergent folk feminism in a protean moment of the folk revival, providing new models of womanhood for women raised on Fifties pop songs like “Mr. Sandman.”

The elements unique to this moment of the much larger, arguably ongoing, American folk movement were the close of World War II and the new world order that set in in the conflict’s wake. The crossroads at which all folk performers found themselves in this era were truly extraordinary: a postwar economy in a “golden age” of prosperity and consumerism, a mounting nuclear arms race with the communist U.S.S.R., and a skyrocketing birth rate that produced the Baby Boom, the largest and most influential generation yet in the nation’s history. With the time and comfort the end of active, global warfare afforded them, the prosperous among this generation focused inward, taking aim at the social inequalities that rested at the foundation of a country that called itself the leader of this postwar, free world. Thus, the rumblings of the counterculture began, meeting Black Americans’ ongoing fight

¹ I use the term *folk revival* through this dissertation, as other historians do, to refer to the period of heightened interest in folk songs in the United States following World War II. I use the term *folk movement* to refer to the much broader, centuries-long practice of folk music in America, propelled by a diverse musical community. As will be evident, the American folk movement has had several distinct peaks (revivals), but the 1960s folk boom is my interest in this dissertation.

for equality in the civil rights movement. Folk songs were revived as tools in this struggle for racial justice, as they had been in past eras for past causes. Many Black and impoverished, rural musicians also saw a resurgence in their careers, suddenly finding themselves commercially successful standard-bearers for rather inchoate, liberal notions of American-ness, purity, and truth.²

Others have expertly traced the class- and race-based politics at work in the folk revival, which featured legions of young baby boomers who were frustrated with the hypocrisy of their country and staunch in their belief that folk music and the community that rallied around it could unlock more authentic, more just ways of life. A far less-explored terrain is gender and sexuality within the folk revival and the American folk movement as a whole—a gap in the historiography that is both concerning and relatively surprising given the number of prominent women folk musicians who participated in the folk revival and the clear impact their careers had on landscape of American popular music and performance.

Through my study of the careers of several of these women—namely Odetta and Joan Baez—I put forward the idea of *folk feminism*, which I understand as the concept of womanhood, rooted in both the performance of folk music and the appreciation of folk stars, that allowed women who participated in the folk revival

² The pursuit of authenticity via folk music in the postwar period can be understood within the broader historiography of the New Left's spiritual and political quest to redeem a sense of wholeness via egalitarian-minded social activism. For two foundational sources on this topic, see Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998) and James Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

to take early steps toward personal liberation in the late 1950s and early 1960s.³ My definition of this term requires grappling with the masculinist tides that shaped the folk movement overall: folk women were indeed sexualized, marginalized, and objectified both as performers and fans. The aesthetics of folk performance were particularly rigid for white women, glorifying the perceived vocal purity found in classical *bel canto* singing and coupling that sound with the expectation of delicate, virginal stage personas. For Black women, these expectations were far less clear in the sense that the mostly white world of folk was not prepared to conceive of a coherent notion of acceptable Black womanhood. Thus, ethereal, bare-footed women singing ancient love songs comprised the vast majority of female folksingers in the early years of the folk revival. These gendered expectations and related ambiguities were rooted in folk's longstanding propensity for rejecting popular trends of the present and romanticizing the pre-industrial ways of life in which many of the most beloved folk songs originated.

However, in the postwar context where American expectations of femininity were severely repressive, the backward-looking stylings of folk paradoxically served as a kind of escape route for women. Those who gravitate toward the folk revival nurtured powerful, independent, and increasingly anti-domestic voices through the

³ With regard to my use of the word "women" throughout this dissertation, I take a cue from Daphne Brooks in her brilliant, recent book *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2021). She writes, "'woman' as a social formation serves as the overarching gender rubric in this study, in short, because the majority of figures in the book identify as such; however, queer sociality undergirds the core spirit of this book's focus." Though the artists I research did not identify as queer or nonbinary and though it would be a stretch to call my analysis at this stage "queer," I have attempted to write with deep awareness of the ways in which these women rejected their era's conventional definitions of womanhood.

conventions of folk performance. Without managers or elaborate production teams, they chose their own repertoires, becoming musical archivists and curators, carriers of age-old narratives imbued with important, often-political messages typically reserved for male communication. Thus, folk feminism in my definition involves Fifties women performing songs and styles of the past and fusing them with their needs in the repressive present in order to reach and model more liberated states of womanhood than otherwise would have been accessible to them and socially acceptable for them. This subtle yet powerful kind of feminist performance broke into American popular culture by the early-1960s and influenced a generation of women who would build upon it, fueling the civil rights movement, the counterculture, the women's music movement, and ultimately the women's liberation movement.

My temporal focus is a small sliver of the folk movement: the years 1957-1959. This framing, unconventional in its specificity and its endpoint still in the Fifties, arises from my effort to recover and center the roles of women in the folk revival.⁴ When we rework the field's historiographical focus on the men of folk with a commitment to women's history, one of the first revelations is that female performers played a major role in launching the folk revival at its very start, in the mid- to late-1950s. Specifically, I focus on the intersecting careers of Odetta Holmes Felious Gordon (who preferred her stage name Odetta) and Joan Baez, both of

⁴ My understanding of this period is rooted in a historiographical notion of "the long sixties," by which historians acknowledge substantial continuity between the late 1940s, the 1950s, and well-known sociocultural upheaval of the Sixties. For a key sources mapping out this conception of the decade, see "The Ike Age: Rethinking the 1950s" in Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground: The Sixties and its Aftershocks* (New York: Columbia UP, 51-60).

whose popularity and influence in the late 1950s matched and even exceeded that of any male folk musician.

This reframing of the folk revival challenges those many narratives that trace its start to Bob Dylan's arrival in Greenwich Village in 1961 and proceed to emphasize the "peak" years between 1962-1965. Those early-Sixties years were, indeed, memorable years in the history of folk music: folk performers, with their austere stylings and stripped back productions, made an unprecedented leap into mainstream culture with enormous commercial success. (In 1962 alone, the group Peter, Paul and Mary's self-titled debut album spent ten months on *Billboard's* Top Ten list, while Joan Baez graced the cover of *Time* and Bob Dylan released his first album.) However, in shifting away from these well-covered years and events, I highlight how the "peak" of the folk revival was, in some ways, not its core. I argue the peak years of commercial success were the outcome—perhaps, the echo—of the work women did to keep folk alive between the Depression era and the Sixties, especially in the late-Fifties period I emphasize here.

Folk Movement Historiography

Existing scholarship on the folk movement simply does not focus on the women, neither the female artists, nor the female audiences. There are biographies and autobiographies of several of the most well-known female performers but no feminist study of the movement as a whole or the folk revival in particular. This dearth of scholarship is particularly frustrating, because there is a huge amount written on the movement and its male leads. The folk community, especially that of Greenwich Village, was dogmatically self-aware, in large part due to the strong

influence of ethnomusicology and other academic fields in the early folk movement. This anthropological discipline merged with the artistic self-consciousness of bohemians by the early 20th century, further fueling the autoethnographic impulse of the American folk movement. Musicians, too, with their industry's propensity for memoir, and Baby Boomers, with their generational gravitas, have added yet more self-reflective literature. Overall, the contemporary scholars of folk are often male writers who were tangentially involved in the folk revival themselves, either as musicians, fervent fans, budding intellectuals or, more often than not, a mixture of the three.

Thus, in a sense, the first studies of the American folk revival were published during the revival itself. There is good amount of writing from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s on the most popular songs, their origins, their notable performers, and the movement as a whole. For the purposes of this dissertation, three folk-focused magazines of varying levels of professionalism have been invaluable: the quarterly journal of folk music, *Sing Out!* (published 1950-2014), the "folk fanzine" *Caravan* (published independently 1957-1960), and the amateur "Journal of Washington Square Folklore," *Gardylloo* (1959-1960). These magazines existed alongside literally countless songbooks, publications aimed at folk fans, TV shows and radio programs, and of course folk records themselves with copious liner notes—some ephemeral and some well-known to this day. Almost all could surely be found at one point or

another in a tiny shop that became the intellectual heart of the revival upon its opening in 1957, Izzy Young's Folklore Center.⁵

Several cultural histories launched a wave of folk revival scholarship in the 1990s and early 2000s when those who experienced the folk revival and went on to study it reached the book publishing phase of their academic careers: Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (1996) and Ronald D. Cohen's *"Wasn't That a Time!" Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Revival* (1995), followed in 2002 by his comprehensive *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society 1940-1970*.⁶ These books made an important intervention in popular music studies, arguing for the cultural significance of folk music and against previously held academic notions that, in one scholar Graeme Smith's words, "folk was hopelessly romantic, a bourgeois distortion and containment of subaltern musical forms."⁷

Though these histories too often conflate meticulous documentation with critical analysis, they are valuable in that they present extremely detailed narrations of the folk revival from its roots in the 1930s to the 1960s and make mention of an

⁵ The following is small selection of typical kinds of sources from the community, ordered by year: Pete Seeger, "How Hootenanny Came to Be," in *Sing Out!* 5, no. 4 (Autumn 1955): 32-33; D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1959); Barry Kornfeld, "Folksinging in Washington Square," in *Caravan* (1959); Alan Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began* (El Dorado: Delta, 1970). Also see: Izzy Young's monthly newsletter at The Folklore Center Archives, NYU Bobst Library, New York, New York.

⁷ Graeme Smith, "Wasn't That a Time: Review Essay" in *Popular Music* 16, no. 1 (1997), 127-130. For another early defense of folk music's importance, see Simon Frith, "The magic that can set you free: The ideology of folk and the myth of the rock community" in *Popular Music*, no. 2 (1981), 159-168.

enormous collection of performers, journalists, activists, managers, organizers, publications, venues, songs—the entire cultural apparatus of folk. They are also helpful to my project in that they highlight and historicize the folk revival’s interest in authenticity while maintaining a level of scholarly skepticism surrounding the perception thereof in songs and performers.⁸ A giant in the field, Ronald Cohen points out in *Rainbow Quest* that the pursuit of “authenticity” in the folk movement was multi-pronged; first and, perhaps, foremost, performers sought to sing authentically, i.e. in the exact style, often with the exact accents and dialects, of the communities that originally produced the songs. Inextricable from the folk community’s aesthetic pursuit of authenticity were its ideological leanings—which were, broadly, egalitarian, anti-capitalist, anti-materialist, and anti-industrial. Singing the songs of rural and oppressed peoples with fanatical attention to style became synonymous with fighting a political battle against the corruption of the modern, industrialized world. Cohen, as well as Cantwell and others, track paradoxical shifts in this aesthetic rigidity over the years of the folk movement, highlighting the undeniably reality that “folk” is ultimately a category in flux—a

⁸ Ronald D. Cohen, *Wasn’t That a Time!* (Boston: Scarecrow Press, 1995) and Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1996). Also see Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society 1940-1970* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002); Richard A. Reuss and Joanne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music & Left Wing Politics 1927-1957* (Boston: Scarecrow Press, 2000); Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?* (London: A&C Black, 2006); Ronald Cohen and Stephen Petrus, *Folk City* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015).

battleground for certain groups' values and self-identification.⁹ This understanding of the paradoxically unacknowledged quest for identity at the core of the folk community's obsession with authenticity forms an important foundation for my work.

A fascinating and influential addition to such scholar-participant narratives is folksinger Dave Van Ronk's memoir, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, which was cowritten with prolific folk music historian Elijah Wald and published posthumously in 2005. (This memoir propelled a narrative of the folk revival, at least briefly, into the popular imagination in 2013 when the Coen Brothers used it as the basis for their film *Inside Llewyn Davis*.) Though the book follows a conventional memoir format, Van Ronk's voice is very much that of an expert leading readers through the intricacies of the Village and broader folk scene. It is replete with definitions and taxonomies, all delivered with a tone of humorous irreverence and ironic authority typical of many on the scene.¹⁰ Van Ronk provides one of the clearest reflections of how his community of musicians understood the term *folk music* itself. Though "folk" has become an all-encompassing categorization for essentially any song performed with acoustic instruments as of 2022, he explains that the definition was

⁹ Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 14, 60, 172-179. Also see: Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 29-31, as well as Van Ronk's explanation of the importance of the 1953 release of music collector Harry Smith's six-LP set the *Anthology of American Folk Music* via Folkways Records. He writes, "This was very important for my generation, especially those of us I consider the 'neo-ethnics,' because we were trying not only to sing traditional songs but also to assimilate the styles of the rural players. Without the Harry Smith *Anthology* we could not have existed, because there was no other way for us to get hold of that material" (46-47).

¹⁰ Van Ronk, *Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 31-46

far more specific when he began performing in the period this dissertation highlights:

In the 1950s, as for at least the previous two hundred years, we used the word “folk” to describe a process rather than a style. By this definition—to which I still subscribe—folk songs are the musical expression of preliterate or illiterate communities and necessarily pass from singer to singer. Flamenco is folk music; Bulgarian vocal ensembles are folk music; African drumming is folk music; and “Barbara Allen” is folk music. Clearly, there is little stylistic similarity here. But all this music developed through a process of oral repetition.¹¹

In this dissertation, I take this definition and those aligned with it as a starting point for understanding the music the performers I am studying valued. The notion of folk as process gives this genre categorization a kind of ambiguity that has made this topic fertile ground for many a scholar.

Filene

In my estimation of the field, American Studies scholar Benjamin Filene’s 2000 book, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*, ushered the study of the folk revival into a more nuanced era by taking an interdisciplinary approach to look more deeply at the contradictions involved in folk’s pursuit of authenticity. Filene incisively tackles the tense dynamics of race and class in the folk movement head-on by turning his focus away from the performers and onto the “middlemen”—folklorists, producers, managers, radio programmers, and others—who “discovered” folk musicians and helped them achieve popularity, all the while canonizing their work in a growing body of songs celebrated as “pure” and “anti-

¹¹ Ibid., 27-28.

commercial.”¹² What Filene contributes to the field here is a much-needed suspicion about the assumptions that underlay the glorification of these songs and performers; pointing to the way Alan Lomax paraded Leadbelly through New York City for performances following his release from Angola prison in Louisiana, Filene identifies a deeply problematic “outsider populism” at work in the early folk revival. This “tendency in the thirties to locate America’s strength and vibrancy in the margins of society” involved an elitist—and, in the case of performers of color, racist—reassertion of the power dynamics that put those people in the margins to begin with, even as it celebrated and, at least on the surface, emulated them.¹³ Filene traces this “outsider populism” all the way to the peak years of the 1950s and 60s, when the folk revival attracted

an early wave of the 1960s counterculture, pushing against what they perceived to be the empty homogeneity of their suburban backgrounds, the hypocrisy of a government that saved the world for democracy and then launched the House Un-American Activities Committee, and the schizophrenia of a life filled with unprecedented abundance yet shadowed by fears of annihilation. For these young people, the possibility that [folklorist and performer Pete] Seeger held out of entering into the world of the folk appealed as a chance to build a richer, more morally grounded, more thoroughly integrated life.¹⁴

In these peak decades, we shift focus from the folklorist-performer relationship to the self-styled urban folksingers. Here we come to characters like Bob Dylan, almost perfectly impersonating Woody Guthrie, with fabricated tales of riding rails in New Mexico to boot; and Dave Van Ronk, learning the songs for which

¹² Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 204.

he became famous, like “Cocaine Blues,” from the rural southern reverend Blind Gary Davis.

Overall, in the pursuit of authenticity, the folk revival began with urban intelligentsia of the 1930s and 1940s putting marginalized musicians on display, and entered the mainstream in the 1950s and 1960s with disillusioned, mostly white and mostly middle-class youths singing those people’s songs and imitating their styles. I appreciate Filene’s argument, because he is able to explore the contradictions within the folk movement without getting trapped in the question of “whether or not” these performers were “authentic.” Furthermore, he neither casts rural folk performers as powerless victims of the urban elite, nor attacks the urban stars of the scene for their inauthenticity. He writes,

My focus is on illuminating the cultural matrix within which these figures operated, not on exposing their wrongdoings. I do not delve extensively into the financial exploitations, racial prejudice, and political corruptions that surfaced in the brokers’ relationships with folk performers...I am more interested in understanding their intentions and in tracing their influence than in judging their ethics.¹⁵

Overall, what his focus contributes to the field is a deepened awareness of the instability of the “folk” music cannon, the politics involved in its formation, and its evolution over the decades of the movement and beyond.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ For more on Alan Lomax and his work with the rural poor, see John Szwed, *Alan Lomax: The Man Who Recorded the World* (New York: Viking, 2010); David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard Books, 1981). For further analysis of race within the folk movement, see the chapter on Leadbelly in Stacy Morgan, *Frankie and Johnny: Race, Gender, and the Work of African American Folklore in 1930s America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017). Also see Karl Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

In this dissertation, I see myself building directly upon Filene's framework, not challenging his notion of outsider populism, but expanding upon it to consider how this phenomenon impacted women in particular as both fans and performers. In his foregrounding of class and race as they relate to folk performance, Filene fails to consider the interwoven influence of sexuality in the shaping of this musical tradition, especially with regard to women and the heteronormative pressures of the early cold war. Different groups got different positives and negatives from their experience of folk music, and women are no exception. Still, Filene barely broaches the topic of gender. His explanation of this oversight is questionable: "I chose the main protagonists in my chapters (all men) to serve as case studies representing different approaches to roots music. Their stories are intended to illuminate the work of other brokers, both male and female, who are not directly represented." Unsurprisingly, Bob Dylan gets his own chapter, but Joan Baez does not.¹⁷

The fact of the matter is that men experienced the folk revival quite differently from women; specifically white men, who become the focus of Filene's book, experienced kinds of comfort and expressive freedom (as well as expressive constraints) that women of color did not. The women performers whose careers have filled this dissertation receive but a few pages in Filene's analysis, even though they were as impacted—I would argue even *more* impacted—by the curatorial voices of the music industry and folk world's middlemen as any of the men Filene emphasizes. The linchpin for analysis becomes sexuality and power—a woman's

¹⁷ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 6. His parenthetical.

lack thereof in a masculinist world like the 1950s folk scene. Therefore, “illuminate” may not quite be the word for what Filene does for these women’s stories.¹⁸

Historiography of Women in Folk Music

Where women of the folk movement *have* received scholarly analysis, it is not within the specific context of folk movement history. Here I would like to bring up several books that touch on the topics and performers in which I am interested with a feminist lens. In terms of the roots of the folk revival, Michael Denning’s writing on feminism within the Popular Front provides an important foundation for my project. While certain feminist cultural historians have mounted a harsh critique on the culture of the era for its perceived exclusion of women, I find use in Denning’s rebuttal via his rather unexpected analysis of the figure of the female garment worker.¹⁹ Showing that there was more to Popular Front culture than “sentimental maternalism” and “the virile male working class body,” he traces the “labor feminist aesthetic” promoted by such artists as clothing designer Elizabeth Hawes and writer Tillie Olson.²⁰ He writes, “The Popular Front activism of these young women workers was, one might say, a combination of industrial feminism and the flapper.”²¹ Unfortunately, Denning does not extend his analysis of Popular Front

¹⁸ For an analysis of gender in the historiography of the Sixties, particularly the exclusion of women’s stories, see Alice Echols, “‘We Gotta Get Out of This Place’: Notes Toward a Remapping of the Sixties,” in *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 9-34.

¹⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 146-151.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

feminism to the female folksingers of this era, like Aunt Molly Jackson, the women of the Carter family, or any one of the countless anonymous female singers in rural eras of the time. Still, his work in this area informs my understanding of the way the aesthetic influence of the Old Left bled into the feminist tides of the folk revival.

Denning also took an important step in the study of the women of the folk revival with his analysis of what he terms “the emergence of a Popular Front cabaret blues, a fusion of jazz and political cabaret, of Louis Armstrong and Bertolt Brecht, of Bessie Smith and Lotte Lenya” in 1939 at the Greenwich Village nightclub Café Society. Here the complex intersections between the history of the folk revival and the history of jazz in the United States become murky. Despite physical proximity and stylistic similarity to other folk musicians, Billie Holiday and her hit “Strange Fruit” (the central subject of Denning’s analysis) existed in a slightly different context. Highlighting the insularity of the folk scene and the instability of its definitions of “folk,” Holiday was considered a jazz entertainer and rarely made it into folk’s discursive worlds—songbooks, record compilations, and the like. That said, Denning’s adept analysis of the political work she did on stage telling a chilling story of lynching night after night is one of the foundational models for my own work.

Denning writes that female cabaret performers “are often dismissed as mere ‘nightclub’ performers, outside the main traditions of jazz and blues, but their work grew out of the African American radicalism of Harlem and the Carolina Piedmont.” Ironically, many Folk Women (who often fit more neatly than the enigmatic Holiday into the “traditions of jazz and blues”) would face similar critiques pairing polished

performance with diluted radicalism. In many cases, my work has been to push against those critiques the way Denning does.

Another foundational study, covering roughly the same historical period as Denning, is Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Again, Davis focuses on female blues and jazz singers of the 1920s-1940s who—given their clear role as “entertainers” who were singing self-penned songs or songs written for them—found their status as authentic “folk” contested. Still, Davis's analysis of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday is critical to my own understanding of the way 20th century performers negotiated and shifted their audience's expectations of Blackness and womanhood. Davis analyzes the ways in which these performers subverted middle-class standards of respectability with subversive themes and imagery touching on solo travel, sexual agency, and queer desire.^{22,23} All three of these thematic elements and lived realities seeped into the careers of the women I analyze, placing Davis's blues women very much in the status of the Folk Women despite their discursive exclusion from the folk world.

Building on Davis's work, in *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement*, cultural historian Ruth Feldstein traces

²² The intermingling of jazz, blues, and folk is a topic ripe for further study, especially with regard to female musicians and the often impossibly dense musicological debates surrounding their classification throughout the 20th century. Van Ronk writes, for example, “There had been a good deal of interaction between jazz and some of the older folk styles [...] When Bessie Smith sang something like ‘Backwater Blues,’ was it jazz or folk music? I would hate to have to answer that question, because there simply is no clear distinction, no firm line dividing the two” (44).

²³ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 66-90.

the impact of black female singers on the civil rights movement. Finding problems similar to what I have found in folk movement scholarship, Feldstein points out a tendency in scholarship on the culture of the civil rights movement to couple of radicalism with black masculinity. Her primary goal in *How It Feels To Be Free* is to correct this historiographical issue by showing ways in which six African American women performers

used their status as celebrities to support black activism and all six played with gender roles as they performed black womanhood in new and distinct ways. In their public performance and their political protests—and crucially in myriad instances when the lines between those blurred—they drew attention to unequal relationships between blacks and whites *and* to relationships between men and women.²⁴

Of the performers Feldstein profiles, African folksinger Miriam Makeba and Nina Simone are two performers who had the most proximity stylistically and physically to the New York City folk scene. While Makeba gained entry into the folk revival as one of its rare international, “world music” stars, Simone was generally relegated to an ambiguous jazz-leaning category of her own, very rarely counted as a folksinger despite many of the same songs folksingers were performing featuring in her repertoire. For this reason, Feldstein does not contend with the specific Depression-era roots of folk or the 1950s standards of folk authenticity the way I do; nonetheless, her attention to her subjects’ ability to challenge their audiences’ expectations of black femininity by pushing back against narratives that linked their success to men in their lives and expressing their sexuality on their own terms has

²⁴ Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels To Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 6.

been critical to my understanding of Odetta's negotiation of the folk world. About Makeba, Feldstein writes, "she sometimes appeared to be simple and refined and sometimes simple and exotic, but she was always distant from images of sexuality and vice with which black women performers had been linked for many years."²⁵ Simone challenged racial and gender discrimination in her own way by using "music, lyrics, and performance strategies on and offstage to develop black power perspectives that were free of misogyny and claimed black women's experiences as relevant."²⁶ In a different context, I find Odetta adopting many of these same strategies. Sadly, white folk stars would eclipse her before she could attain the level of political influence that the Black women performers who did not exist solely within the folk sphere did.

I juxtapose Feldstein's work against feminist cultural histories of the 1960s that also bring white performers into the equation, thereby tackling other versions of femininity that are important to my dissertation. In *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence, and Class in 1960s Music*, a cohort of feminist musicologists presents "the first interdisciplinary work to link close musical readings with rigorous cultural analysis in the treatment of artists such as Martha and the Vandellas, The Crystals, The Blossoms, Brenda Lee, Dusty Springfield, Lulu, Tina Turner, and Marianne Faithfull." Again, there are no folksingers here, but the

²⁵ Ibid., 75.

²⁶ Nina Simone is a figure worth much more thought than the scope of this dissertation allows. See analyses of her performances in Malik Gaines, *Black Performance on the Outskirts of the Left: A History of the Impossible* (New York: NYU Press, 2017). Also see Daphne Brooks, "Nina Simone's Triple Play," in *Callaloo* 34.1 (Winter 2011): 176-197.

essays included illuminate many themes important to my research. Laurie Stras, for example, contributes an essay about female vocal technique in the late 1950s, which analyzes the way women of 1960s girl groups were beginning to challenge traditionally “feminine” styles of singing even as they were sexualized and gendered physically with matching tight dresses, elaborate hair-dos, etc.²⁷ While Odetta becomes the central figure of much of this dissertation, the vast majority of female folk performers were white and were operating within such matrices of expectation—oppressive in their own very different ways.

Theoretical Perspectives

I see this dissertation as a cultural history informed by performance theory. For me, it is impossible to read about the Village in the era of the folk revival and not begin thinking of a carnival; to this day, despite an undeniable loss of bohemian spirit and financial accessibility, the neighborhood retains glimmers of that circus-like character—if only nostalgically—with street performers carrying on in Washington Square Park, outdoor dining thriving, and a music scene vaguely ongoing. This is all to say, I began to conceive of the Village as carnivalesque in the Bakhtinian sense long before I began writing this dissertation, and I am still guided by the idea of spaces that allow for a kind of extended performance event by which

²⁷ *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence, and Class in 1960s Music*, ed. Laurie Stras (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2010); Suzanne Cusick, “On Musical Performances of Gender and Sex,” in Elaine Barkin and Lydia Hamessley, Eds., *Audible Traces: Gender, Identity and Music* (Los Angeles: Carciofoli Verlagshau, 1999); Cynthia Cyrus, “Selling an Image: Girl Groups of the 1960s,” in *Popular Music* 22.2 (2003): 173-193.

normative values and social hierarchies are temporarily shaken.²⁸ Even as my research has gravitated away from the Village in many sections, my initial interest in thinking about the carnivalesque playing out there with particular intensity helped illuminate those qualities in the folk scene at large. In Chapter 3, I expand upon this idea with in-depth performance analysis.

Bakhtin is, of course, considered outdated at this point in the academy, and many other theorists have added crucial awareness of race, gender, and sexuality to the study of American popular performance. Shane Vogel's brilliant analysis of the Harlem cabaret scene of the 1920s, rooted in queer performance theory that José Esteban Muñoz pioneered, has provided an aspirational model as well as a framework for my understanding of female folk performance. Though rooted in the Progressive Era and focused entirely on Black women, Vogel's understanding of the dialectical tensions between "deviant sexualities" in performance and the persistence of uplift ideology is the foundation on which I stand as I move into the 1950s. In a passage that aligns closely with my own understanding of the complexities of live popular performance, he writes,

A primary concern of this book is to qualify the celebratory and utopic potential of the cabaret's public intimacy and intimate relations (a celebration and utopic impulse I believe in) with the ways in which this intimacy allowed for a multiplicity of psychic and physical violence [...] The rhythms of the Cabaret School and the performances and intimacies of everynight life were especially susceptible to being heard, seen, and read wrongly. The intimacy in the cabaret was not the ludic and carnivalesque free-for-all that slumming bohemians and primitivists may have seen—or, rather, invented—in their trips to the cabaret.²⁹

²⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1965).

²⁹ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 24.

Just as Vogel traces the way cabaret performers “negotiated the sexual and racial possibilities of the cabaret with its racial, gendered, and classed violences,” I am interested in the push and pull between oppression and liberation for women on folk stages. However, while Vogel ultimately finds that the cabaret allowed for “the laboring into existence of queer worlds and worlds of racial amelioration,” I am afraid that folk feminism, in my current understanding, did not lead to quite as optimistic a result, despite the steps it facilitated toward greater social equality.³⁰

Chapter Summaries, Defense of Omissions

In order to trace the development of this contradictory yet powerful form of feminism within and through the folk community, this dissertation opens with a gendered genealogy of the folk women’s early years in the 1950s in Chapter 1. Building on the work of feminist cultural historians and theorists of the early Cold War, I synthesize the many layers that shaped femininity and sexuality in the years that directly preceded the folk revival. This exploration focuses on major social and political trends that the folk women and their fans experienced in the wake of World War II, investigating the impact of economic prosperity, overbearing patriotism, and the stirrings of the civil rights movement on the growing confusion surrounding the role of women in society in this era. I weave the major cultural force of the era, rock ‘n’ roll, into my discussion of debates surrounding womanhood and female sexuality, looking at the unexpected ways rock performance empowered young

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

women and led many to the folk movement. With this forward momentum toward liberation through music established, I close with a look at the unconventional and leftist backgrounds that the folk women shared. My ultimate goal in this chapter is to show how global politics and highly repressive domestic mores of gender and sexuality came together with the musical backgrounds of the folk women in a mixture that would become, if not overtly explosive (given folk music's relatively quiet nature), subtly subversive.

In Chapter 2, I introduce Odetta in 1957 as folk's most famous female star and begin to map some of the most influential spaces of the start of the folk revival, with emphasis on the folk scene of Greenwich Village in New York City. With the broader cultural dynamics of the decade already established, my aim in this chapter is to trace ways in which Odetta radically challenged postwar conventions of femininity through folk performance and to provide evidence of her immense popularity, influence, and importance at this moment of the folk revival. The urgent questions become *how* and *why* a performer as radical as Odetta had broken through to occupy her brief but pivotal zenith. These queries lead me backward into an investigation of the racial and gendered dynamics of American folk through the decades—with particular attention to the outsider populism of the Depression era—allowing me to contextualize the idea of folk feminism at which I arrive by the chapter's end.

In Chapter 3, I continue the task of rehashing the narrative of the folk revival with Odetta's career and influence front and center. As I map her trajectory through the climactic years between 1957-1959, I focus on the nuances of her style and ask

how she navigated the racial politics of the folk revival through performance. Employing Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque as interpreted by Barbara Ehrenreich, I arrive at key element of my argument surrounding Odetta's exceptional ability to employ folk performance to its fullest—i.e. to perform not just her identity as a Black woman, but to channel a vast array of contrasting identities. In embodying a multiplicity of perspectives, I argue, Odetta broke American folk performance out of its essentialist tendencies and opened a clean slate for a new generation of folk performers, all the while working toward her own personal liberation from racialized oppression.

In Chapter 4, Joan Baez enters this dissertation's narrative toward its end as a counterpoint to Odetta and a helpful weathervane for the folk community's evolving expectations of its female performers. Continuing to draw upon the foundational work of Black feminist scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, I use Baez as a foil to look at the ways the folk world denied Odetta the opportunity to express her gender and sexuality through folk song while still glorifying her as folk's queen. I then shift focus to Baez's rise, mapping the ways in which her perceived whiteness and youth allowed her to step onto a stage Odetta had cleared for her and build upon Odetta's style and success.

Ultimately, I find that Baez was able to rise to the top of the folk world and the counterculture by embodying a new kind of womanhood that conformed to folk's conventions in terms of optics and sound, but rejected them in terms of attitude, goals, and message. If folk feminism is a story of taking one step forward and two back over and over, there is no greater metaphor for the phenomenon

overall than the cold reality of Baez's rise to national prominence in the context of Odetta's fall.

Final Notes

When I began this project, I set out to write a history of the folk women of Greenwich Village specifically. My project took a turn when I realized that the two women at the core of the story I needed to trace were operating on the national level, crisscrossing the country for tours, protests, and other events throughout the folk revival. Thus, while I agree with scholarship that marks Greenwich Village as the nexus of the folk revival and look into the lives of women in that locale, I urge readers to think beyond the Village and its ever-alluring mythology in their understanding of the folk revival. Odetta, for her part, launched her folk career in California, established a homebase in close proximity to the folk clubs of Chicago, retained roots in Alabama, toured through the South, and performed off and on in the Village. Baez grew up in California, found a folk community in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and experienced her first taste of national fame in Newport, Rhode Island. The fact of the matter is Bob Dylan got his start in the Village, but these women didn't. There were certainly many lesser-known folk women doing incredible work on the local level in Greenwich Village in the same years I follow—Sis Cunningham, Lee Shaw (nee Hoffman), Cynthia Gooding, and Barbara Dane, to name only a few—but I felt there was a broader story to map out and analyze first. I hope this initial attempt at creating a feminist history of the folk revival will provide a foundation for scholars and writers from diverse backgrounds to build upon.

As for explaining the two folk women I choose to emphasize at the expense of countless others—both national and local stars—I can only say that when you discover that two such musical leviathans have not received critical attention more than fifty years after their heyday, you begin with them.³¹

³¹ For those interested in tracking stories of other prominent folk women, starting points exist and are coming out yearly, mostly in the form of biographies and memoirs. For national stars other than Odetta and Baez, see Carly Simon, *Boys in the Trees: A Memoir* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2015); David Yaffe, *Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017); Janis Ian. *Society's Child: My Autobiography* (New York: Penguin, 2008); Judy Collins, *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes: My Life in Music* (New York: Random House, 2011); Peggy Seeger, *First Time Ever: A Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017); Ronnie Gilbert, *A Radical Life in Song* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Sheila Weller, *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon and the Journey of a Generation* (New York: Atria, 2011). For work more focused on local folk scenes with information on women's roles, see Alix Dobkin, *My Red Blood: A Memoir of Growing Up Communist, Coming Onto the Greenwich Village Folk Scene, and Coming Out in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Alyson Books, 2009); Bess Lomax Hawes, *Sing It Pretty: A Memoir* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Kim Ruehl, *A Singing Army: Zilphia Horton and the Highlander Folk School* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021); Suze Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time: A Memoir of Greenwich Village in the Sixties* (New York: Broadway Books, 2008).

Chapter 1: The Paths to Folk Womanhood, 1945-1957

What Is a Girl?

On Sunday, August 18, 1957, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a story entitled, “What is a Girl?”. In it, journalist Dorothy Barclay reviews writer Clarence G. Moser’s recent book, *Understanding Girls*, a follow-up to his 1953 text, *Understanding Boys*. Well-received and widely-read, Moser’s books are framed as essential reading for adults attempting to navigate “the current ‘confusion in sex roles’ which has been causing considerable discussion within deep-thinking, forward-looking parent groups today.” A photo of a female child with cherub-cheeks, pigtails, and a slightly ominous expression is captioned, “THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE facing little girls heightens their need for special understanding.” The article reads not as a book review with any intent to critique, but as a summary for those parents who might not have time to buy Moser’s book, with the vast majority devoted to reporting girls’ supposedly proven “differences.” They are what you might expect: girls talk more and earlier than boys; read better than boys; and “excel boys in self-control, persistence, cooperativeness, moral knowledge and moral opinions. Even children condemn aggressiveness in a girl more than in a boy.” Boys’ doodles—taken as research from a Y.M.C.A. waste basket where Mr. Moser works—tend to be caricatures, tanks, and cars; girls’ doodles are “more elaborately detailed” people, animals, and flowers.¹

¹ Dorothy Barclay, “What is a Girl?”, *New York Times*, August 18, 1957.

What is more noteworthy than the broad outlines of traditional gender roles repeating themselves through these lines is the anxiety embedded in the very title of the article and throughout it. That the Sunday readership of the *New York Times* was presumably interested in reading about the very definition of a girl speaks to a massive shift rumbling beneath the foundation of American society.² Reflecting this uncomfortable awareness—and never challenging the (male) experts—Barclay opens the story:

In many a high school today, a wit among the specialists commented recently, only one clear line of distinction is drawn between the sexes—boys play football and girls cheer.

Boys take cooking and sewing, girls go to shop. Both get training in child care. Both are encouraged to train for the same careers. [...] In pursuit of the admirable aim of developing a 'true equalitarian partnership,' men and women individually and jointly have blurred the old distinctions between male and female that once made life more orderly.

In a voice perhaps more motherly than journalistic, Barclay goes on to ask, "Does this mean, then, that the differences today between boys and girls are so

² There exists an extensive body of scholarship on shifting notions of gender and sexuality in the postwar period. For a foundational analysis of the rigidity of normative gender roles and sexual politics in relation to cold war foreign policy, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988). Also see Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (London: Penguin, 1995); Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). For work focused on expectations of women of color and lower-income women in this era, see essays in Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994). For selected broader investigations of gender through the 20th century, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983); John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). An overarching theme that unites these works—one that has been critical to my understanding of gender in the folk movement—is that contradiction and unclear messaging shaped the social and cultural standards to which all American women were held in the postwar era. For a foundational study of the roots of such contradiction, see Carroll Smith Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985).

insignificant that parents need give no thought to them in the raising of their sons and daughters?" Then, she drives to the core ideas meant to guide parents through these unsettling questions:

In one man's opinion, the answer is definitely, "No." Clarence G. Moser is the man. [...] The "confusion of sex roles" so widely discusses is real and disturbing to both boys and girls, he agrees. But, he holds, nothing is to be gained by treating youngsters as if the final equalitarian aim had already been achieved. Whether the causes are biological or social is immaterial—boys and girls are different: they still face different expectations in the future.

Despite the lip service granted to progress and equality between the sexes, the experts are quite clear in the intended takeaway of their essentialist logic: to raise successful children, parents must reaffirm a rigid gender binary that casts girls in a part that requires them to be passive, polite, and obedient by telling them that is simply what they are. Of course, there is no recognition of the social performance being demanded here, as such a conversation would destabilize the entire message and lead readers right back to the original question. In a culminating paragraph that aims to reassure, Barclay declares:

Here, then, is the girl—conforming, urgently needing the approval and praise of adults, skillful, sensitive. Before her, as matters are tending today, lies a most unsettled future. She has a many-faceted role open to her, no aspect of which will be under her sole control. A major ingredient in her future happiness and success will be the expectations and standards of feminine behavior with which some unknown little boy is now being imbued.³

We are left with the distinct feeling that there are serious cracks in this rather disturbing plan to restore the "orderly" life presented as slipping through readers' hands. At the core of the tension, there is the recognition that women deserve equality—an awareness that undercuts almost everything else asserted in the

³ Barclay, "What is a Girl?".

article, right down to the very fact that *Understanding Girls* was published four years after *Understanding Boys*, not necessarily an afterthought, but also not a priority; at best, a more complex research project due to the increasingly more complex subject at hand.

Bracketed by years reflecting the childhood and adolescence of the girls who would become some of the folk revival's key participants, this chapter aims to trace their paths to lives in folk music and to account for the social, political, and economic forces that positioned to become feminist forebears a decade before the women's liberation movement began. Though many studies of youth culture of the Fifties exists, this gendered genealogy of the Folk Women understands them as a group set apart from their peers in nuanced but critical ways that primed them not just to be folk fans, but to be performers and leaders with political voices, artistic agency, and fierce independence no other group of female performers in American popular culture had yet been able to embody.⁴ The gender "confusion" of their era,

⁴ My thoughts in this chapter fall at the intersection of gendered studies of Fifties youth cultures and histories of the roots of second-wave feminism in the United States. For more on young women's lives in the era, in addition to Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, see Liz Heron, ed., *Truth, Dare, or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties* (London: Virago, 1985); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (New York: Beacon Books, 1992); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (London: Oxford UP, 2011); Mary Rizzo, *Class Acts: Young Men and the Rise of Lifestyle* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2015). For works focused on the postwar beginnings of women's liberation with intersectional awareness, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2003); Alice Echols and Ellen Willis, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); and Wini Breines, *The Trouble Between Us: An Uneasy History of White and Black Women in the Feminist Movement* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006). For personal takes on the stirrings of women's liberation, I have also drawn on several remarkable female memoirs of the era. See Hettie Jones, *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Dutton, 1990); Joyce Johnson, *Minor*

though not always easy to navigate, eventually became the key component in their early steps toward careers in musical performance that would liberate them personally while also helping to break down the repressive expectations of American femininity.

The Question of Postwar Womanhood

Looking just slightly past mainstream news outlets, we find the anxiety expressed in *What Is a Girl?* in full form. Just a few months following the publication of that story, in February 1958, a local newspaper across the country in Palo Alto, California ran an article about an unruly high school student, a teenage girl named Joan Baez. Her school had announced a plan for a routine air raid drill, and instead of finding a way home as she was ordered, supposedly to sit in a cellar or in one of America's ubiquitous bomb shelters, Baez had decided to stage a protest against the "misleading propaganda" of the early Cold War. She had refused to leave school, because she had read her fathers' physics books on her own time and confirmed that no person could get home fast enough to survive a missile in motion from Moscow to California.⁵ The newspaper reported,

Miss Baez said staying at school was her own idea. While her father had called the plan for the drill 'unrealistic' in a letter published in the Time Forum on Jan. 14, she said he had actually discouraged her from making an issue about it [...] Principal Ray Ruppel said she was allowed to stay in the office until 3. He did not try to get her to go home early because he knew about the family's stand on the matter. Ruppel said

Characters (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983); and Diane Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (San Francisco: Last Gasp of San Francisco, 1988; originally 1969).

⁵ Joan Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 41.

Miss Baez is a good student and “a very fine person. Joan was awfully nice about it,” he commented. And he said he admired her for standing by her convictions.⁶

Baez’s action was not only controversial in its opposition to federally sanctioned systems of safety, but also in its embodiment of the related “confusion of sex roles” playing out through expectations of girls in this historical moment. Public protest, a form of performance not yet woven into the fabric of American politics, was certainly not acceptable for a female whose life was meant to be almost completely confined to the domestic sphere. (This protest would have been controversial even for a middle-class teenage boy in 1958.) Adding to the gender “confusion” of this situation, two male authority figures, in opposition to Moser’s advice to parents in *Understanding Girls*, had essentially supported this young woman in her rebellious act; at least, they had not punished her. As if to calm its readers or justify this lack of punishment, the article emphasized via the school principal how “awfully nice” Baez was despite her provocative nonconformity.⁷

A woman making a leftist stand was such a threat to both the feverish patriotism and, more importantly, the rigid patriarchy of 1950s America that Baez was immediately attacked as a “communist infiltrator” in a “stream” of letters to the editor of the *Palo Alto Times*. A kind of shaming that befell many postwar women who questioned the status quo, this conflation of pacifism with anti-American

⁶ “‘Conscientious objector’ stays at school during test,” *Palo Alto Times*, February 7, 1958.

⁷ Ray Ruppel qtd. in “‘Conscientious Objector.’”

communist leanings did not hinder Baez.⁸ She had already begun to sing locally and pressed forward with performances and political activities during this period. At the same time, she kept a foot in the world of conventional teenage femininity. With her characteristic humor, she notes in her memoir, “Having opposed it before, my father now seemed pleased with my bold public action: I may have proven to him that I was serious about something aside from boys.” Furthermore, in her local newspaper interview, she pointed out that most students took the drill as an excuse to throw parties. The article quotes her coyly adding, “I was invited to one myself.”

Baez could not have possibly known how perfectly she embodied the contradictions that were tearing at the seams of American womanhood in that moment. Here was a teenage girl whose two main interests were boys and politics, followed shortly by singing and playing guitar as a means of exploring these dual fascinations. In one way, she conformed to heteronormative messaging that told young women they existed primarily as future housewives for men, future mothers for their children. At the same time, she was also acting out the slightly fainter but increasingly present message that women could and even should pursue serious careers, that they deserved equality in this postwar democratic society. Baez was

⁸ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 42. Also relevant here is that in 1959, Baez struck up an influential friendship with prominent anti-war activist Ira Sandperl. For more on sexist popular depictions of left-leaning women, see Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 48; May, *Homeward Bound*, 94; Also see Donna Penn’s work on the demonization of queer women postwar in Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver*, 364-377. For broader analysis of women in the early Cold War, in addition to relevant chapters of these books, see Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001); Tanya Roth, *Her Cold War: Women in the U.S. Military, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

attacked as a somehow-offensive, even dangerous girl, but the irony was that she was mostly enacting a mixed message that could be found reading between the lines of the average mainstream publication advising women and girls how to behave in that moment.⁹

Though Baez would rise to the top of the folk stratosphere by the early 1960s, as of the late-Fifties, she was just one teenage girl among many experiencing one of the more storied adolescences in American history, one that would eventually lead masses of white, middle-class kids to the folk revival. The key contextual information here is the close of World War II. Following the conflict, the country was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom. The gross national product rose from 200 thousand million in 1940, to 300 thousand million in 1950, to 500 thousand million in 1960. Though individuals' concrete experiences were far more nuanced, dominant currents of popular culture encouraged a generation that had just returned from a traumatic war to seek a quiet, idealized life—one in which soldiers returned from battle to the office and women were expected to return from their wartime work to a focus on their families.¹⁰ Furthermore, in the context of the Cold War, mainstream American culture increasingly linked capitalist competition,

⁹ Others have briefly noted such cultural contradiction epitomized by Baez's choices and style: Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 146-147; Elizabeth Thomson, *Joan Baez: The Last Leaf* (London: Palazzo, 2020), 47-57. For other cursory analyses of Baez's feminist qualities, see Gillian Gaar, *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (New York: Seal Press, 1992), 83-87; Leslie Berman, "Charmed Circle: Folksingers and Singer-Songwriters" in *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, Ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House, 1997): 125-134; Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: The Saga of Women in Country Music* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), 282-287 .

¹⁰ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 54-56; May, *Homeward Bound*, 96, 159; Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver*, 1-5, 37-39, 50-51, 97.

consumerism, and affluence with patriotism.¹¹ Alongside a marked expansion of the middle class, exponential growth of the suburbs, and a wave of corporate mergers came the postwar baby boom. Between 1946 and 1951, 22 million children were born in the country. This number represented just a fraction of the 65 million children born between 1944 and 1961. This massive new generation's economic sway as a market was monumental.¹²

But how did the experience of postwar popular culture differ for girls? What was a young Joan Baez gleaned from all that surrounded her, as opposed to a young Bob Dylan? To begin to answer this immense question, we must recognize that girls (and their mothers) were being singled out as their own isolated mass market following World War II. Awareness of this demographic's power began early; Barclay, for example, wrote in 1957, "There are in this country today some 20,000,000 girls from ages 6 to 17. How, really, do they differ from boys?" The question was pressing not just for the parents reading Barclay's article, but for all sectors of society—politically, economically, spiritually. Defining this powerful new generation and the gender roles within it would be key to the forward motion of the country. The problem was, despite enormous amounts of energy going toward this

¹¹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 153-160.

¹² Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 23-24; Landon Jones, "How 'baby boomers took over the world,'" *The Washington Post*, November 6, 2015; Landon Jones, *Great Expectations: American and the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980); Lyman Stone, "The Boomers Ruined Everything," *The Atlantic*, June 24, 2019; Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 40-43.

definition, the message was anything but clear; contradiction, in fact, became the only certain theme of the lives of girls of the baby boom.

The obvious yet threatening root of this question was that World War II had blown American society apart irrevocably, a process that had stretched through the modern age but which war accelerated exponentially.¹³ In terms of gender and sexuality, the global conflict had dealt a definitive blow to the line that had traditionally separated men's and women's work, and no number of parenting guidebooks or cleaning product ads could force postwar society back into a more "orderly" prewar status quo. Rallied by empowering propaganda campaigns with overtly feminist messages, over 6 million women had joined the domestic workforce during the war, a number that represented one-third of all the jobs held on the home front. Though working-class women and women of color had traditionally worked outside of the home at significantly higher rates than white, middle-class women, even these historically oppressed groups had experienced a dramatic shift in their responsibilities and roles, with the 2 million heavy industry positions that women had occupied during the war as just one example.

At the war's end, the vast majority of working women reported that they *wanted* to continue working outside of the home, even while an increasingly-reactionary culture glamorized male soldiers' triumphs and encouraged women to "make room" for these men to return to the home. In reality, despite the abrupt layoff of 4 million women in 1946, they found their way back to work with teaching,

¹³ Much of my thinking about the instability of social hierarchies in the midst of industrialization is informed broadly by Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1991).

nursing, sales, and secretarial positions. For many married women who were pressured not to work, there was not just a war-born desire to continue working, but also a great contradictory pressure to do so in the new era of constant, costly consumerism. By 1955, female employment in the United States had reached a historic peak. Meanwhile, popular culture continued to practice the art of denial, casting women first as girlfriends left behind during the war, then almost exclusively as wives and mothers despite the fact that they were working long hours.¹⁴

The Folk Women reenter this narrative as the young daughters of these women, the children of a postwar superpower that now found itself locked in a new global conflict, a nuclear standoff with the Soviet Union. While their mothers' worlds were, in the chosen word of many a critic, "schizophrenic" in large part due to the experience of World War II, these girls of the nuclear era were arguably not much better off with these women as their models, compounded by the indecipherable variation of Cold War feminism pushed their way. On one level, the country's triumph in a historic battle for the "free world" provided ad men, politicians, teachers, and the like with fuel for rhetoric that cast these girls as "modern,"

¹⁴ Douglas 54-55; Meyerowitz, ed., 40. For more on the impact of World War II on the sexual division of labor, see William Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Role, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford UP, 197). Chafe notes that, in 1960, twice as many women worked for wages as in 1940, 218. Also see Susan Hartmann, *The Homefront and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982). For thoughts on the impact of the experience of wartime labor on women's attitudes toward independence, see Amanda Littauer, "Introduction: What Are We Waiting For?," in *Bad Girls: Young Women, Sex, and Rebellion Before the Sixties* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 3. For a focused look at the way the war changed social perceptions of women working as musicians, see Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-Girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000).

destined to be somehow different and stronger than their mothers. What is more, maintaining the nation's geopolitical stronghold in the context of the Cold War required such independent, productive womanhood. Secretarial work was no longer the aspirational zenith for a woman; these girls were told they could be—in fact, they *needed* to be—scientists, activists, and defenders of the free world. At the same time, the products and cultural texts being marketed to girls were recycling the same repressive expectations of selflessness and timidity that for centuries had held women back. Summing up the paradox, historian Susan Douglas writes,

By 1960 there were approximately 11.7 million girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen in the United States, and their average allowance of four dollars a week was spent on lipstick, Phisohex, size 30AA stretch bras, *Teen* magazine, Ben Casey shirts, and forty-fives like “Big Bad John.” [...] Like millions of girls of my generation, I was told I was a member of a new, privileged generation whose destiny was more open and exciting than that of my parents. But, at the exact same time, I was told that I couldn't really expect much more than to end up like my mother. Was I supposed to be an American—individualistic, competitive, aggressive, achievement-oriented, tough, independent? This was the kind of person who would help us triumph over *Sputnik*. Or was I supposed to be a girl—nurturing, self-abnegating, passive, dependent, primarily concerned with the well-being of others, and completely indifferent to personal success? By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the answer was starting to become less clear.¹⁵

For an apt example of how this confusion could have infiltrated the childhood of any of the Folk Women, we can turn to the stories—folktales, really—that Disney revived with tremendous popular success throughout the Fifties. Though *Cinderella* (1950) often serves as the most iconic example of the expectations of Fifties femininity, the production history of *Peter Pan* provides a more telling and nuanced display of the kind of ambiguity young girls faced with regard to their expected and desired futures. The 1953 animated film was markedly sexist, with the lead female

¹⁵ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 25-26.

characters reduced to absurdly flirtatious or sorrowfully weak caricatures of their former renderings in Barrie's original work.¹⁶ When the film came out in February, *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther reflected:

The characters are drawn and animated in such a way that they readily recall not only the appearance but the behavior of familiars in other Disney films. That is to say, the well-bred Wendy is a virtual duplicate of the prim Snow White [...] As for the famous Barrie fairy, the crystalline and luminous Tinker Bell, she is as nubile and coquettish as the maiden centaurs in "Fantasia." What's more, Mr. Disney has completely eliminated from his film the spirit of guileless credulity in fairy magic that prevails in the play.

In Crowther's estimation, these changes that downplayed and even attacked independent womanhood were welcome, or at least not worthy of critique. He went on to praise Disney's renderings of the female characters explicitly:

Tinker Bell is a bit of a vulgarity, with her bathing-beauty form and attitude, but even she—like Peter's harem of doting mermaids—is cleverly and expertly drawn. Wendy and the other children, plus Nana, the nurse-maid dog, are merely good, pious Disney creations in a firstclass, feature-length "Disney cartoon."¹⁷

If Wendy was "pious" and that was the recipe for a "firstclass" story for masses of children in 1953, a curveball came just a year later when *Peter Pan* the musical opened in San Francisco and made its way to Broadway. Though part of a centuries-old tradition and not an explicitly-feminist casting decision, Texan star Mary Martin's triumphant performance of the lead male created a slightly more gender-fluid message for girls who might have suddenly seen themselves in the

¹⁶ For an extended analysis of this version's misogynist messaging and how it differed in subtle but important ways from the 1909 play, see Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 30.

¹⁷ Bosley Crowther, "The Screen: Disney's Peter Pan Bows," *The New York Times*, February 12, 1953.

adventurous Peter. After Martin's opening night on Broadway, *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson wrote:

Barrie wrote the libretto. But a lot of the exuberance of Texas has stolen into the legend now. For Miss Martin, looking trim and happy, is the liveliest Peter Pan in the record book. She has more appetite for flying and swinging than any of her more demure predecessors, and she performs as actor, dancer and singer with skill and enjoyment. Peter Pan may have been a proper Victorian originally. He is a healthy, fun-loving American now.

While potential discussions of gender-bending are here subsumed in emphasis on era and nationality, the review certainly celebrates the updated prowess and complexity of the other female characters. While 1953's Wendy was deemed appropriate in her "merely good" and somewhat forgettable iteration, 1954's Wendy is modern and exciting. Atkinson writes, "Kathy Nolan's round-faced beaming Wendy is perfect-girlish without sentimentality." He adds details of the other female stand-outs: "As the mother of the Darling children, Margalo Gillmore gives a beautiful performance. Sondra Lee, as Tiger Lily, the Indian maid, is uproarious. She dances and acts a sort of gutter Indian with a city accent that is mocking and comical."¹⁸ Meanwhile, critics relished in the theatrical tidbit that Mary Martin's 12-year-old daughter took the stage for a waltz scene as Liza, the family's child-maid.¹⁹ While it would not be obvious to young girls watching the production, there was something fitting about a mother and her daughter in the mid-Fifties occupying the same stage, playing lost children fighting the inevitable process of growing up. A

¹⁸ Brooks Atkinson, "The Theatre: A New Peter Pan," *The New York Times*, October 24, 1954.

¹⁹ Ibid.; "Mary Martin as 'Peter Pan,'" *The New York Times*, October 10, 1954.

question lingering behind-the-scenes, so to speak, was what the future held for these women in the adventure playing out off-stage.

Most of these women went on to star in NBC's live televised production of *Peter Pan* on March 7, 1955, the first full-length Broadway production on color TV. With resounding success—a record-breaking audience of 65 million—NBC restaged the program the following year. Though no known memoirs as of yet have traced a future folk musician to a seat (or couch) in one of these audiences, surely the various adaptations of *Peter Pan* were in these girls' imaginations. One, the cartoon-bound cautionary tale of unlikable, forgettable girls who stepped out of place; the other, the live action event with “new” and “fun” women dancing and flying. Critics loved both. It followed that girls had to find a way to be both.

*

There is much more to the story of the folk women's youths—especially regarding sexuality and race in the early Cold War era—but to close this section, there is a generational nuance in need of attention. Though the women who would become the most well-known performers of the folk revival are often grouped in with their fanbase, the baby boomers, I have been careful not to identify them as such here for the simple reason that they were not. Given the dearth of scholarship on the folk women as a whole, it is absurdly easy to overlook that the female performers of the peak years of the folk revival were born *during* or even before World War II, not in the baby boom following the soldiers' return. Joan Baez was born in 1941, just a few months before Bob Dylan. Odetta, who becomes the focus of this research at the end of this chapter, was born in 1930. The list goes on: Mary

Travers 1936; Carolyn Hester 1937; Judy Collins 1939; the Kossoy Sisters 1939; Alix Dobkin 1940; Buffy Saint Marie 1941; Maria Muldaur 1943; Joni Mitchell 1943; Mimi Fariña 1945. Look up a woman you know to have been a full-fledged folksinger of the early 1960s during the folk revival, and the high likelihood is that she was born before 1945.

These women occupied an ambiguous place as members of the Silent Generation (those born between 1925-1945) who had childhood memories of World War II and even in some cases the Great Depression. At the same time, they grew up more or less alongside the massive generation that followed them in the forced, fragile insouciance of postwar America. This unique generational positionality had the basic impact of giving the women who became folk stars a several-year head start in their lives as performers, making them leaders simply by virtue of age and experience without positioning them as full-blown adults, who were, as we will see, the target of Fifties teenage rebellion. Furthermore, there is something to be said for being born in the midst of a world war. Though they were young at the time, these women never seemed to lose or forget a wartime sense of responsibility to their communities—a kind of seriousness of purpose that would later inspire the slightly younger, affluent, and comfortable baby boom generation that was missing just that.²⁰

²⁰ For more on the generation directly preceding the baby boom, see Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 34-35. In his discussion of the social construction of teenage identity, Doherty notes, “Reaching adolescence in the latter half of the next decade, this generation of wartime babies, not their celebrated younger siblings of the great baby boom of 1946-57, became the original teenagers.” Further theoretical grounding here would be very helpful. My sense is that these ideas surrounding the Folk Women’s generational positionality as cultural and leaders are rooted in studies of postwar youth subcultures

Teenage Girls, Music, and Technology

Though the looming, imagined hellscape of the Cold War era was, indeed, a unique setting for a girl's adolescence, the contradictions of American femininity that shaped these women's lives were not necessarily new. For centuries, women's issues in the United States had been defined by the push and pull between national ideals of egalitarianism and the realities of patriarchy; individualism and motherhood; expressive freedom and sexual repression and violence. What was unique to this moment, however, was the scale at which these contradictions were beginning to play out—literally *play out* via new technologies of mass media. As the baby boom generation grew up, the industries of American popular culture rose to meet and stoke demand for entertainment, adapting technological advances made during World War II for this new market. The realm of music saw, perhaps, the greatest innovation, with wartime plastic and audio-visual machinery now available for popular commercial use; through these technologies, Fifties music would become *the* critical catalyst for both female folk performers and their fans.²¹

published by Birmingham School theorists. For foundational analyses of the complex interaction between consumerism and radical politics that allowed youth subcultures to flourish as the repetitive cycle of traditional cultures wavered in the postwar years, see Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 1993); Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular," in *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1981). For an important historical text theorizing the development of youth subculture in the mid-1950s, see "Chapter 15: Youthquake" and "Chapter 16: Parental Panics and the Reshaping of Childhood" in Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004).

²¹ Among many scholars who write about the relationship between technology and music in the postwar era, Susan Douglas is most relevant to my work. She writes, "Historians will argue, and rightly so, that American women have been surrounded by contradictory expectations since at least the nineteenth century. My point is that this

The baby boomers made waves throughout the industries of American popular culture as members of an age bracket whose attention and purchasing power was more powerful than ever postwar: teenagers.²² By 1958, there were approximately seventeen million teenagers in the United States, and they comprised the first generation more likely to keep and spend any money they made instead of turning it over to their parents. They also received unprecedentedly high weekly allowances.²³ For teenage girls, such purchasing power opened up a thrilling world of identity-formation via consumerism. Such engagement in the market was noted and debated energetically in real time. In August of 1957, a profile of the “average teenage girl” in a local North Carolina paper noted, “The teenage girl is part of a powerful consumer group [...] Like the boys, she often has more ready cash than her father—and she keeps her allowance up to the rise of prices.”²⁴

situation intensified with the particular array of media technology and outlets that interlocked in people’s homes after World War II. It wasn’t simply the sheer size and ubiquity of the media, although these, of course, were important. It was also the fact that the media themselves were going through a major transformation in how they regarded and marketed to their audiences that heightened, dramatically, the contradictions in the images and messages they produced” (14-15). For an important foundational study of the process by which music became a commercial product in the decades preceding World War II, see David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Music* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009).

²² For more on the evolution of the concept of teenage years in America and increasing age consciousness in the Fifties, see Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 32-53; Jones, *Great Expectations*, 61-76, 212; Marcel Danesi, *Forever Young: The “Teen-Aging” of Modern Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). Another measure, provided by journalist David Halberstam in *The Fifties*, is that by 1956 the 13 million teenagers in America had a cumulative income of \$7 billion a year, which represented a 26% increase over 1953.

²³ Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics*, 41; Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 100, 122-126.

²⁴ Eugene Gilbert, “Year-Long Survey Reveals Average Teenage Girl Is Remarkably ‘Old-Fashioned’ Like Her Mother,” *Durham Morning Herald*, August 17, 1957. For

The music industry responded in kind with a flood of new products. Launched in 1939 and suspended shortly thereafter during the war, a CBS Laboratories project to develop a phonograph record that would play for at least twenty minutes on each side resumed in 1945. In 1948, using the lab's innovations, Columbia Records introduced the 33¹/₃ revolutions per minute LP to the public. The LP had a much longer playing time than its predecessor (the 78) and was made of vinyl instead of shellac, making records both more affordable and more audible. At the same time, innovations to phonographs greatly reduced their price. Thus, the record player became a household item, marketed largely to women—one that idealized mothers and wives were pictured buying and using in countless ads as part of their domestic duties.²⁵ Men certainly purchased records as well, but recent

foundational feminist reception theory informing my thinking, see Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984). Also see relevant essays in Andre Cavalcante, Andrea Press, and Katherine Sender, Eds., *Feminist Reception Studies in a Post-Audience Age: Returning to Audiences and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2018). For important examples of such theories deployed in the context of sound, music, and mass media studies, see Herta Herzog, "On Borrowed Experience: An Analysis of Listening to Daytime Sketches" in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 11 (1941); Mary Ellen Brown, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance* (California: SAGE, 1994); Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982); Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance" in *CinemAction*, no. 46 (1988); bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-132. For an excellent study of Black girls' and women's engagement with music between world wars, see Daphne Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution: The Intellectual Life of Black Feminist Sound* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2021), especially Chapter 6 on record shops and collections. Writing "against Marxist cynicism," Brooks embraces "the beauty of sonic self-curation and worlding" (344).

²⁵ Scholars of gender and postwar consumerism estimate that, on average, wives made 75% of all household purchases. For this statistic and others see "Post-War Consumerism," in *Women and the American Story*, The New York Historical Society, <https://wams.nyhistory.org/growth-and-turmoil/cold-war-beginnings/post-war->

scholarship has begun to uncover the extent to which 20th century record shops defied masculinist norms as spaces where women were welcome and encouraged to be active music listeners.²⁶ Furthermore, as historian Elijah Wald points out, women were not just the members of the family in charge of domestic entertainment purchases involving the technologies of music; they were also the members of a family who tended to hold the cash for smaller purchases like records. Black women in the rural south, in particular, were paid in cash for domestic labor they performed for white women; that cash bought records when one of the region's peddlers came around.²⁷

Teenage girls, of course, had access to all of these consumer goods through their allowances, jobs, and families. If they did not have their own radios or record players in their own rooms, they could also go to record stores around the country, where listening booths allowed for free, self-curated aural experiences either alone or with groups of friends.²⁸ With its lengthy play time, the LP opened new

consumerism/. There exists substantial research on postwar women's engagement with television in gendered spaces, but more attention is needed on the parallel topic of radios, phonographs, and vinyl records. My thinking here is informed by a review of 1950s phonograph ads that clearly feature and target women, as well as feminist scholarship on the everyday consumption of TV and radio in gendered spaces: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television, and Modern Life: A Phenomenological Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1996).

²⁶ Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 310-347. Brooks's study is rooted in the interwar period. Again, there is a need for such research on women and records in the postwar years.

²⁷ Elijah Wald qtd. in Brooks, *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, 538.

²⁸ Ibid., 310-347.

possibilities for sonic storytelling and became the standard for albums over the next two decades. The 45, which RCA Victor unveiled just a few months after the LP, became the standard for singles. Meanwhile, FM radios were first installed in cars in 1952, and cheaper and more lightweight transistor radios appeared on the market throughout the decade. With all of these options, teenage girls became record collectors and music experts—tastemakers in their own right—trading and amassing music more actively than any other demographic. In 1954 American record sales were at \$231 million; by 1959 that number had tripled to \$613 million, and the majority of buyers were teenagers.²⁹ By 1963, the feminization of these new technologies of music was so complete that the editors of *Time* ran an article, snarkily describing the average twelve-year-old:

There she sits, desperate, unhappy, twelve years old. She is cursed with the catastrophe of parents, and her boy friends complete her misery by being too young to drive. She sulks behind a screen of bobby pins, slapping at her baby fat, mourning the birth of her acne. She is a worried sixth-grader, an aging child, a frightened girl—and the queen of the \$100 million-a-year popular record industry. The record companies make market surveys, and as a result, they have through the years cast their heroine younger and younger, stretching her life cycle back toward the cradle. In the days when teenage girls were called bobby-soxers, a full-blooming record fan was 16 or so. and only by great leaps of the imagination could she convince herself that Frankie was really singing about her. Now she is ten, or even eight, and by twelve she has become an ardent collector of the dollar each. 45-r.p.m. records through which she suffers the painful joy of hearing a dirge for her already disappearing adolescence. Many of the singers and songwriters who churn out 5,000 records a year for her are scarcely older than she is. and they sing right at her. treating her as if she were a jaded old teenager. Every song echoes their search for something almost as grotesque as it sounds, something the industry calls "the teen feel."³⁰

²⁹ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 123. Also see Brooks's notes in *Liner Notes for the Revolution*, where she quotes Elijah Wald arguing, "pop consumers are women..." (539).

³⁰ "Music: St Joan of the Jukebox," in *Time*, March 15, 1963.

Music and female youth culture were inextricably tied based on this booming record industry alone, but there were even more layers to the way sound came to permeate teenage life when we consider that the Fifties also marked the golden age of television. Though they had existed since the 1930s, television sets could only be found in about 17,000 households at the end of World War II. As families' disposable incomes skyrocketed postwar, so did television ownership. By 1949, 250,000 sets were being sold monthly. Capitalizing on the new popularity of television and angling toward teenage audiences, networks launched shows dedicated to music performance and dance throughout the decade, with *American Bandstand*, first aired in 1952, being the most popular. Suddenly, for this generation, music was as visual as it was aural; musicians' voices were now linked to gendered looks in a powerful way, a coupling that would become critical to the influence of folk on young women in years to come.³¹

Meanwhile, knowing they could not compete with the new visual component of television shows, radio stations cut the plays and live music of prewar programming and began to feature recorded music, selected by a set of increasingly influential musical tastemakers: disc jockeys. In contrast to the curatorial power women and girls had in their private lives through music consumption, DJs of the 1950s were overwhelmingly male. Among the multitudes that made a career of playing records on air was folksinger Judy Collins's father, Chuck Collins. As a blind

³¹ Scannell, *Radio, Television, and Modern Life*, 1-5; Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 1-5; Elijah Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 172.

man and singer himself, he became a relatively well-known DJ through his boisterous personality, his pride in his Irish roots, and his expansive work across many local radio scenes, including Seattle, Hollywood, and Denver; and while female DJs surely would have empowered women, the dominance of male personalities in the golden age of radio did not exclude women from listening or enjoying music's growing force. Chuck Collins, not surprisingly, bought Judy Collins her first guitar.³²

Whether DJs or fans were opining, musical taste became the streamlined and massively influential affair still unfolding today in this era. In 1956, the same year as Dick Clark—one of postwar music's most famous curators—took over as *American Bandstand's* host, *Billboard Magazine* began publishing its weekly list of the country's top ten best-selling albums. Furthermore, though the magazine had been publishing various versions of its "music popularity charts" to rank singles since 1936, these charts became the consolidated Hot 100, as we still know it today, in mid-1958. The Hot 100 represented a composite of previously separate charts for disk jockey plays, jukebox selections, and record sales. It was accompanied by a series of weekly charts dedicated to each genre—a system that, among other racist categorizations, relegated almost all music by Black artists to the category of R&B. Radio DJs and TV music show producers both used and reinscribed these *Billboard* charts in their programming decisions. Thus, the streamlining of the *Billboard* charts

³² Collins, *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes*, 26-38. For a helpful look at older, male arbiters of musical taste like Dick Clark, see Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, 207-208.

created a more homogenized—as well as more racially segregated—music listening experience for America’s youth.³³

Finally, the postwar economic boom combined with the baby boom generation’s mushrooming ardor for music fueled an expansion of the record industry. In the late Forties and early Fifties, Capitol, MGM, and Mercury joined RCA Victor, Columbia, and Decca in the pantheon of major labels. The majors, with aging executives, generally viewed rock ‘n’ roll as a passing fad and stuck to old-guard artists as well as a range of extremely safe calypso, polka, and novelty song albums. Frank Sinatra, for example, had signed with Columbia in 1943 and continued to have hit records with them throughout the Fifties. Doris Day was also with Columbia from 1947 through 1967. Bing Crosby, meanwhile, had launched his career with Decca. By the late-Forties, the majors’ conservatism mixed with the influx of demand opened a space for hundreds of new independent labels, known as the “indies.” In a label boom similar to one that had hit in the early 1920s, the years 1948 through 1954 saw the establishment of approximately one-thousand new indies. Between 1955 and 1959, almost seventy percent of top ten singles were released by such small independent labels. Though they were largely bought up by the majors in the Sixties, their impact on American musical development and experimentation in the Fifties cannot be overstated.³⁴

³³ Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 151. Also see Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 18.

³⁴ Gar, *She’s A Rebel*, 5; Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 132-133. Also see Tom Piazza, “Pop View: The Little Record Labels That Could (and They Did),” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1994.

These seismic changes in the production and consumption of sound post World War II provided the foundation upon which teenage girls discovered and interacted with music. As with other cultural spheres of their era, musical consumption was not free from misogynist scaffolding. Male DJs and producers controlled the airwaves; male hosts presented the bands; male music journalists wrote patronizing profiles of their teenage listeners. However, pocket money, accessible music products, and a proliferation of choices allowed teenage girls their own kind of private and collective ways in to listening. Most of all, a mass culture dedicated to “the teen feel” bonded and validated teenage girls in this listening. For the girls who would become musical performers themselves, this history of the technology and consumerism that defined their youth is as important an origin story as any other.

The Folk Women and Rock ‘n’ Roll

Into this postwar landscape where technology paired with consumerism made music a powerful force in young women’s lives, rock ‘n’ roll entered as the dominant youth genre. The era’s ongoing gender “confusion” could not have had a more apt sound—one that stoked and amplified the contradictions teenage girls faced to such an extent that it became a critical, sonic bridge on their journeys toward self-empowerment.

It goes without saying that Fifties rock was a male-dominated industry. Most ubiquitous among the stars was, of course, Elvis Presley. In July of 1954, Sun

Records (one of the new indies) released his first album. In 1956 alone, he had five of the year's nine Number One singles.³⁵ Also by 1956, according to the reports of disc jockeys, 68 percent of the songs they played were rock 'n' roll. Elvis was in good company with fellow slightly lesser-worshiped white rock stars like Bill Haley & His Comets, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Buddy Holly. Also on the scene were their Black counterparts, the male pioneers of the sound, including Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and James Brown, who were among the first Black artists to cross over from the R&B charts onto the pop charts. When Elvis appeared on the scene, these giants of R&B still had a footing on those coveted charts, but white covers of their songs as well as white emulators of their styles were increasingly taking over in instances of cultural appropriation that continue to resonate across American popular culture.³⁶

While African American men had a chance, however embattled, in the world of mainstream rock 'n' roll, women were almost entirely shut out of the pop charts once rock became the genre of the day. In the early Fifties, female artists had held approximately one-third of the top songs. However, by the year 1957, only two women reached the top twenty-five; neither of those women were in rock 'n' roll,

³⁵ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 84.

³⁶ Garr, *She's a Rebel*, 10-11; Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*; 4-5, 180; Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 23. For a foundational history of the music industry's role in reinforcing racist ideology through a fixation with rigid genres in the early twentieth century, see Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010). Also see Chapter 2 of this dissertation for more in-depth thoughts on American popular music and race.

but rather, performed in the big band style of the 1940s.³⁷ By 1958, there were no women in those top brackets.

The phenomenon did not go unnoticed at the time, but journalists displayed a remarkable lack of perspective in their hypotheses regarding its cause. In November 1956, for example, a music industry trade magazine called *Cash Box* published “The Plight of the Female Singer,” an article following up on a previous story entitled, “What’s Happened to the Girl Singers?” Summing up the year in music, the article states,

In the entire list of pop records there are only six female singers who had hits. All the rest were either made by male singers, groups or instrumentalists. In the rhythm and blues field, the situation is even more startling. There was not one hit record in the entire year, recorded by a female [...] The problem in the record business is that a large part of the population which buys single records is composed of teenagers—female teenagers. Naturally this is not the entire audience by any means, but it is a major factor in the total picture. It’s obvious therefore that teenage girls are essentially more interested in male singers than female singers and that the male has a much greater chance of catching their attention than the female.³⁸

The mixed messaging of the era is painfully clear here. *Cash Box* acknowledges teenage girls as a powerful force, one powerful enough to drive the entire music industry, as though men were not even in the audience; but the article undercuts any genuine sense of female empowerment with the blatantly sexist idea that these girls demanded exclusively male performers and adored those men. Sadly, the girls reading these messages were at an impressionable age and often internalized the

³⁷ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 86; Gar, *She’s a Rebel*, 8.

³⁸ “The Plight of the Female Singer,” *Cash Box*, November 17, 1956, <https://www.americanradiohistory.com/Archive-Cash-Box/50s/1956/CB-1956-11-17.pdf>, 3.

“theories” the press espoused. In 1958, for example, *Billboard* quoted a singer of the briefly famous, Chordettes-like trio, the Poni Tales,

There are many theories as to why the girls have such a hard time obtaining a hit record these days. Toni Cistone, one of three 19-year-olds comprising the Poni Tales, has her own way of explaining. “I’d go out and buy a boy’s record any day before I’d buy a girl’s,” says Miss Cistone. “Girls are the ones who buy most of the single records. I think there is probably some kind of jealousy angle connected with it when they buy a girl’s record. Girls, I must say, have been very nice to us tho [sic]. And we make a special point, wherever we visit or appear, to be nice to the girls in our audience. It’s important.”

We asked how the girls explained their hit, “Born Too Late,” in what appeared to be a world of male singers and groups. “Not because it’s rock and roll, because we don’t sing rock and roll,” said Pattie McCabe. “It’s a message song. Lots of girls fall in love with an older guy. It’s like the junior high school girl who secretly loves the senior who’s the football captain. Or the high school girl whose boy is away in college. “Born too late,” gets very close to home with a lot of girls for that reason and for that reason, we think the girls bought our record.”³⁹

As this discussion reveals, it was accepted as fact that top-charting women were mostly flukes in the era of rock ‘n’ roll. That a female performer might inspire or excite young women in the audience more than a male was not a topic of conversation, even for one of the rare female performers managing to survive on the scene.

The reason for the rarity of female musicians was, obviously, far more complex than any of these sources hint at and rooted in the rigidly-policed heteronormative order of the early Cold War. As the new, young generation of baby boomers increasingly questioned traditional morality, including pre-war sexual mores, parents and elders in general pushed back with an intense opposition to pre-marital sex. Soon, sexual behavior became *the* battleground not only for the age-old

³⁹ Ren Grevatt, “On the Beat,” *Billboard*, October 20, 1958, 7.

parent versus child drama, but also, for the historically-specific need to protect America from the U.S.S.R. In her landmark analysis of the way domestic issues were fused with geopolitical ideological wars during the Cold War, Elaine Tyler May writes,

Nonmarital sexual behavior in all its forms became a national obsession after the war. Many high-level government officials, along with individuals in positions of power and influence in fields ranging from industry to medicine and from science to psychology, believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct connection between communism and sexual depravity.⁴⁰

In this interpretation, national security started at home—in particular, in homes where heterosexual men led their families via both economic and sexual prowess.⁴¹ A woman who deviated from this power structure was a threat to heterosexual male stability, and, by extension, a threat to the very strength of the United States. In fact, the reasoning went, such a woman was likely a communist spy. These messages of sexual repression infiltrated women's lives so deeply that young, unmarried women were taught that it was their responsibility not just to avoid premarital sex, but also to cultivate ways to *not* tempt their partners before marriage. Though unmarried men often received similarly wholesome orders, the message was far less intense, far less consequential and detectable if denied. Essentially, a boy would not become an outcast for having sex before marriage; a girl who claimed such freedom would. For queer women, working class women, and women of color, sexist attitudes

⁴⁰ May, *Homeward Bound*, 91.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

surrounding female sexuality were even more layered and often more pernicious, interacting with racism, elitism, and homophobia in complex webs.⁴²

The result of this severe stigmatization of female sexuality was a skyrocketing rate of teen marriage and, subsequently, teen motherhood. In 1957, 96.3 out of every 1,000 girls between fifteen and nineteen had a child—a rate of teenage motherhood that marks an all-time high in the United States to this day. For women who found themselves pregnant and unmarried, the shame associated with having a child without a partner was rivaled only by the cost, danger, and trauma of an illegal abortion.⁴³ As previously noted, many of the Folk Women were just reaching their teenage years at this moment, meaning that the social pressure to marry and give birth that they faced was higher than any other group of women had faced. In 1957, Odetta Holmes married for the first time at the age of 27, perhaps on

⁴² For more on public ideas of female sexuality as they intersected with racism in the postwar era, see Chapter 2-3 of this dissertation. Also see Regina G. Kunzel's essay, "White Neurosis, Black Pathology: Constructing Out-of-Wedlock Pregnancy in the Wartime and Postwar United States," in Meyerowitz, Ed. *Not June Cleaver*, 304-331. For an excellent essay on the way lesbian desire was perceived as anti-American sexual deviance, see Donna Penn's "The sexualized Woman" in Meyerowitz, Ed., *Not June Cleaver*, 358-381. For important analyses of Fifties masculinity and the increasing acceptance of premarital sex for men, see Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 61-74; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight From Commitment* (New York: Anchor Books, 1983). Also note: the Kinsey reports, published during this era, documented a marked difference between public messages of abstinence and private sexual behavior. As of 1958, while eighty percent of women surveyed agreed that sex before marriage was unethical, fifty percent of those women also admitted to having had premarital sex. For more see Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 70-71; Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 65; Littauer, *Bad Girls*, 81-173.

⁴³ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 70; Meyerowitz, Ed., *Not June Cleaver*, 335-357. For estimates of the number of illegal abortions and associated deaths happening at various points postwar, with attention to disproportionate mortality rates of women of color and poor women, see Rachel Benson Gold, "Lessons from Before *Roe*: Will Past be Prologue?," in *The Guttmacher Report*, Vol. 6 Issue 1, March 1, 2003, <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2003/03/lessons-roe-will-past-be-prologue>.

some level yielding to the expectations that beset her. In 1958, Judy Collins became pregnant with her son Clark at age 18 in Colorado and quickly married his father, her high school sweetheart Peter Taylor in the following months. The way these women and others both found and did not find relief from the questions of motherhood and marriage within the folk scene is the subject of coming chapters; but here it is chilling simply to think about how many talented women who might have had careers as folk musicians surely did not due to these harsh realities.

What this ideology of domestic containment meant for women in music in the Fifties was that a female rock 'n' roll star did not stand a chance on the pop charts any more than an overtly-sexual woman stood a chance in middle-class society. Starting with the charged, steady beat—the heart of the sound—rock evoked sex on many levels, and rock performers expressed their sexuality in the most palpable way mainstream American popular culture had witnessed yet. Even the name of the genre, which white music industry moguls invented in an effort to claim the sound, was a nod to sex.⁴⁴ There is no need to recount how provocative Elvis Presley's thrusting and gyrating on stage was. A female rock star echoing these moves even subtly in the early Cold War context would have threatened the very existence of the country, according to most. Following this mindset to its effects, women were seen to exist not to produce music, but to consume it, which placed them firmly in the audience. Therefore, though it so clearly oversimplifies women's desires, the *Cash Box* article is a near-perfect evocation of the passive place to which

⁴⁴ Altschuler, *All Shook Up*, 34, 67-70, 108 Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 142; Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock n Roll*, 170-171.

the music industry was attempting to relegate women. Teenage girls doing anything other than idolizing male rock stars would have rendered that demographic rebellious to the extent of political subversion. *Cash Box* obviously had a vested, if subconscious, interest in keeping women in their socially sanctioned, seemingly-safe place as fans; and evidently a singer in a prim and angelic band like the Poni Tales or the Chordettes was not much more empowered than the scores of teenage girls being told they lived only to worship Elvis. Those women, always in elegant ballgowns and gloves, always styled in a way that made them vaguely indiscernible from one another, existed quite sadly as perfect echoes of the sexual repression that shaped their lives.

*

There was power in popular music for women who sought it, though; and again, this is where the Folk Women return to the narrative of the decade. Despite the masculinist overtones of rock 'n' roll, the vast majority of women who later made their way to the folk movement were ardent rock fans; and rock fandom was not as passive as music industry executives and journalists assumed or as oppressive as some feminist scholars have interpreted it. The Fifties charts were indeed replete with masculine stars and misogynist messages. Countless songs glamorized heterosexual male sexuality while casting women as objects of the pursuit. Even more songs perpetuated the stigmatization of women's sexual freedom and rendered normative stories that had been anything but in their original forms. However, a different angle—not exactly closer, if anything, a bit more zoomed out—reveals young women beginning to harness the genre's energy in their

own ways for their own purposes, seeding a kind of subtle feminist rebellion within the broader male-centered teenage rebellion of their time.⁴⁵

Far from oppressing future female folkies with sexist lyrics leading them straight to traditional marriages and lives of domesticity, rock songs seem to have provided at least some of the fuel for these teenage girls to break away from the conventional and make a transition to the bohemian folk world. Jane Traum, a teenager growing up in the Bronx who would later become a stalwart of the Village scene, remembers being “totally open” to rock ‘n’ roll, dancing to the latest hits every day at lunch at her performing arts high school and waiting for the announcement of the week’s Number One hit every Saturday on *Hit Parade*. She recalls that there was a sense of “things changing...everything opening up, loosening up...I mean, that whole period of rock ‘n’ roll was very liberating.”⁴⁶ In her memoir, Suze Rotolo also frames rock as a welcome source of excitement: “A program called *Make-Believe Ballroom* delivered mostly bland popular music until the day the DJ

⁴⁵ A wide-reaching summary of debates within feminist rock ‘n’ roll criticism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but for academic writing that emphasizes the more oppressive side of the genre in the Fifties, see Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 116; Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie, “Rock and Sexuality,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 374-379. The ways scholars read rock mostly as a set of misogynist texts, musical and lyrical, does not necessarily correspond to how young people engaged with it. The vocal performances and stage acts of any number of male rock stars (Little Richard, Elvis, etc.) were revolutionary even if their lyrics were not. For important feminist perspectives on the genre from the 1960s, with more attention to rock as liberation, see Ellen Willis, *Beginning To See the Light: Sex Hope, and Rock-and-Roll* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) and Lillian Roxon, *Lillian Roxon’s Rock Encyclopedia* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969).

⁴⁶ Jane Traum, Interview by author, Woodstock, New York, October 16, 2019.

placed a single titled 'Sh-Boom' on the turntable, inaugurating the arrival of rock and roll on mainstream radio."⁴⁷

For these women, the power of rock 'n' roll was not in the lyrics, but rather, in the new kind of physicality it allowed. In their memoirs and present-day interviews, many juxtapose the genre against the pop music that had been available to them in the early Fifties (and even into the late Fifties on the major labels): big band numbers of a fading era with both male and female leads like Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney, as well as wholesome trios like the Chordettes, and novelty songs like Patti Page's 1953 hit, "How Much Is That Doggie in the Window?" While rock 'n' roll did kick such female pop singers off the airwaves, the explosion of strong beats into auditoriums around the country evidently proved far more empowering from a feminist perspective than the presence of these mild-mannered female performers ever had.

Movement was key to this empowerment, with amplified beats and seductive electric guitar riffs inspiring a new universe of untethered, uncoupled, and unstructured dance. On television shows like *American Bandstand*, teenagers could learn the moves of the new era. As Elijah Wald writes,

Once people stopped holding onto their partners, there was no reason to do set steps, so the twist, frug, swim, surf, fish, fly, bug, dog, duck, chicken, bird, monkey, slop, Watusi, pony, shake, jerk, waddle, stomp, and mashed potato weren't dances in the way that a waltz, polka, or mambo was a dance. They were moves that could be mixed and matched as the dancers saw fit, and their most enduring effect was to help European Americans—as well as plenty of African Americans and other people all around the world—loosen up and explore new ways of using their bodies.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time*, 43.

⁴⁸ Wald, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, 221, 169; Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 93.

In one of the most ironic twists of the era, young women no longer had to be led by male partners in order to dance. In fact, they were not even expected to dance with a male partner anymore—a touch-free dynamic that placated sex-averse parents on some level while also setting girls free from boys on the dancefloor. These new moves allowed for a kind of physical independence that would, in time, translate to many other areas of women’s lives. Among many stories of awakening to a rock ‘n’ roll beat, Suze Rotolo writes,

I was a withdrawn fourteen-year-old, and our mother may have asked [my older sister Carla] to take me under her wing. For whatever reason, she decided to bring me along to a party she was going to. She and a girlfriend put a few tissues in my bra, undid my ponytail, and gave me a new cute skirt to wear so that I’d look less like a kid. I was still very awkward, but progress was being made. They schooled me in a few dance moves and made sure I knew the words to the Gene Vincent song “Be-Bop-A-Lula.” I was happy.⁴⁹

Rotolo then describes a party full of like-minded people—those who were interested in opera, those who were learning to play guitar, those who made her feel “less like an outsider” than she normally felt. The scene occurs just prior to her branching out into the folk scene of the Village and is framed as a moment that emboldened her to eventually make that trip downtown. Though the connection is not made explicit, it is clear that rock ‘n’ roll served as a bridge to folk, a way for teenage girls of the Fifties to—literally—step away from men and from the lives of their mothers and begin to form their own identities.

Contemporary scholarship has yet to recognize the extent to which Fifties-era rock ‘n’ roll empowered female fans. While the trend toward analyzing lyrics is

⁴⁹ Rotolo, *A Freewheelin’ Time*, 44-45.

admirable in its attention to detail, it should be noted that women recalling rock 'n' roll very rarely cite lines or refrains that brought them down; as ever, the power of music was as much or more contextual as it was textual. For a start to understand the power of rock 'n' roll for certain women, Susan Douglas has written against the grain of feminist music scholarship as well as popular representations that depicted Beatlemania as mindless feminine hysteria, arguing that it was instead "a critical point in the evolution of girl culture that wasn't foolish at all, and was particularly dangerous to the status quo." However, her argument rests on the idea that the Beatles were not "as threateningly masculine" as the male rockers that preceded and inspired them. She posits, "girls instinctively recognized the Beatles as a Trojan horse, smuggling androgyny, a contempt for middle-class conventionalism, and sexual release into their protected middle-class world. The Beatles insisted that all kinds of barriers could be finessed." In the inescapable debate surrounding everyone's favorite Beatle, Douglas notes, girls "often chose the Beatle that they themselves most resembled either physically or as a personality type, or the one they most wanted to be like."⁵⁰

While the hyper-masculine rock 'n' roll stars of the Fifties did not allow for such a sense of a gender fluidity, I would argue that they played a greater role than Douglas implies in emboldening young girls—that there was more continuity for women between an Elvis performance and a Beatles performance than Douglas

⁵⁰ Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 119. Also see Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, "Joan Baez Induction Acceptance Speech – 2017 Rock Hall Inductions," YouTube video, 8:01, June 10, 2017, <https://youtu.be/jRvW3RxRHek>.

theorizes. For one thing, to the average fan, a 4/4 rock beat was a 4/4 rock beat; groups of girls gathered together dancing with each other both to Elvis's "All Shook Up" in 1957 and to the Beatles' "Twist 'n' Shout" in 1963. Of course, it is no wiser to elide Elvis Presley and the Beatles than it is to pose them in stark opposition; it is just important to remember that, no matter the band, these were the first five years of masses of American women getting to express themselves spontaneously via dance in female community, with men often reluctant but at-the-ready to join in for all the possibility such dance held.⁵¹

Apart from dance, there was also an important element for women simply in identifying as fans—again, one connected to the choice and desire that came with consumption of music in this era more than those previous. For example, in her personal essay "Sexing Elvis," feminist scholar Sue Wise has written about how energizing it was to be an Elvis fan, simply in the sense that

He was an interesting hobby when life was boring and meaningless. [...] Most of all he was another human being to whom I could relate and be identified with. [...] In my own private Elvis world, I could forget that I was miserable and lonely by listening to his records or going to see his films. Some people who feel so alone in an alien world turn to religion or to drink or to football teams to give their lives purpose. I turned to Elvis; and he was always there and he never let me down.⁵²

⁵¹ Of great interest here is Elijah Wald's strong assertion that heterosexual women called the shots on the dance floor, at least in the 20th century. In *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, he writes, "As a general thing, American women dance because they want to dance, while American men dance because they want to be around women. The result is that the most popular dance music will be whatever style the most women prefer. That doesn't hold up in every single case, but—if one leaves out gay subcultures—it holds overwhelmingly true throughout the country and across lines of age and ethnicity" (97).

⁵² Sue Wise, "Sexing Elvis," in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 395.

Fandom, in this description, allows a woman to objectify a man—to turn him into a projection of all she would like him to be, and to keep him in that static identity as “hers.” Elvis here gives a queer woman senses both of individuality and community without any acknowledgement of a competing sense of repression. The process was not unlike the songwriting and performing that produced a host of lifeless, idealized female characters in rock songs; that is to say, if rock aimed to police women, women found innovative ways to push back and make their own meaning out of the genre.

When we consider fandom as a form of power, it is not difficult to see the line between fan and performer collapsing. Perhaps for this reason, the women of folk claimed and continue to claim rock ‘n’ roll as part of their genealogy. For better or for worse, in the search for models and points of resonance, aspiring female performers were forced to see themselves in the male performers of their youths; in many cases, admiration for these male performers was part of what made the Folk Women aspiring performers. Perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this study, Joan Baez was a rock ‘n’ roll fan well before she was a folk star. Though her most iconic performances have cast her as endlessly grave and pure, there was (and is) a “fun” flipside to Baez’s persona whose roots can be traced to the sounds of the Fifties.⁵³ She recalls her earliest “performances” for her middle-school classmates at lunch:

I was a big hit, and came back the next day for a command performance. This time I did imitations of Elvis Presley, Della Reese, Eartha Kitt, and Johnny Ace. Before the

⁵³ Elijah Wald, phone conversation with author, August 29, 2019. In Wald’s estimation, Baez was not opposed to being seen as a “party girl.”

week was out I had gone from being a gawky, self-conscious outsider to being something of a jesterlike star.⁵⁴

In fact, up until the few years before her official retirement in 2019, Baez was still incorporating such early rock songs into her repertoire. She was in the habit of performing a kind of musical monologue on her early influences. Playing a ukulele, the first instrument she learned, she would hop through several Fifties R&B hits, cutting them all off humorously after only a few lines each to speed the set along; but then she would arrive at the anecdote of her first onstage performance, at her junior high school talent show at age fourteen in 1955, also recounted in her memoir. In one clip of this monologue, she says, “I did this song, which I still love,” and performs a rather moving rendition of the 1954 doo-wop hit by the Penguins, “Earth Angel.” There are a few giggles from the crowd in the first seconds of the song, as though no one is ready for Baez to do this seriously, but slowly everyone accepts that this is not a joke; this is a song Baez respects. She sings jauntily,

*Earth Angel, Earth Angel, will you be mine?
My darling dear, love you all the time
I'm just a fool, a fool in love with you*

in the same set as “Silver Dagger,” the folk song she made famous, which features invective verses like,

*“All men are false,” says my mother
They'll tell you wicked, lovin' lies
And the very next evening, they'll court another
Leave you alone to pine and sigh*

⁵⁴ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 31.

If the “Earth Angel” performance is meant to be merely a nostalgic reenactment of her teenage self, it is one Baez has done all over the world throughout her career. She claims this song as an influence and sings it alongside the crusading anthems for which the public is determined to know her.⁵⁵

As the contradictions within Baez’s persona suggest, the relationship between rock and folk in the lives of the Folk Women is a curious one. While many folksingers and fans would come to reject or at least scoff at popular music—largely due to a perception that it was apolitical or anti-intellectual—it is important to note that just as many kept a foot in the mainstream, where rock ‘n’ roll reined through the Fifties. The women of the folk movement seem to have been slightly more open to such cross-pollination than the men. Happy Traum explains, with regret, that he essentially missed Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Chuck Berry, and others. By the time he began to play in the Village in the early 1950s, he recalls being a bit of a “snob” about such performers. Dave Van Ronk, who began making trips to the Village in 1951, was a jazz aficionado and makes no mention of mainstream rock ‘n’ roll in his acclaimed memoir. Meanwhile, at the start of her folk career in Colorado, Judy Collins was still steeped in the mainstream and makes no effort to downplay it. She writes about the summer of 1959, when her first child was born,

Clark was learning to crawl and we began having friends over for dinners on the deck, spending our free evenings spinning rock-and-roll records on our precious turntable, twirling under the stars, listening to Pete Seeger and Buddy Holly.

⁵⁵ JoanBaezVideo, “Joan Baez Salutes initial R&B influences,” YouTube video, 11:35, February 28, 2012, <https://youtu.be/ulhGRoByWAO>.

She goes on to write about her attraction to Buddy Holly, who “was known as the single most important force in rock and roll” and who had died in a plane crash in 1959, just months before she started her singing career. She writes,

He was good-looking and slim, with a voice that cut through on the radio, a sexy man in his horn-rimmed glasses.

I have often thought of Buddy and his band on that cold night when I have had to charter planes to get in and out of the cities I play in. This was a terrible piece of news for anyone who was a fan of Holly’s, and for anyone at all who had a heart. It hit me very hard; I felt nauseated and frightened when I heard the news.⁵⁶

Just a few sentences after these memories, Collins sums up her life in this moment with a brief comment on what can be read as the stirrings of feminism:

In Central City, I held down two jobs—waiting tables during the day at the Tollgate Hotel and Bar in town and singing at the Gilded Garter at night [...] Nylons were a buck a pair, but I mostly wore tights in the winter and went bare legged in the summer. I had yet to burn my bra, but that was coming. You could get a radio for fifteen dollars, and it cost 4 cents to send my folks a letter from Blackhawk to Denver.

She goes on to share anecdotes about Donna St. Thomas—one of the extremely rare female rock ‘n’ roll musicians—for whom she opened at her first paid run of performances in Denver. St. Thomas was fated to obscurity, but she was married to the owner of a local strip club “where a remarkable woman who called herself Tempest Storm was taking off her clothes and creating quite a stir.” Local newspapers, if they even mentioned Tempest Storm, did so to talk about her love life or her breasts, treating her very much like Marilyn Monroe and other hypersexualized women of the time. Collins, however, seems to have had a more

⁵⁶ Collins, *Sweet Judy Blue Eyes*, 53.

nuanced experience with the star. She found her “gorgeous” and “elegant,” remarking,

I had never seen a woman naked, except myself in the mirror when I was trying to figure out why *I* did not have a fabulous front! We went to meet her after the show, and I could barely speak. She was dressed demurely, and I remember thinking that *she* wouldn't have to sing for her supper, ever. Still, I had come to love singing for my supper and was happy to spend the summer at the Gilded Garter. I didn't know it then, but one of the people who would come to hear me in Central City was a young man from Minnesota named Robert Zimmerman. He sang a lot of Woody Guthrie blues, and no one had ever heard of him.⁵⁷

*

In the origin story of each Folk Woman, there is a lot of rock ‘n’ roll. That Fifties rock provides the musical and social context for so many women of the folk movement’s journeys of self-discovery is significant. A young Joan Baez imitated Johnny Ace. Judy Collins not only idolized Buddy Holly, but also seemed to see a bit of herself in him; she opened for a rock set with folk songs. Suze Rotolo danced at parties downtown. Alix Dobkin was drawn to Elvis but, at the same time, uncomfortable with what she remembered as his “threatening male edge,” aware that she sought, or perhaps needed, a slightly different kind of performer to emulate.⁵⁸ As she recalled, “I tried to write rock & roll songs, but they all ended up sounding like folk songs, so I gave up trying.”⁵⁹ If fandom were truly passive, it is possible that the dominance of these male gods of rock ‘n’ roll would have simply held all these women back. However, listening to rock ‘n’ roll allowed women to be performers even as the music industry cast them as mere fans. Even those with no

⁵⁷ Ibid., 53-55.

⁵⁸ Alix Dobkin, interview with author, October 15, 2019.

⁵⁹ Ibid., email to author, October 29, 2019.

aspirations toward a music career were suddenly crafting their own dances, trying out new styles, and feeling inspired to sing along to songs that bore such little resemblance to the restrained hits of the past. And for women who did have aspirations to be musicians, rock seems to have brought them one step closer to their performing careers. Despite its misogyny, the spirit of rock in the context of its debut was one of rebelliousness and release; these attributes would, in a new way, resurface in the folk movement.

The Folk Women and Social Justice

For the women who would become stars of the folk revival, awareness of racial inequality and other pressing issues of social injustice in the United States comprised yet another layer of the foundation on which they built their careers. In fact, if these women had only one thing in common before their arrival as key players on the folk scene, it was that they were raised in exceptionally liberal households on the eve of the civil rights movement, or determined to seek out such progressive environments on their own. Thus, while the musical landscape of their youth was determined in part by the *Billboard* charts, they were simultaneously immersed in a long tradition that linked political progressivism with the music of disempowered people. Much of this music was considered folk music. Phrased differently, music and leftist politics were so intertwined for the Folk Women from

such an early age that their paths to the folk revival were, in some ways, already paved.⁶⁰

To begin with, apart from the sheer popularity and fundamental rebelliousness of rock 'n' roll, there were less obvious racial dynamics to the genre that made it attractive to politically conscious women. Rock's roots were in the blues, so many folksingers knew rock 'n' roll not as an exciting "new" style as their peers did, but rather, as an amped up, commercial version of the "race music," as it was called, that they had been listening to on family record players and radios throughout their childhoods. In looking past the white, male, and increasingly sanitized surface-level of mainstream rock hits, the Folk Women found the rich history of Black musical forms along with the painful history of cultural appropriation and struggle.

Many of the aforementioned women who would find their way to the folk movement in a few years—Suze Rotolo, Alix Dobkin, Mary Travers, Ethel Raim—can be categorized somewhat neatly as red diaper babies. Their adolescent years were defined by the political radicalism of their parents. Often these women came from Jewish families and lived in New York City, though certainly not as a rule—Suze Rotolo's family was Italian; Ethel Raim had many families of varying political leanings as a foster child; Alix Dobkin moved around the country. Despite differing details, their families' associations with the United States Communist Party and its promise of socio-economic equality went hand in hand with an appreciation for the

⁶⁰ For much more on the legacy of the Old Left as it connects to the folk revival, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Also see Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, Chapters 4-6.

music of the impoverished and oppressed. Songs of social justice were particularly important to families facing constant FBI surveillance and fear of arrest as McCarthyism swept the country.⁶¹ About the earliest members of the folk revival, Suze Rotolo summarizes,

Folk music was the antiestablishment music, the music of the left. In addition to traditional folk songs there were songs about unions and fighting fascists, about brotherhood, equality, and peace.

Most of us were children of Communists or socialists, red-diaper babies raised on Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Pete Seeger. We had listened to Oscar Brand's *Folksong Festival* on the radio while still in our cribs.⁶²

For Alix Dobkin, whose parents were both staunch supporters of the party, social justice and music were tied together from her earliest years. She opens her memoir with an anecdote of meeting the singer Paul Robeson in the late 1940s. She writes,

At seven years old I was aware of the admiration my parents felt for him and for the songs he had made famous. Grandma knew Mr. Robeson through her Communist Party connections and had invited the great man to visit at our Manhattan apartment on West-Eighty third Street. She beamed, Pop smiled, and Mom, a nervous woman, served tea and fussed.

Paul Robeson was a "Negro," which, in the late 1940s, meant that his life was especially hard and unfair. I understood that people who didn't like Jews also didn't like Negroes and used Jim Crow to hurt them and keep them back. This, like all injustices, made me sad and angry.⁶³

Experiences like this led Alix Dobkin and her siblings to create their own version of the Hit Parade, one that included everything from rock 'n' roll hits to opera to union

⁶¹ For much more on federal censorship of Old Left folksingers in the early cold war, see Aaron J. Leonard, *The FBI and the Bureau: The FBI, The Folk Artists and the Suppression of the Communist Party, USA 1939-1956* (London: Repeater Books, 2020).

⁶² Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time*, 45-46.

⁶³ Dobkin. *My Red Blood*, 1.

songs. Her repertoire was further reinforced through summers spent at Camp Kinderland, one of many left-leaning summer camps run by the Jewish community in rural areas north of New York City. It was there that Dobkin met and came to idolize Ethel Raim, who was a few years older and her counselor. There was a strong tradition of musical performance at these summer camps, with folk songs circling around campfires and in cabins throughout the summer and into life back home. Although she was not Jewish, Suze Rotolo also attended Camp Kinderland around the same time with close family friends. She writes,

There was no reason to create subdivisions for religions or ethnicity. We'd been brought up to unite, not separate. We had in common an outsider status inflicted on us by the Cold War and our parents' political beliefs. Other than our seriousness about freedom, justice, equality for all, and banning the bomb, we were still just a bunch of teenagers.⁶⁴

The experience of growing up in communist and broader socialist circles primed young women for feminist mindsets in ways they took for granted. Scholars debate the extent to which the U.S. Communist Party's culture was an escape from the sexism of the era. However, it is certainly true that women in these leftist circles were invited into political spaces more than their non-leftist counterparts—if only to organize. Meanwhile, their children were immersed in radical politics as part of growing up. As many of the Folk Women have recalled, their elders encouraged critique of American social structures as part of a moral upbringing, thus liberating many of these young girls from some of the feverish patriotism-cum-sexism their peers experienced. Given that communist theory aspired to a world without sexual

⁶⁴ Rotolo, *A Freewheelin' Time*, 53.

division of labor, women's work was not (at least in official party rhetoric) shrouded in shame and denial in socialist families as it was in white, conventional middle-class families in this time. Though, as has been noted, women of diverse backgrounds were working outside of the home as of the mid-1950s, the mothers of the red diaper baby Folk Women tended to be involved at least tangentially in political work about which they were passionate.⁶⁵

For these women and their children who had an appreciation for the subaltern and the lesser-known backstories of many elements of American culture, rock 'n' roll existed alongside folk. There was Elvis, but before him, there was Big Mama Thornton. A blues singer and guitarist, she became the first person to record the song "Hound Dog"—which Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller wrote specifically for her—in August of 1952 as rock 'n' roll was gathering steam. Released in February of 1953, the song shot to the #1 slot of the R&B chart and stayed there for 14 weeks, selling nearly two million copies. With its driving beat, Thornton's adept electric guitar work, and her full-throated scolding, "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog been snoopin' 'round my door," the song was altogether radical for a woman to perform and revolutionary in the history of rock 'n' roll. In a pattern I analyze closely in coming sections on Odetta Holmes, a white artist would record his own version of the song with massively greater financial and social payoff four years later in 1956. Elvis's cover of Big Mama Thornton's original hit would sell 10 million copies to her

⁶⁵ McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, 7-12, 160-192. For foundational analysis of socialist attitudes toward female labor in the decades preceding World War II, see DENNING, *The Cultural Front*, 118-159 and Mari Jo Buhle, *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

2 million and secure the #1 spot on the pop charts for 11 weeks. However, given the musically radical background of the Folk Women, they were among the few who were tapped into these backstories, lesser-known songs, and lesser-known performers.⁶⁶

Though openness to lesser-known radio programs and record-store research led to such knowledge, parents and older mentors often supplied young women with their most influential early education in folk songs. In oddest of juxtapositions, these women idolized not just rhinestone-clad Elvis, but also log-cabin-bound Pete Seeger, who had been fusing folk performance and leftist politics through shows and protests around the country for decades. Alix Dobkin explains Seeger's monumental influence with the simple statement: "We were Pete's grandchildren." Having been blacklisted from mainstream radio and TV, Seeger was making a living performing at such summer camps as Camp Kinderland as well as at schools and universities in the mid-1950s. Many were introduced to folk music through Seeger's instructional records, including a very young Joni Mitchell in Saskatoon, Canada.⁶⁷ As a songwriter, teacher, and song collector, Seeger had enormous influence over the definition of the folk canon itself, and a community formed around him. As Dobkin explains, "Singing Seeger's songs bonded and revitalized people of good will

⁶⁶ Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll* (Durham Duke UP, 2020) 36-42.

⁶⁷ Echols, *Shaky Ground*, 211.

working for the common good, and in the late 1950s, the first generation he raised began to come of age.”⁶⁸

It was at one such Seeger show in 1957 that Joan Baez first learned of the existence of folk music. She writes that the moment “vaccinated” her against music of less “pure” intention. Growing up in a progressive, Quaker family, Baez’s childhood differed from that of the red diaper babies of urban communities but was still shaped by similar themes of empathy for outsiders of all sorts. The daughter of a woman with a “shipwrecked childhood,” who was passed from foster family to foster family, and a mathematician from Puebla, Mexico, Baez was exposed to innumerable cultures and nontraditional experiences from an early age. She spent her first years at the boarding house her family ran in California, encountering a diverse cast.

We had college kids, Chinese scholars, sailors, writers, bus drivers, wanderers, and a cellist who played so beautifully that Mother would click off the vacuum cleaner and stand in the hallway to listen, and I would sit outside his door trying to decide whether to become a cellist in the symphony or to grow long dainty nails.⁶⁹

Furthermore, as Baez grappled with her mixed-race identity, she experienced racism firsthand. About junior high, she writes, “So there I was, with a Mexican name, skin, and hair: the Anglos couldn’t accept me because of all three, and the Mexicans couldn’t accept me because I didn’t speak Spanish.”⁷⁰ She goes on to elaborate on how “different” she felt from her peers in a physical sense, with

⁶⁸ Dobkin, *My Red Blood*, 111; Leonard, *The Folk Singers and the Bureau*, 169-175.

⁶⁹ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

particular emphasis on the ways she did not live up to mid-fifties expectations of femininity. About a childhood friend, she writes,

She was like my sister Pauline: beautiful, with her hair curled and pulled back in a flawless ponytail, eyebrows plucked, the colors of her sweater, collar, and scarf perfectly coordinated, her skirt even at her ankles, her saddle shoes fastidiously polished. Her lunch bag was new, and her books and binder were in impeccable order. She wore 'natural' lipstick. By contrast, I was Joanie Boney, an awkward stringbean, fifteen pounds underweight, my hair a bunch of black straw whacked off just below my ears, the hated cowlick on my hairline forcing a lock of bangs straight up over my right eye, my collar cockeyed, my scarf unmatched and wrinkled, my blouse too big, my socks belled, my shoes scuffed, my lunch bag many times used and crumpled, lines under my eyes, and no lipstick.⁷¹

It was in this era of her life that Baez began her artistic path. She explains, "it was the sense of isolation, of being 'different,' that initially led me to develop my voice." When she was not accepted into the girls' glee club, she assumed it was because she could not sing in the classical bel canto style, a way of vocalizing with a high amount of vibrato that was the norm for female singers in the early fifties. She goes on to describe the process of changing her voice into the voice for which she became famous.

Powerless to change my social standing, I decided to change my voice [...] My natural voice came out straight as an arrow. Then I tried bobbling my finger up and down on my Adam's apple, and, to my delight, found I could create the sound I wanted. For a few brief seconds, I would imitate the sound without using my hand, achieving a few "mature"-sounding notes. This was terrific! This is how I would train!

The time it took to form a shaky but honest vibrato was surprisingly short. By the end of the summer I was a singer.⁷²

⁷¹ Ibid., 30.

⁷² Ibid., 29.

In a fascinating kind of compromise, Baez developed a repertoire that was far more unconventional than her voice. That is to say, while she conformed to women's vocal stylings of the fifties, she did not stick to the typical material of teenage girls. Her attraction to music outside of the mostly white mainstream was, perhaps, so in line with her social position as an outsider that she does not even highlight or explain that her taste often departed from the pop charts and gravitated toward male performers over females. Among the first songs she learned to play were several blues ballads by the popular singer Johnny Ace, "Pledging My Love" and "Never Let Me Go." They were not obscure songs—they were top hits on the R&B charts in 1955 and also crossed over onto lower spots on the pop charts—but they were certainly not the expected building blocks of a repertoire for a teenage female singer. Branching into more blues, Baez also learned the "Annie" series, which white radio stations attempted to ban upon its release due to its explicitly sexual lyrics. Baez notes that even at only fourteen years old, she "was disgusted with the watered-down 'white' version, 'Roll with me Henry.'"⁷³

Returning to "Earth Angel," if it was one of the pop songs Baez heard over and over on her "little grey plastic bedside radio," it was also a song that existed within this context of her attraction to rhythm and blues. As one of the earliest R&B songs to crossover from the R&B chart to the Top Forty chart, the song represents the converging of two previously separate streams of music in the early and mid-fifties. Decades later, in her monologue on her influences, she presented the song

⁷³ Ibid., 29-30.

not alongside other Top Forty hits by white artists, but rather, alongside lesser-known hits by black artists. Perhaps Baez sings “Earth Angel” unabashedly with these racial dynamics in mind, lending just a bit of her egalitarian ethos to an otherwise less than revolutionary song. In the end, it is clear that any judgements about these songs must be made within the context of what was available. As Baez jokes, the alternative in 1955 was to do what all the other girls at her talent show were doing—wearing “ridiculous” short skirts and lip syncing along to novelty songs, like “How Much Is That Doggie In the Window?”⁷⁴ She jokes that she did not have the legs for such a performance, but it is clear she also did not have the life experience to sing the fluff to which women in the Fifties were limited.

As a final note, the geopolitical context of the Cold War shaped Baez’s interest in music beyond the mainstream in a unique way. Her father’s career in mathematics intersected with the postwar nuclear arms race in a way that defined her formative years. Struggling to reconcile a guilty conscience with his work on the atomic bomb, Baez’s father eventually committed himself to pacifism—a decision that prompted a series of career changes that led a young Baez from city to city for her father’s various academic positions, including a UNESCO position teaching and building a physics lab at the University of Baghdad for a year in 1951. She writes, “Rather than get rich in defense work, [my father] would become a professor. We would never have all the fine and useless things little girls want when they are growing up. Instead we would have a father with a clear conscience. Decency would

⁷⁴ JoanBaezVideo, “Joan Baez Salutes initial R&B influences.”

be his legacy to us.”⁷⁵ Baez’s experiences, both in Baghdad and surrounded by the liberal-leaning academics with whom her father worked, instilled in her a familiarity with anti-consumerism, a passion for social justice, and a related commitment to non-violence. She writes about her time in Baghdad, which included a life-threatening case of hepatitis,

The day we landed, in the heat and the strange new smells, we were horrified to see an old beggar being driven out of the airport gates by policemen using sticks and shouting in a crude and guttural language [...] Despite my illness I began to feel a part of Baghdad, as though its sufferings were also mine. I certainly felt closer to the beggars in the streets than I did to the people who sat around the British country club talking about punting on the Cam and how difficult it was to get these bloody natives to do anything. I felt sorry for the bloody natives.⁷⁶

These were the formative memories that Baez would bring to her anti-war stance in her 1957 protest of her high school’s air-raid drill; and in just a few years, the memories she would bring to her career as America’s foremost folksinger.

Conclusion: “What is a Teenage Girl?”

This genealogy opened with a newspaper article asking, “What Is a Girl?” and has traced the question backward and forward through the decade. It will come as no surprise that the question only evolved as the girls in question grew up. By the late 1950s, “What Is a Teenage Girl?” was the pressing debate.⁷⁷ In August 1957, in

⁷⁵ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 24.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-27.

⁷⁷ Eugene Gilbert, “Year-Long Surveys Reveal Average Teenage Girl Is Remarkably ‘Old-Fashioned’ Like Her Mother,” *The Herald-Sun*, Durham, North Carolina, August 17, 1957. Other texts on the question of womanhood and girlhood proliferated in this era. In addition to articles cited in this chapter, also see teen fashion model Betty Cornell’s series of advice books for girls: *Betty Cornell’s Teen-age Popularity Guide* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1953) and her follow-up *All About Boys* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1958). For more

its "What Young People Think" section, the *Durham Morning Herald* published a survey evocative of the country's intense and prismatic confusion surrounding this gender question under the heading, "Are You a Typical Teenage Girl? (Fill in the blanks, then compare your answers with the information in the articles.)." Of the six points on this survey, one (the first) is about professional goals: select "yes" or "no" regarding the statement, "I'd take my chances on a high paid job, instead of a safe one at less pay." Four are about one's social life, with clear undertones of the anxiety surrounding premarital sex: "I approve of going steady (Yes/No)"; "What I seek in a boy friend is wealth, looks, reputation, personality (name one)"; "I use the telephone _____ minutes a daily."; "I have drunk, smoked. (Once? Often? Regularly?)." The final question, if there remains any need for evidence of the centrality of rock 'n' roll to young women's lives, is: "Elvis Presley is my favorite singer. (Yes/No)."

If a teenage girl were to have read the articles that accompanied the survey, she would have found more questions than answers regarding whether she was "typical." On one side, she would read a description of "Jane Teen" rendered by Eugene Gilbert, the 31-year-old President of the Gilbert Youth Research Company, who had "been surveying the teenage scene for years." From its very title—"Year-Long Surveys Reveal Average Teenage Girl Is Remarkably 'Old-Fashioned' Like Her Mother"—Gilbert's article makes a nod to shifting gender norms, but reasserts a conservative path forward into adulthood. In this vision, "Jane Teen" seeks financial

exemplary press on the topic, see Amy Vanderbilt, "Clothes for Teens Involve Conflicting Points of View," *Press and Sun Bulletin*, New York, October 4, 1956; Hugh Delano, "Teenagers View Steady Dates as 'Only Normal,' *The Courier-News*, New Jersey, May 4, 1957; "What Is a Teenage Girl?," *The Greenville Sun*, February 14, 1959.

security over ambition, prioritizes domestic tasks, hopes for marriage and a family, and only votes “no” to the Elvis question because she is prone to fads and now loves Pat Boone (notably less riské) more. She starts dating (“a prime part of her life”) at 14, approves of going steady, and “wants to marry by the time she’s 22—perhaps a little older than her mother married”—a set of numbers and aspirations that envision her as slightly modern by delaying her expected marriage age while also silently requiring her to be an obsessively dating virgin for about 8 years.

In an article right next to Gilbert’s, the *Herald’s* Woman’s Editor Suzanne Jones gathers the reactions of a local panel of four Durham teenagers. Among them, there is a real Jane. She has considered where she wants to go to college but says she has barely thought about marriage. Her peer, Joe, is quoted, arguing, “Some people would classify Mr. Gilbert’s typical teenager as a square,” while another peer, Fred, says, “I believe the girls I know are just about as mature as Mr. Gilbert says of the ‘typical teenage girl.’” A final voice in the mix, Kay, does not resolve the confusion at all, only adding that she thinks her teenage girl friends are mostly thinking about parties and dances more than marriage. In a direct rebuttal to Gilbert, all that is clear is that “Neither Kay nor Jane [have] such well-formulated plans for the future as Mr. Gilbert believes of the typical teenage girl.”⁷⁸

This uncertainty was felt by all, and it was obvious by 1957 that researchers like Gilbert could no more clarify the norms of teenage girl in the present than they could will a particular future into being. With equal parts opportunity and

⁷⁸ Suzanne Jones, “Mr. Gilbert’s Typical Girl Measures Up a Little Older,” *The Herald-Sun*, Durham, North Carolina, August 17, 1957.

repression shaping their lives, in an absurdly prosperous country riddled by social tension and international dispute, it would be up to these girls themselves to choose their path. For an article relatively open to this uncertainty, it closes on an incongruously conservative note regarding those paths: “Kay and Jane know they’ve grown up this much...that grammar school dreams of a movie career have been dropped by a wayside, and ‘the natural way’ of living, a husband and family, are their hopes for the future.”⁷⁹ For many teenage girls, with the “natural way” of living increasingly in question, a career in the performing arts or a life more broadly dedicated to art was not out of the realm of possibility around age sixteen in the late fifties; for many, the path forward would lead to music and to the folk scene.

It is Jane—the real one—to whom I would like to give the last word, though the following telling quote of hers is buried deep within Jones’s report. After saying she has not thought much about marriage, she adds something rather bold: “That seems way off, but I think now, since you asked, that I’d want a well-educated husband and one that’s on my own level.” One wonders what this Jane was listening to.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 2: Folk Feminism and its Origins

The Café Bizarre

The story of the folk revival generally begins on any one of countless Sundays in the Fifties in Washington Square Park, where the status quo was, indeed, men playing and women watching. However, if we are to center the role of women, the narrative could instead begin on one of the strangest nights in folk history—a night that encapsulates the contradictions inherent to the movement, particularly with regard to gender. On August 18th, 1957, the first coffeehouse to feature folk music in the Village, Rick Allmen's Café Bizarre, had its opening night. Located on 106 West Third Street, one block south of the park, the Café Bizarre gave Village folksingers their first formal stage. Allmen was not a folk connoisseur, but rather a Village landlord who had taken note of the massive numbers of folksingers sleeping in the rooms of his apartment building on 190 Spring Street. Each Sunday, after the festivities in the park, his building tended to be the last hurrah for the weekend, with bluegrass singers, ballad singers, and blues singers occupying different floors. Allmen put the same crowd to work on his café, promising anyone who helped with the renovations a spot in the opening night show. Even more unusual than the promise of a proper stage was Allmen's assurance that if the club took off, there would be money in it for everyone.

The launch of the Café Bizarre was in no way guaranteed to be the great success it ultimately was. Among the many elements that made the club a questionable first formal venue for the movement, the space was, as its name suggested, a wild caricature of the Village, designed to match and market the most

naïve outsider's perception of the community who lived and made art there. The attempted ambiance was "spooky," laughably dark with candles flickering and fake cobwebs laced throughout. The servers were dressed, in Dave Van Ronk's memory, as Morticia from the Addams Family; even the lettering of the sign outside was reminiscent of a haunted house, uneven and smudged as though written in blood.¹ Inside, plans for a carefully-scripted show—one that leaned into the traditions of theater more than folk music—had been ruffling the feathers of the musicians who were considering playing throughout rehearsals.

The Village folksingers may have escalated their antics into an all-out rebellion against the Café Bizarre had it not been for one woman: Odetta. The celebrated performer seems to have saved the show on multiple fronts. According to Van Ronk, the only reason he and his fellow musicians ultimately acquiesced to the performance as scripted was that Odetta was set to be the headliner. Meanwhile, "feeble" official advertising efforts were not a major setback once "a wildfire word of mouth news flash" regarding Odetta's impending appearance tore through the Village. Whether they were uptown "tourists" or stalwart Villagers, Odetta fans bought up every ticket and became the kind of energized and attentive audience the Café Bizarre needed for a triumphant opening night. As Hoffman described, "You couldn't have packed another folk enthusiast in with a nine-pound hammer."²

¹ Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, 148; Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 53-55.

² Lee Shaw (Hoffman), "New York Scene – The Bizarre Theatre," *Caravan No.2*, September 1957, 2.

There is, of course, the superficial explanation that Odetta was simply more famous and more experienced. She was a nationally recognized figure entering a theretofore local scene; and while this show was the first “professional” appearance for almost everyone else who took the stage and sang under a proper spotlight for the first time that night, she had been making a living as an actor, singer, and guitarist since the mid-1940s. Throughout the early 1950s, she had played at a string of the most iconic cabaret-style nightclubs in the country, from the Blue Angel in midtown Manhattan to the Tin Angel in San Francisco; and by the time of the Café Bizarre opening in 1957, she had already become a regular performer at the Gate of Horn in Chicago. (Opened in early 1956, the 100-seat venue that legendary manager Albert Grossman ran was dedicated solely to folk music and was, more or less, what the Café Bizarre emulated.) In April of 1957, in the midst of her Gate of Horn run and several months before her appearance at the Café Bizarre, she had released her first solo album, *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, on the new, exclusively folk label Tradition Records. Folksingers of the Village scene and beyond had taken to it with reverence.

Odetta was clearly one of two folk leviathans capable of carrying and propelling the movement by mid-1957. The question is how this happened and what her gender had to do with it. With a bold voice whose tone and timbre she changed from song to song, her talent was, indeed, undeniable. However, many other performers who took the stage that night were known for show-stopping voices. Ellen Adler sang in a high soprano that some believed to be on-par with Joan Baez’s, and which led Hoffman to describe her as “the enchanting Ellen Adler.” Judy Isquith,

the third and final woman on the bill, was known for her exceptionally rich and sonorous tone, a quality that earned her the nickname “Big Judy” around the Village. Similarly, Dave Van Ronk was known for his foot-stomping gravitas, intricate blues-style guitar, and impossibly loud howl. Hoffman reported, “Dave sings blues with an intensity and vitality, and sometimes violence, that comes across powerfully to his audience. His performance brought a thunder of applause.” A few skiffle groups filled in the spaces, and several other local stars—“Luke Faust, a young man with a masterful hand at the 5-string banjo” and bluesman “Bob Brill, who handled his material beautifully but failed to make the contact with his audience that is necessary for really effective singer-communication”—also stood out.

Despite their own enthusiastic reception, the Village performers placed themselves in a firmly, almost comically, second-tier status as soon as Odetta took the stage. Hoffman reported,

Behind her, in the spill of the lights, the seated performers listened with the intensity of apprentices before a master: one with tears in his eyes – another with his head thrown back, his eyes closed and his mouth open, as if her voice were something that washed over him, engulfing him. And the audinece [sic]...tense and excited, completely held by the power of this woman.

When she finished, they asked for more. They begged and cried for meore [sic]...particularly the performers on the stage, who were close in fact and in emotion, to her singing.

With a rather shy smile, she took up the guitar again and sang for us. Her voice filled the hall, sweeping us away from the Here-and-Now of it.

And then it was over.³

Hoffman’s review is obviously a subjective account, but even if the details are exaggerated here, the Village folk community’s awe of Odetta—or at least their

³ Shaw (Hoffman), “New York Scene – The Bizzare Theatre,” 2-3.

determination to be *seen* as in awe of Odetta—is evident. From Hoffman describing her as a “magnet” that drew a “wandering audience” to order even before she took the stage to a man visibly crying in her presence, it seems that Village folk musicians reveled in being rendered powerless by this woman; and in *acting* powerless, with the most fascinating release of power being the willingness of the performers to transform into rapt pseudo-audience members in front of their actual audience. The message was something along the lines of: *We are something, but we are nothing compared to this woman*. In this chapter, I trace the complex history of the folk movement that made Odetta the only performer capable of captivating this audience and propelling folk music into its next era in the late 1950s.

In this chapter, I would like to use this pivotal show to demonstrate ways the folk scene provided a particular sense of possibility to the women who gravitated to it. While this storied part of the city was a space for folksingers and fans to subvert mainstream expectations of race and class in overt, celebrated, and eventually mythologized ways, it simultaneously opened subtle avenues for the destabilization of normative conventions of gender via folk performance. The same elements of the Village folk scene that made it one of the most energetic musical landscapes in American cultural history—the intentional merging of art and politics, the ideological insistence on authenticity in life and art, and the celebration of and openness to outsiders—were also the elements that empowered the women of the folk scene in an era before many even were even aware of feminism as a sociopolitical concept.

At the same time, there were serious limitations to the various forms of liberation that the Village folk scene promised. As we have seen and will continue to see, the folk community drew its inspiration from the past in ways that both helped and harmed female members. What resulted was a kind of folk feminism, as contradictory as the folk movement itself, which confined women to age-old stereotypes of gender while also allowing them to subtly rewrite those roles from within a masculinist world of performance. Through analysis of Odetta Holmes' first major performance in the Village, this chapter aims to provide a tangible example of folk feminism at work. Given that the folk scene defined itself by its connection to the past, this chapter looks backward to the Depression era to contextualize and explain how Odetta and others arrived where they were by the start of the folk revival.

Narratives of the Folk Revival

By the time Odetta headlined the Café Bizarre, the folk revival was gaining momentum throughout the United States, with focal points on college campuses and nightclubs in San Francisco, Denver, Chicago, Boston, and many other urban areas. Though aspiring performers could find gigs and community around the country, the undeniable epicenter of the movement was Greenwich Village in New York City. With its decades upon decades of history as a haven for artists and progressives of all stripes, as well as its proximity to Manhattan-based power centers of the national music industry, the Village was a natural crossroads, mecca, and, in many cases, home to those who identified as folk musicians. In fact, the mythology of the place aligned so closely with the anti-authoritarian ideology of the movement, it is difficult

to imagine one existing without the other. As Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul, and Mary later recalled, “Greenwich Village was, in many ways, the epicenter of the 1960s cultural revolution in America. Remarkable breakthroughs were made... but none more so than in folk music. Folk songs reached people’s hearts, inspiring them to challenge the established societal norms and break with antiquity.”⁴

The irony I want to emphasize is that Odetta, folk’s greatest star at the time, was neither a product of the Village scene nor representative of the majority of the folk community. The “urban folksinger” was the archetype of the Village folk revival. Statistically speaking, this performer was much more likely to be male than female.⁵ They were also likely to be white and from a middle-class family. In the early years (approximately 1952-1959), before the scene began to attract aspiring stars and other enthusiasts from far-flung locales like Bob Dylan’s hometown of Hibbing, Minnesota, this folksinger was almost inevitably a teenager from an outer borough or suburb of Manhattan. They were disillusioned with mainstream America, critical not only of the vapid and rigid state of its culture, but also, of the associated racial and economic inequalities to which politicians and cultural elites of the Eisenhower era turned a blind eye.⁶ They were armed with an acoustic instrument and, at the very least, knowledge of Harry Smith’s six-LP set *The Anthology of American Folk*

⁴ Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, 9.

⁵ Alix Dobkin, interview by author, October, 15, 2019; Happy Traum, interview by author, October 16, 2019; Dobkin, *My Red Blood*, 170-173.

⁶ For more on this generation’s hunger for a collective definition and experience of “the real” as an alternative to postwar cultures of consumption, see FN 2 in the introduction.

Music, commercial recordings of rural musicians made in the 1920s and 1930s, which Folkways Records had released in 1952. Other songs drifted in and out, but many considered these eighty-four tracks to be the foundation the canon.⁷

In the mid-Fifties, now remembered as the build-up to the mainstream folk boom, a folksinger's weekend typically began with the Friday-evening trek from their suburban home to lower Manhattan, and then on to any one of numerous parties happening in apartments throughout the Village. Jamming and swapping songs carried on throughout the days and nights until about noon on Sunday, when everyone headed from whatever floor, couch, or bed they had found to the movement's main stage at that point, Washington Square Park. There, musicians gathered in different groups based on their nuanced political and aesthetic leanings and created a cacophony of guitars, banjos, and fiddles so loud that those approaching the park could hear it from blocks away.⁸ They sang for each other, for the Italian-American residents dealing with this largely unwelcome intrusion, and for the growing crowds of tourists who walked through the Village to observe its latest strand of bohemian denizens, often confusing them with their Beat predecessors. If the performers got anything out of this tourism, it could only have been a heightened sense of their difference from the uptown masses; in these years, so few were playing for financial gain that it was unheard of even to set one's case

⁷ Happy Traum, interview by author, October 16, 2019; Van Ronk, *Mayor of Macdougall Street*, 46-47. For *Billboard's* brief announcement of the anthology's release, see "Folkways Issues 'Anthology' Series" in *Billboard*, August 16, 1952.

⁸ Happy Traum, "Recollections," in Cohen and Petrus, Eds., *Folk City*, 117-118.

out to collect a few dollars. (In fact, many roamed the Village without cases, their guitars slung over their backs.) In short, the years are remembered as a carefree moment when a sincere love of the music fueled the scene. For those who were not necessarily there for the music, the swelling sense of generational communitas was enough of a draw.⁹

There were certainly female folk performers—their stories comprise the bulk of this dissertation—but the far more common role of a woman of the Village folk scene was more ambiguous. A broad portrait of this woman would paint her, like the men, as in her teens or early twenties, white, from an outer borough, left-leaning, and looking for an escape from middle-class conformity. Where folk men wore beards and the denim jeans and rolled sleeves of blue-collar laborers, folk women bought leather sandals (risqué for the time) at shops around the park and experimented with wearing their hair loose, straight, and long.¹⁰ About these women, Dave Van Ronk writes in an aside in his memoir, “...one of the advantages of both anarchism and folk music was the number of young women who seemed to be attracted to the scene. Some were singers, but a lot just hung out on the fringes, and

⁹ Van Ronk, *Mayor of Macdougall Street*, 127. Cohen and Petrus, Eds., *Folk City*, 1-25.

¹⁰ Bruce Weber, “Allan Block, Whose Sandal Shop Was Folk Music Hub, Dies at 90,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2013; Hajdu, *Positively Fourth Street*, 35, 214; Jane Traum, interview with author, October 16, 2019. Joan Baez, who would popularize such styles by the early 1960s, took the stripped-down audacity of sandals one step further by making a point of performing barefoot. Contextualizing the influence of the Greenwich Village style, she notes that the 1959 Newport Folk Festival audience was decidedly conventional: “The kids who flocked to the festival were trim and had short hair: the sixties had not begun yet.” Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 60.

the anarchists were all deeply committed to the principle of ‘free love.’”¹¹ To summarize, though many a powerful love story took place in the Village against the backdrop of the folk movement, the women of the scene were generally viewed as “cute” and “fun” but, in many ways, tangential. If the term “folk woman” had even been used at the time, it would have referred vaguely to a nameless fan of the music—an adventurous girl whose liberal leanings made her a potential sexual conquest or muse. As Suze Rotolo recalls, “All that was offered to a musician’s girlfriend in the early 1960s was a role as her boyfriend’s ‘chick,’ a string on his guitar.”¹²

There are few contemporaneous descriptions on the role and place of the women in general as clear as Van Ronk’s memoir, but reading between the lines of various reports of everyday life in the folk world corroborates his general attitude. In April of 1957, 29-year-old folk enthusiast Izzy Young opened the Folklore Center on 110 MacDougal Street. Ostensibly a folk book and record shop, it immediately became the main hub of the scene. Reflecting on two years of massive growth, Young published an article in the magazine *Record Research* in 1959 with guiding, ever humorous, advice:

If you want to make a killing—open a Folklore Center (there are a dozen stores opened up since I opened my store in March, 1957) and don’t be afraid. Don’t be married. Have faith in your genius. Put on concerts which only 60 people will attend to attest to your integrity. Lend money to any itinerant folk singers. Let them sleep in back of your store and feed them. Once your ego is established start your own magazine. Brag if you can pay the bills. After two years a girl from California will

¹¹ Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 49. Another major player of the early folk scene, Izzy Young, similarly links his life in folk with heterosexual pursuits: “My real life and my sex life didn’t start till I opened the Folklore Center [in 1957].” Young qtd. in *The Conscience of the Folk Revival*, xxi.

¹² Rotolo, *A Freewheelin’ Time*, 182-183.

walk into your store and make you realize you are worth something. You will make a living from the money you no longer lend, alone! You will start to keep books for the government and the accountant. You will rob and hustle and move from the bottom of twelve totem poles towards a view of the top of the stairs. Own percentages as that is the way to make money in America. Write columns for everyone as it will make you an information center and information is money in America. Then you will get married and will start in a new profession gotten from a lead in your own store.¹³

Women were woven through the narrative, but again, they were often nameless and decentered. They were “chicks” like Rotolo, who would appear on the iconic cover of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* in a few years’ time, beautiful and intelligent, yet permanently affixed in the cultural imagination to a male musician’s arm.

With even the slightest shift of perspective, it becomes clear that the women of the folk scene were far more than a pretty crowd orbiting the art. To begin with, they were in no way interchangeable long-haired waifs. Immersed in a universe of songs that glorified epic sagas and the drama of a hard-lived life, each folk woman whose story can be traced was a complex person on a journey as momentous as any male folksinger’s. Furthermore, though female musicians on the scene were relatively rare—confined to what Alix Dobkin describes as the unwritten rule of “one ‘chick’ per show”—they were there, performing each night alongside the men.¹⁴ Many of these folk women—the musicians as well as girls “on the fringes”—had a unique and strong impact on the course of the folk revival. If they were not literally on the stage, they were the muses who inspired songs, waitresses who kept the clubs moving, writers and administrators, illustrators and mothers, fans and

¹³ Young, “Predications of the Folklore Center for the Future,” in *The Conscience of the Folk Revival*, ed. Scott Barretta (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 9.

¹⁴ Dobkin, *My Red Blood*, 173.

activists. In short, they were sometimes the face and even more frequently the unsung backbone of an entire movement.

Odetta Saves the Show

Odetta was an outlier to almost everything that defined the early years of the folk revival, very much the way the Café Bizarre challenged some of the folk scene's core aesthetic and political principles. Returning that evening, it is fitting that the age-old equation of different with dangerous, of alternative with freakish, was on full display through the outlandish décor. The folk community did not seem to know exactly how to react, but it was rapidly formalizing itself for this latest revival and attempting to articulate reactions that had only taken place in bars, apartments, and parks just weeks earlier. For example, also in August 1957, a local folk enthusiast named Lee Hoffman (then Lee Shaw), had launched the fanzine *Caravan*, which quickly became a respected forum for internal conversation and debate of the emerging scene. In her review of the Café Bizarre show in *Caravan* No. 2, Hoffman only mentioned the "haunted" details to point out how poorly they were delivered. Describing the beginning of the show, she wrote,

The PA system emitted a wail of feedback, the kind you get at a typical amateur production when the sound man doesn't know how to handle his equipment. A light flashed on, on the platform above the stage area, and a face was visible, illuminated from below in the manner of a Halloween ghoul. This pseudo-Theodore made a few comments that failed to relate to the program, and then introduced the first act, a newly formed skiffle group.¹⁵

¹⁵ Shaw (Hoffman), "New York Scene – The Bizarre Theatre," 2.

She went on to marvel at the fact that the PA feedback was intentional and to criticize the emcee's telling of a series of "common gory jokes" in a way that ruined them. Her take, overall, was that this emcee was the low point of the show, but her disapproval rested more on his unprofessional performance than on the vaguely offensive implications of the ghoulish theme itself.¹⁶ The Café Bizarre operated via gimmick—*amateur* gimmick at that—and nothing could have been further from the life-stripped-bare ethos of folk.

In more ways than one, the Village folk community was stepping into uncomfortably inorganic territory on this night. A far cry from the typical folk performances that took place without stages in Village apartments and random corners of Washington Square Park, the Café Bizarre was highly formal both in its physical set-up and in the kind of polished performance it expected from the folksingers. In the large garage space, the folksinger "crew" had erected a proscenium-like stage, complete with lighting and sound systems. The stage had no curtain and was "thrown together out of moveable platforms," in Hoffman's description, but it still threatened the very heart of the movement. A formal stage, however haphazard, created a visible separation between the performers and the audience, challenging the folk ideals of accessibility and equality on many fronts, visible and metaphorical. In the park, where anyone with a guitar could theoretically be a folk musician, it was relatively easy to stand by the idea that folk music was "the people's music," by everyone and for everyone, as Pete Seeger and other

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

members of the Old Left so frequently declared. Seeger famously expanded, “A mountaineer singing a pop song to some neighbors in his cabin might have more folk music in it than a concert artist singing to a Carnegie Hall audience an ancient British ballad he learned out of a book.”¹⁷ At the Café Bizarre, suddenly, there was an undeniably elevated level of exclusivity and removal from Seeger’s idealized everyday life context. The audience was no longer a casual flow of pedestrians passing through a public park or a crowd gathered in apartments to share their appreciation for the music in an intimate space. Instead, the audience was a group of paying customers with tickets; and the folksinger was a commodity, a performer whose talent could be validated and announced by their inclusion in this show.¹⁸

This is to say, the blurry line between audience and performer—a core characteristic of the early Village folk scene—was hardening. Though the musicians did have a bit of power over their placement on the bill for the evening via their participation in the construction process, Rick Allmen still curated the show based on his knowledge of the names of the scene. Dave Van Ronk, for example, watched the construction process dubiously from afar but was still invited to open the second set.¹⁹ The line-up, in fact, featured some of the best-known singers of the

¹⁷ Cohen and Petrus, eds, *Folk City*, 38; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 194-195; Seeger and Schwartz, *The Incomplete Folksinger*, 145. For more in-depth analysis of the idea that folk songs were “of the people” as opposed to “for the people” see sections on the early Cold War leftist group People’s Songs, Inc. in Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, 144-154.

¹⁸ My thinking here is informed, in part, by Filene’s analysis of the ways “middlemen” inserted themselves as an authoritative, gatekeeping layer between folk performers and audiences throughout the 20th century. Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 4-6.

¹⁹ Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 54.

Village community, including Bob Brill, Luke Faust, Roger Abrahams, Judy Isquith, and Ellen Adler. Pre-show advertising was “pretty feeble: a few posters in Village windows, a few handbills with only the meagerest of information on them,” but it was still an attempt at marketing a local phenomenon that had not yet been sold.²⁰ These were some of the first hints of a kind of commodification and the related hierarchizing of performers that would come to dominate and, in some accounts, ultimately destroy the revival.²¹

Oddly enough, members of the folk community did not focus their critique of the Café Bizarre on its commercial nature, the politics of the line-up, or the subtle existential threat such a selection process posed to the anti-authoritarian, anti-commercial spirit of the movement. Instead, they zeroed in on what might be read as the aesthetic parallels of this kind of commodified performance: the “elaborate stagecraft” that many found to be, again, in Van Ronk’s take-no-prisoners account, “a crock of shit.”²² The presence of an emcee was only one element of a much broader effort to control the performance. Allmen had gone as far as to hire a university-trained director to script light cues, sound cues, set design, and set direction. Van Ronk remembers, we “took sadistic delight in deliberately missing our cues, tripping over the furniture, and provoking [the director] into screaming fits of rage. We

²⁰ Shaw (Hoffman), “New York Scene – The Bizarre Theatre,” 2.

²¹ For analyses that mark the commercialization of folk music as an element in the folk revival’s loss of spirit and ultimate fracturing, see Cohen, *Rainbow Quest*, 261-261; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 3, 211-220; Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 211-215; Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, 188-195.

²² Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 55.

couldn't help ourselves; he was so funny when he blew up."²³ Careful rehearsal, spotlights, canned sound, microphones—these were the trappings of a kind of rigid formalism that Village folksingers rejected on principle; their embrace of spontaneity in performance was the aesthetic core of their entire political project. Impish behavior in rehearsal was a form, however childish, of preserving the folk movement as they saw it.²⁴

These inclinations make the folksingers' adulation of Odetta all the more contradictory, for her performance style was anything but rough around the edges. Classically trained and ever-posed, Odetta strove for an image rooted in the politics of respectability with which she had been raised as opposed to the bohemian ethos this new generation glamorized. My intention in critiquing her reception is not to question Odetta's inherent talent or lack thereof; nor is it to challenge the validity or sincerity of her audience's response. Rather, I aim to highlight the performance involved on all sides of this interaction and to consider how Odetta's identity as a Black woman in the context of the late-Fifties Village folk scene shaped this scenario. Though accounts both contemporaneous and removed skirt awkwardly around her race, it had to have been heavily felt that Odetta was the only person of color who

²³ Ibid., 55.

²⁴ For guiding thoughts on the aesthetic celebration of spontaneity in postwar art as it related to life in the Village, see Sally Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), specifically her introductory thoughts on urban land-scape, communitas, ordinary life, freedom from rules and canons, playfulness, and physicality" as well as an overarching commitment to "the new," particularly prominent in the "re-experiencing of the body" that many of these performance forms allowed (6,14).

took the stage that evening. She was one of, at most, a handful of people of color in the room. Others sang English ballads and blues, approaching but not quite touching the topic of American racial inequality. Meanwhile, in addition to ballads and blues, Odetta sang African American spirituals and work songs, material that tackled the specific horrors of slavery and Jim Crow era discrimination head on in overtly political ways.²⁵

There is no record of what Odetta sang at the Café Bizarre. However, with her solo debut just released, it is likely that she performed many songs from the album. In one of these songs, the dirge-like “Deep Blue Sea,” she sang a tragic story of a man drowning in a high, melancholy melody, her voice full of wavering vibrato:

*Deep blue sea, baby, deep blue sea
Deep blue sea, baby, deep blue sea
Deep blue sea, baby, deep blue sea
It was Willy what got drowned
In the deep blue sea*

*Dig his grave with a silver spade
Lower him down with a golden chain
Dig his grave with a silver spade
It was Willy what got drowned
In the deep blue sea*

American folklorists speculated that this song had originated centuries before in England and later gained its lullaby rhythm in the West Indies, a possible evolution that made it not only a traditional sea shanty but also, in Odetta’s hands, a subtle commentary on the Middle Passage.²⁶ There were, however, much more obvious

²⁵ For my analysis and historiography of the racial politics of the blues, see Chapter 3.

²⁶ Among scholars who understand the ocean as a space connected to the traumatic legacy of African slavery, Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s work is most helpful to me. See *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (Oakland: AK Press, 2020) and *M*

treatments of slavery and racism in her repertoire. In the chilling “Another Man Done Gone,” she retired her guitar in favor of a sparse, gospel-inspired handclap accompaniment. Displaying her renowned vocal control, she also traded the classical bel canto of “Deep Blue Sea” for a deeper, less feminine tone with far less vibrato in her voice. At once mournful and cautionary, she sang of the countless Black men reduced to chain gangs for minor violations or no violation at all:

*Another man done gone
Another man done gone
Another man done gone from the county farm
Another man done gone*

*I didn't know his name
I didn't know his name
I didn't know his name, didn't know his name
Didn't know his name*

*He had a long chain on
He had a long chain on
He had a long chain on, had a long chain on
Had a long chain on*

*They killed another man
They killed another man
They killed another man, killed another man
Killed another man*

Perhaps she concluded her performance with her “Spiritual Trilogy,” which also closed her album. Rousing lyrics like, “Before I’ll be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave” and “Come go with me to that land where I’m bound/There’s no kneeling in that land where I’m bound” beckoned the room of white folksingers and fans to a more equal country. With repeating lines, shouting that mounted throughout the

Archive: After the End of the World (Durham: Duke UP, 2018). Also see thoughts on oceanography in Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* Vol. 14, Issue 2-3, June 1, 2008, 191-215.

suite, and a raucous guitar accompaniment to match, the songs all but demanded their listeners to sing along. These were not songs meant to be performed with the technical perfection of a virtuoso, though Odetta certainly had that ability; these were songs meant to engage and galvanize an audience, to create a community.²⁷ Surely, the folksingers on stage as well as the packed audience stood and sang.

To a movement that prided itself upon its egalitarianism, Odetta's ability to deliver material related to racial injustice in a direct and compelling way was a saving grace. Though my focus has been the politics of gender and sexuality in the era of the early folk revival, the focus of progressive circles in this moment was undeniably race. Odetta's performance at the Café Bizarre was three years after the 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, which had ordered the desegregation of public schools and stoked the tensions between segregationists and their opponents throughout the country. The performance came two years after 14-year-old Emmet Till was murdered in Mississippi, an act of racial violence so brutal and adeptly-publicized that white America had taken note. In less than a month, President Eisenhower would send federal troops to escort Black students integrating Little Rock Central Highschool in Arkansas. And at the very moment

²⁷ There are many ways to approach the idea of community formation through song, but for my purposes, scholarship with emphasis on the politics of performance and protest in the Sixties has been most helpful. See, for example, Bradford D. Martin, *The Theater Is in the Street: Politics and Public Performance in 1960s America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004). Also see Roy, *Reds, Whites, Blues*, 2-9 for a succinct explanation of the sociological approach to understanding music. For a fascinating perspective on folk arts, specifically, and community creation, see Banes, *Greenwich Village 1963*, 95-107. Also see relevant sections on folk music arising from regional communities in Filene, *Romancing the Folk*.

Odetta took the stage, a bill that would become the first federal civil rights legislation since 1875 was making its beleaguered way through congress: on September 9th, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which aimed to protect African Americans' voting rights, would become law. In that moment, racism across the country was so deeply institutionalized that less than 20% of eligible Black voters were registered to vote.

This is all to say, on the eve of the peak of the civil rights movement in the United States, the folk movement simply had to find a way to center African American experiences and African Americans themselves in order to have any chance at being the socially relevant cultural force its members wanted it to be. Odetta's star had risen in the years leading up to August 1957 in part because she met that need; and she met it in profound fashion with a host of songs rooted in African American history and aesthetics, delivered in her unforgettable voice with unrivaled gravitas. For eager folk fans, Odetta served a purpose: she refreshed and validated the folk movement for its new context within the budding New Left.²⁸

Gendering Authenticity

²⁸ For helpful starting points on the veiled identity politics of the New Left, see Grant Farred, "Endgame Identity? Mapping the New Left Roots of Identity Politics," *New Literary History*, Vol. 31, No. 4, *Is There Life after Identity Politics?* (Autumn 2000), 627-648; Susan Bickford, "Anti-anti-identity Politics: Feminism, Democracy, and the Complexities of Citizenship," *Hypatia*, 12.4 (1997), 111-131; Alice Echols, *Shaky Ground*, Part 2 "Feminism, Sexual Freedom, and Identity Politics." Also see a foundational work on the hegemonic impulses of "well-intentioned" movements: Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1995).

American folk revivalists had long confronted issues of race and class, always within the context of a painstaking and endlessly evolving conversation on “authenticity.” Almost every tome on folk music addresses this topic, though writers differ in terms of the degree to which they are willing to recognize folk “authenticity” as an elaborate, shifting construct versus an objective, achievable pursuit. For the purpose of understanding Odetta’s place in these debates, we need to go briefly back to the Depression era and events leading to it.

American academics had been concerned with folk culture, especially music, since the early 1900s, but it was not until the 1930s, in the wake of traumatic financial collapse and widespread poverty, that the general public first turned its eye toward “the folk.” Here was a group of people, their culture already well curated in countless books by folklorists, who were celebrated for living in isolation from modern society; the more cut off they were from the mainstream, went the logic, the more “authentic” their music was. Music like this held particular appeal in the Depression, when middle-class Americans were forced to question the social and economic institutions on which they had relied; suddenly, as Benjamin Filene explains in *Romanticizing the Folk*, a “tendency [...] to recognize America’s strength and vibrancy in the margins of society” swept the nation. In fact, in an extremely romantic interpretation of “margins,” the public began to locate purity, timelessness, and endurance in figures previously considered corrupt or weak: outlaws, bandits,

hobos, and other kinds of impoverished and transient people.²⁹ Explaining the phenomenon, which he identifies as “outsider populism,” Filene writes,

There is, of course, an oxymoronic quality inherent to “outsider populism”: how can one build populism around those outside “the people”? The outsiders appealed, though, because they reminded Americans of themselves—or of how they wanted to see themselves: independent, proud in the face of hardship, straightforward, beholden to no special interests. Images of the folk attracted Americans because they suggested sources of purity and character outside the seemingly weakened and corrupt mainstream of society. Ironically, then, to highlight a person’s marginality in relation to the mainstream helped authenticate him or her as an exemplar of American grit or character.

Here we begin to sense how unstable the definition of “authenticity,” and by extension, the very definition of “folk” was. During the Depression, prison work songs gained traction; as did Woody Guthrie’s tales of hopping trains and rejecting capitalism, Aunt Molly Jackson’s union marches, and ex-convict Lead Belly’s heart-wrenching blues. However, twenty years before, “cowboy songs” had been briefly in vogue due to folklorist John Lomax’s collecting efforts and his good fortune in securing Harvard funding to traverse the West listening to ranchers sing. Before that, in the early 1900s, American folklorists had looked almost exclusively to rural white communities in the mountains. Following a standard that the Harvard Shakespeare scholar and folklorist Francis Child had pioneered, they had identified “folk music” as a centuries-old group of anonymously-penned British ballads that had been passed down orally. Known as the Child ballads, the 305 songs had made their way from the fields of rural England to the hills of Appalachia and the South. “Authenticity” for these early collectors lay not in the outlaw or the cowboy, but

²⁹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 64-65; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 67-77.

rather in the American counterpart to the British peasants Child had so admired: Protestant farmers and craftspeople of Anglo-Saxon descent. The older the ballad one of these people sang, the better; not only was age a sign of pre-modern roots, but also of a kind of Darwinian endurance. It was assumed that the songs that had survived the test of time, including any evolutionary changes to lyrics, melodies, verses, etc., were the “purest” songs available to the world, fittingly sung by the “purest” folk.³⁰

It is evident from this brief overview of the evolution of “folk” that conversations circled mostly around class leading up to the Depression, with race also factoring in. However, women were quietly involved from the beginning of American folk history as musicians, consumers, and characters. To give a brief snapshot of gender in this “original” canon, we can turn to “Barbara Allen,” its most famous song. Like all the Child ballads, it takes a highly detailed narrative form and is relatively long, with most versions featuring about nine verses.³¹ Also characteristic of the canon as a whole, it explores the most serious of themes: sickness, heartbreak, death, true love. As the story goes, a young man named William slights a maiden named Barbara Allen, who responds by ignoring him. He falls desperately ill with heartbreak, and Barbara Allen shows no sympathy. (In

³⁰ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 25. Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr, Eds., *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2014), 1-15.

³¹ Details and verse counts differ for most well-known folk songs. Child collected as many “variants” as possible. Also see versions in Maynard Solomon, Ed., *The Joan Baez Songbook* (New York: Ryerson Music Publishers, 1964) and Margaret Bradford Boni, Ed., *The Fireside Book of Folk Songs* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947).

most versions, he summons her to his bedside, and she says with merciless curtness, "Young man, I think you're dyin.") William dies of sadness, and Barbara Allen proceeds to die of grief. In the end,

*Barb'ry Allen was buried in the old church-yard,
Sweet William was buried beside her;
Out of Sweet William's heart there grew a rose,
Out of Barb'ry Allen's, a briar.*

*They grew and grew in the old church-yard,
'Til they could grow no higher;
At the end they formed a true lovers' knot,
And the rose grew round the briar.*

Child ballads like "Barbara Allen" did not shy away from strong and even controversial female characters. Here Barbara Allen shows surprising nerve, rejecting a suitor whose flirtation with other women she finds unacceptable; what is more, William shows emasculating weakness, so dependent on this woman that he dies. Finally, there is nuance to both characters: Barbara Allen's death reveals she is neither just a heartless, spurned lover, nor a passive victim of love. She is complex and ultimately living what seems to be an honest life. The Child ballads are full of such fictional women facing struggles unique to their gender. There is Mary Hamilton who, impregnated by the king, parts with her baby and hangs herself:

*"Arise, arise, Mary Hamilton,
Arise and tell to me
What thou hast done with thy wee babe
I saw and heard weep by thee?"*

*"I put him in a tiny boat,
And cast him out to sea,
That he might sink or he might swim,
But he'd never come back to me."*

Many of these songs were written in the first person, giving female musicians an avenue to embody these characters and their struggles. In *Geordie*, for example, the wife of a nobleman pleads for his life after he is caught for poaching the king's deer:

*Ah, my Geordie never stole nor cow nor calf,
He never hurted any,
Stole sixteen of the king's royal deer
And he sold them in Bohenny*

*Two pretty babies I have born,
The third lies in my body,
I'd freely part with them every one
If you'd spare the life of Geordie.*

In some versions of the tale, the judge refuses to pardon *Geordie*, and a mother is left single and devastated. In others, the judge is so impressed with the woman's character that he frees her husband, again granting a female character much more power than expected. Another kind of inversion of gender roles takes place in the mysterious "*Silkie*," where a creature who is a man on land and a seal in water takes his son from the baby's mother to care for him at sea. The *Silkie* predicts that the mother will remarry a harpooner who will eventually kill both him and the child.³²

The Child ballads did cast women in essentialist roles of mothers and wives, but they did so with a rare willingness to imbue women's lives with drama, choice, and ambiguity rivaling that of any male lead's storyline. It is difficult to say how American women of the turn of the century related to these songs, how the stories might have shaped or reflected the conventions of gender in the rural mountain communities that performed them. However, it is known that women were deeply

³² These Child ballads are pulled from *The Joan Baez Songbook* (1964). It is important to note there were far less empowering Child ballads, but the ballads I emphasize here were some of the most popular during the folk revival, in large part due to Baez's choice to include them in her repertoire.

involved on all levels of the continued curation of the Child ballad canon on this side of the Atlantic. While men in rural communities had their own repertoire of songs for public gatherings, women tended to sing the Child ballads at home while they worked in a song tradition that has been described as “more static” than the male parallel. As folklorists were after this very kind of musical timelessness, the majority of songs most early collectors recorded came from female musicians. Additionally, a surprising number of folklorists scouring the mountains for the latest arrangements of these ballads were women themselves, with Lorraine Wyman and Josephine McGill being two of the best-known collector-arrangers of popular parlor books before 1920. Furthermore, these parlor books were designed to be placed on pianos in middle- and upper-class homes throughout The United States; and domestic, family entertainment of this sort was considered to be women’s work. Thus, the Child ballads lived and evolved through women, as did the definition of American “folk.”³³

*

With both the Child ballads and the concept of outsider populism in mind, we can return to the question of racial politics within the folk movement. Up until the late-1920s, it was the rare folklorist who openly centered a musician’s racial identity in their discussion of authenticity. In the effort to find alternative and “truer” paths through modern life that folk music promised, perhaps it made sense

³³ Anne Cohen and Norm Cohen, “Folk and Hillbilly Music: Further Thoughts on Their Relation,” *JEMF Quarterly*, 13 (Summer 1977), 52-53; Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 20-35.

that early folklorists tended to focus on those of a different class or region; it seems the chasm between white and black was so wide that there was no seeing oneself or one's spiritual longings in those of a different race. In the folk world pre-1930, there was indeed such a thing as *too different* or, perhaps, *too disempowered*.

Several shifts began to shake the whiteness and Englishness of the American folk canon in the 1920s. First, as new technologies and a booming economy allowed the commercial recording industry to expand in this era, record companies sent their scouts out to more unexpected locales in search of lucrative material. One such scout from Okeh Records happened to record Mamie Smith, an African American vaudeville singer of the Harlem Renaissance, singing her song "Crazy Blues" in 1920. It was unheard of for a commercial record company to record a musician whose fame only reached the local level—much less a woman of color—but "Crazy Blues" sold a record-breaking 75,000 copies in its first month on shelves and a million copies in its first year, mostly to an African American working class market. Quickly, the major American record companies jumped on the trend of so-called "race records," capitalizing on demand for African American blues, jazz, work songs, gospel, comedy, and spoken-word storytelling, as well as adding a parallel white category they called "hillbilly records." Their efforts ushered in an era of New York recording moguls traveling south, as well as southern musicians migrating to New York. The recording industry was not at all invested in folklorists' debates regarding authenticity, but it had clearly stumbled upon an untapped source of revenue whose appeal to the public seemed to be its "authentic" sound, despite the fact that this body of songs was centuries younger than the ones academic

folklorists championed. Many of these songs were still anonymously penned, and they stood apart aesthetically from popular music on the radio; to the general public, these were the voices of “the folk.”³⁴ Race and hillbilly records propelled many women who did not necessarily identify as blues or folk singers to fame within the folk context: Mamie Smith to start, but also Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, the women of the Carter Family, and “country flappers” Roba Stanley and Moonshine Kate.³⁵

While academics dismissed race and hillbilly records as commercial (and therefore inauthentic), several folk song collectors just coming into full form in the folk world saw potential in the merging of folk study and popular entertainment. They set out to bring “folk” out of scholarly confinement. Their efforts coincided with a surge in public desire to separate America from Europe, both culturally and politically, following the trauma of the First World War. In a powerful confluence of all these movements and trends—traditional British ballad-centered folk study, the Harlem Renaissance, commercial recording of the 1920s, and a growing interest in the distinctly “American”—poet and journalist Carl Sandburg published *The American Songbag* in 1927 to enormous popularity. The first book of songs defined as “folk” aimed at the general public—designed to be “singable” instead of scholarly—*The American Songbag* presented a strikingly diverse collection of 280 songs, complete with illustrations and simple piano accompaniments. It proudly established an American musical heritage, and, to that end, repositioned the Child

³⁴ Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, 33-34.

³⁵ Bufwack and Oermann, *Finding Her Voice*, 63-70.

ballads as only one small subset of American folk music. The rest of the songs came from working people ranging from milkmen to oil drillers and prisoners; it was, in Sandburg's rather rosy words, "a ragbag of strips, stripes, and streaks of color from nearly all ends of the earth."³⁶

While still fixated on the locally rooted, the bucolic, and the old, Sandburg's conceptualization of folk authenticity included added obsessions with American diversity and musical accessibility. The former focus led Sandburg to a far more inclusive approach toward songs by minorities than any other American folklorist had taken. *The American Songbag* featured a section of African American "Blues, Mellows, Ballets" and a section of "Mexican Border Songs." More importantly, interspersed through all the other sections were songs by African Americans, other people of color, and women. Despite these efforts, the book did not attempt any critical conversation on social inequality in America, with only a few vague quotes that romanticized people of color. For example, at the start of the blues chapter, Sandburg included a quote from folklorist Dorothy Scarborough's 1925 book *On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs*:

I dare hint delicately that while it is possible that neither the vocalist nor I might derive joy
from singing *as singing*, yet as a folk-lorist I should experience delight at hearing a folk song
put across in such a way that I could capture it. I urge that as a song hunter I should rather hear a Negro in the cornfield or on the levee or in a tobacco factory, than to hear Galli-Curci grand-operize.³⁷

³⁶ Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), xii.

³⁷ Dorothy Scarborough qtd. in Sandburg, *American Songbag*, 224.

Other than this quotation—which itself was more an expression of folk’s perceived opposition to commercial music than it was a consideration of race—Sandburg’s only other reflections on American social inequalities were in his flowery introduction. He wrote,

There is presented herein a collection of 280 songs, ballads, ditties, brought together from all regions of America. The music includes not merely airs and melodies, but complete harmonizations or piano accompaniments. It is an All-American affair, marshaling the genius of thousands of original singing Americans.

While their particular struggles were not acknowledged, people of color and women were at least embraced as an integral part of this “All-American affair” through their inclusion in the book; what is more, their “genius” was implicitly recognized and celebrated alongside that of white male musicians. Thus, as American folk entered an era of pushing against a canon that traditionally had England at its core, it simultaneously entered an era of counting American women among the celebrated “folk.” Woven throughout *The American Songbag* are descriptions of a diverse range of female musicians. In the “Blues, Mellows, and Ballets[sic]” section, for example, we find the gospel song “You Fight On,” introduced thus:

Brave counsel and a spacious melody for a pilgrim’s progress. . . A North Carolina woman at Purdue University heard this for years as a girl from a negro woman cook in her home. “Often when I was in the kitchen, she would say to me, ‘Come on, Miss Mary, get on de tune wagon, you ain’t on de tune wagon.’”³⁸

In the same section, there is a version of “Times Getting’ Hard, Boys,” a song that would later gain popularity in its alternate form as an apolitical cowboy tune. With the lines, “Take my true love by de han’ lead her roun’ de town/When she see dat

³⁸ Sandburg, *American Songbag*, 248.

yellow boy she almos' faint away," an American classic is retold, satirically it seems, from an African American point of view. Sandburg writes in his introduction,

When Rebecca Taylor sang her spirituals for us in Columbia, South Carolina, she was asked if she knew other songs, not spirituals. "When you were a girl wasn't there something that boys and girls would sing at each other for fun, for mischief?" Her eyes lighted, she gave a soprano chuckle, and sang this verse out of the years when she was young. The "yellow boy" amid the black girls made an impression; it started a song.³⁹

Visions of the women of American folk continue in a whole section devoted to the many versions of the "Frankie Song," which follows a woman named Frankie (sometimes Sadie, Josie, or Annie) whose partner has committed adultery. With echoes of "Barbara Allen," Frankie shoots and kills the man and, in many iterations, receives a jail sentence. However, other versions set Frankie free, implying her violence is justified or at least undetected. For example, the section ends with "Sadie," about which Sandburg writes,

This is a woman's version of the old story of Frankie and her man. Six young women from six old cities sang it at White Lake, Michigan. They wrap Sadie in a "sky-blue kimono." They have Sadie kill her man, and he is hauled to the graveyard, and that's all. No arrest, no murder trial, neither acquittal nor execution. Text and tune here are from Julia Peterson of Ann Arbor.⁴⁰

The mostly working-class women who are noted for singing these songs—the "folk" according to Sandburg—are often reflections of the female characters whose tales they tell. In the previous folk era of focus on rural people singing centuries-old ballads about European nobles and maidens, there were limits to the degree to which an American singer could identify (or be identified) with a song's heroine; but in *The American Songbag*, with songs written relatively recently in

³⁹ Ibid., 242.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 86.

United States, the lines between folk character and folksinger began to blur. In the aforementioned “Sadie,” for instance, Sandburg’s introduction seems to imply that the “six young women” who sang the song to him were the same “they” who helped Sadie in her murder plot, creating a sense of collective female rebellion that is only heightened in the song’s last verse, which switches suddenly from the pronoun “she” to “they”:

They hauled out the rubber-tired carriage, and they hauled out the rubber-tired
hack,
They were haulin’ a guy to the grave-yard, and they weren’t gonna haul him back,
He was Sadie’s man, that had done her wrong, he wouldn’t come home.

In other examples, women embody their songs so closely, the sense of a fictional story unfolding is barely present as an autobiographical mode takes its place. As though urging herself on, an elderly African American cook sings, “You fight on, you fight on,/With yo’ swo’d in yo’ han’.” In “She Said The Same To Me,” attributed to “folks from the Ould Sod who settled in Iowa,” an Irish woman encounters another female immigrant “mournin’ for her true love, who was in Amerikee.” In “The Poor Working Girl,” Sandburg even acknowledges that there is almost no distance between the “folk” singing the song and the story they tell:

This wastrel may be heard from the lips of factory girls in several scattered cities of the Union of States. Some sing it as if it were true and after the fact, while others rattle it off as if there’s nothing to it but a ditty to pass the time away. Both may be correct.

The song has just one verse, meant to be sung “Slowly and mockingly angry” in a satirized version of a wealthy woman’s voice:

*The poor working girl,
May heaven protect her,
She has such an awf’ly hard time;
The rich man’s daughter goes haughtily by,*

*My God! Do you wonder at crime!*⁴¹

Parsing out whether or not these songs were truly autobiographical is not critical to the broader point that with the publication of *The American Songbag*, American women gained a kind of power they had not yet had in the folk world. In the Child ballad years, women were counted among “the folk” by virtue of their pre-modern lifestyles and their knowledge of treasured songs; in this new late-twenties phase, American women seemed to gain access to the canon with their own stories, particularly their stories of hardship and sorrow. While an obsession with the anti-commercial remained, authenticity in the folk context was being redefined to include expressions of modern working-class women’s issues. Also, with the naming of names, “authenticity” now increasingly applied to individual women themselves. By detaching them from the Child ballads, the folk world was allowing women to move from a static connection to the past into the present and future.

Depression Era

There were hints of outsider populism in Sandburg’s patriotic celebration of diversity, but it was not until the Great Depression that the philosophy came into full form in the folk movement. In this stage, folklorist Alan Lomax and his family dominated the folk world with their song collecting expeditions, publications, and audio recordings. They built on Sandburg’s work and ethos, but with an intensified belief in the authenticity of Americans who existed radically outside of the mainstream, as well as a heightened focus on specific individuals instead of

⁴¹ Ibid., 195.

communities. Foremost among them was an African American guitar player Lomax encountered serving a life sentence for murder in Louisiana's Angola State Prison: Huddie Ledbetter, or Lead Belly.⁴² After helping to win Lead Belly's freedom, Lomax took on the role of his manager and began to promote him across the country as the face of American folk music in the early 1930s. According to Filene, Lead Belly's image of "incompatibility with the mainstream" was the quality that appealed to the public as "authentic." The Lomaxes highlighted this "incompatibility" on multiple levels, from insisting that Lead Belly wear his prison uniform for performances to emphasizing that he had spent decades in confinement, completely cut off from outside cultural influences. Lead Belly, according to one of John Lomax's introductions to him, "doesn't burlesque. He plays and sings with absolute sincerity...I've heard his songs a hundred times, but I always get a thrill. To me his music is real music."⁴³

In a national climate of extreme crisis, it seems that the American public was ready for such an extreme break from cultural norms. That is to say, if we accept that folk musicians were a kind of mirror of their audiences' desires, that audiences was suddenly seeing some projected version of themselves—their desired traits of honesty and strength and, perhaps, their experiences of disempowerment—in an African American ex-convict. This was quite a distance from where folk had been even a few years earlier, when black prisoners were considered among the folk but certainly were not the stars.

⁴² Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 1934.

⁴³ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 58.

That the Lomaxes had chosen a Black man to be their most celebrated outlaw was, of course, no coincidence. The folklorists' search for a figure "free" from the perceived corruption of mainstream society intersected in this era with a broader ideology of primitivism running through many fields and professions. From avant-garde painters to anthropologists, many members of the cultural elite around the western world had taken to "the primitive" the way American folk fans took to "the folk." They looked toward non-western communities, celebrating their seemingly "untamed" way of life, with specific emphases on their perceived tendencies toward irrationality, violence, and unrestrained sexual desire. These qualities were not blatantly criticized, but rather couched within a patronizing admiration of these people as childlike, innocent, noble, and free. In this framework, non-whiteness was conflated with primitivity, intensifying racialized concepts of authenticity for myriad communities of color. This ideology combined with American racism and the folk world's Depression-era outsider populism set a man like Leadbelly up for a complex and ultimately tragic music career. Characteristic of their overall promotion efforts, the Lomaxes wrote for the press,

Leadbelly is a nigger to the core of his being. In addition he is a killer. He tells the truth only accidentally...He is as sensual as a goat, and when he sings to me my spine tingles and sometimes tears come. Penitentiary wardens all tell me that I set no value on my life in using him as a traveling companion. I am thinking of bringing him to New York in January.⁴⁴

This fearsome identity that the Lomaxes created for Lead Belly became the standard for African American bluesmen who came to fame in folk movement over

⁴⁴ Alan and John Lomax qtd. in Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 63-65. Quote in *Folk City*.

the next several decades. As folk hotspots cropped up in cities around the country, these men from the South followed in Lead Belly's footsteps, finding performance and recording opportunities among largely white crowds and under the thumbs of white promoters. For every expression of admiration for African American music—such as the Lomaxes' 1934 statement that African Americans sang “the most distinctive of folk songs—the most interesting, the most appealing”—there inevitably followed an overtly racist statement linking blackness to criminality, primitivism, or some kind of mystical, timeless strength, all in the name of authenticity.⁴⁵ These men were set up to be simultaneously revered and feared, and ultimately marginalized within the folk movement as they were in society at large.

While Black men were “cast as both archetypal ancestor and demon” within the folk movement, with Lead Belly as the prototype, white men gradually saw the arrival of their own paradoxical persona to morph into and maintain—one largely modeled after the Oklahoma-born songwriter Woody Guthrie.⁴⁶ If Alan Lomax was Lead Belly's champion, Pete Seeger was undeniably Woody Guthrie's. Like Sandburg and Lomax before him, Seeger zealously built a career dedicated to defining, canonizing, and propagating the American folk music tradition, this time carrying it

⁴⁵ “Like I Was a Bear or Something: Blues Performances at the Newport Folk Festival” in Ulrich Adelt, *Blues Music in the Sixties: A Story in Black and White* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1972), 30-56.

⁴⁶ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 63. For broader context on the New Left's search for authenticity on the margins of society, specifically in the lifestyles of impoverished Black men, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (London: Oxford UP, 2011) 84-131 and Alice Echols, “We Gotta Get Out of This Place’: Notes Toward a Remapping of the Sixties,” in *Socialist Review* 22 (1992): 9-34.

into eras of direct alignment with leftist political movements and demand for social change. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression—and often working within academic institutions—Seeger associated with the Communist Party and was a firm advocate of deploying folk music in the service of labor activism and other popular front causes throughout the 1930s and 40s. Meanwhile, in the same years, Woody Guthrie was living (and writing about) a mythically tragic life in the American West, losing his home and family members to multiples fires, illness, crime, and seemingly endless poverty. The two musicians' paths converged in 1940 in New York City, where they met in midtown at a benefit concert for migrant farm workers.⁴⁷ At age 20, Seeger had recently dropped out of Harvard, while Guthrie, 27 and a father of three, had made the trek east with hopes of advancing his music career. Within six months, they were rooming together in a house in the Village, performing as two core members of the Almanac Singers, the first urban folk singing group of its kind. The Almanac Singers' repertoire, a combination of old folk standards and new songs penned by the members, was overtly anti-racist, pro-labor, and anti-war.

Though folklorists throughout the movement's history had also been folk musicians, Pete Seeger blurred this line with more self-consciousness than anyone before him. As the Manhattan-born child of a Harvard musicologist, he knew he could neither deny his class privilege nor his power as the latest star curator of the canon. However, Seeger identified so strongly with the ideal of egalitarianism that he was not willing to play the role of an authoritative, upper-class folklorist. Instead,

⁴⁷ Alan Lomax later marked this meeting and performance as the beginning of the folk revival. See Cohen and Petrus, eds., *Folk City*, 30.

he developed a persona modeled after the working-class “folk” musicians he so admired. He wore a uniform of flannel shirts, often with the sleeves rolled up far past his elbows in a salute to laborers, and adopted a casual manner of speaking infused with expressions of modesty and subtly western slang. Perhaps more importantly, he began to live a “folk-inspired” life, working briefly with a traveling group of puppeteers, tagging along on Woody Guthrie’s hitchhiking and freight train-hopping forays, performing with him at union rallies, and, beginning in the early 1950s, building his family their own one-room cabin in the Catskills by hand.⁴⁸ When Guthrie could no longer perform with Seeger, due to the former’s rapidly declining health, Seeger set out to make Guthrie a legend of the old guard. He not only sang his songs, but also introduced most of them with vibrant stories of Guthrie’s life and character. Typical of Seeger’s discourse on Guthrie was the following introduction to a “Woody Guthrie Medley” in a 1963 European performance:

When I got out of school [Guthrie] taught me some things that I never could have learned out of books, that I never could have learned in college. He persuaded me first to start traveling. I said, “Well if you don’t have money, how do you travel?” He said, “Use the rule of the thumb...”

Guthrie was, in these brief lines, cast as the original Rambler, a tough self-made man who mentored all others to a self-sufficient and organic way of living in which money was neither needed nor valued. In this life, a person and their songs became “authentic” through lived experience. Later, strumming his guitar softly between

⁴⁸ “Pete Seeger - ‘Woody Guthrie’ Medley 1963,” Reelin in the Years Archives, February 28, 2019, Archival footage, 12:37, <https://youtu.be/wTVq6X360Xo>. Also see Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 202.

songs, Seeger went on to explain Guthrie's writing process with an anecdote introducing the song "Union Maid":

Woody Guthrie and I were once singing for some trade union people in Oklahoma City. I think they were oil workers. It was a small little meeting and, uh, we were just passing through, and the organizer asked if we'd sing some union songs at the meeting, and then the organizer leans over to us and says, "I hope you can get the crowd singing. There's some in the back, and we don't know who they are, and they may try and break this up." So Woody and I did our best to get the crowd singing, and they did sing. There were women and children there as well as men. It was a real family affair. And the people that had come to break up the meeting never did break it up. We found out later that's what they had thought they were gonna do. Next morning, I found stuck in a typewriter the verses of a little song which has since gone all over the world I believe.⁴⁹

Here Guthrie was, according to Seeger, the ultimate folksinger, writing as he lived this rambling life, and writing and performing in the service of the disempowered.

Though Seeger also championed Lead Belly, performed alongside many African American musicians, and eventually played an active role in the civil rights movement, he never performed race the way he performed class. In part due to Lomax's slightly earlier work, bluesmen within the folk movement had an image Seeger could neither enact nor live by: inherent criminality, unmitigated violence, dangerous sexuality, untamed emotion—these were racist tropes a white man was not willing to perform. What is more, a white man, much less one of Seeger's background, would never experience certain harsh realities of African Americans' lives that made them so alluring to the folk world: the trauma of slavery, backbreaking labor, prison, complete disempowerment. The racialized version of authenticity attached to black men was simply inaccessible to a white singer, no matter how egalitarian he was. Woody Guthrie provided a safe, white version of the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

authenticity with which the folk community imbued black bluesmen. Like Lead Belly, he came from non-urban setting and had endured economic struggle; but where Lead Belly had gone to prison, Guthrie had traveled in search of work; where Lead Belly was branded an ex-convict, Guthrie was glorified a hobo; where Lead Belly struggled to survive the racism of the folk scene and society at large, Guthrie warred against the capitalist machine. Perhaps most tellingly, while Lead Belly balked at Lomax's strict conception of his repertoire, longing to sing more commercial music, Guthrie vehemently turned down lucrative offers to profit off of his songwriting. Ultimately, what separated the white male version of authenticity from its black counterpart within the folk movement was agency.⁵⁰

It was this agency, the freedom to choose "authenticity" as opposed to a forced variation of it, that made white male folk performance of the late fifties and early sixties extremely confusing and, ultimately, quite problematic. Whereas the black men who gained fame within the folk movement comprised a generation born between 1900-1915 to impoverished families in the rural south, the white men were middle-class baby boomers from suburbs around the country, lured to the Village by the promise of a more honest and open life. Their childhoods had been defined by rampant consumerism, the threat of nuclear war, the tyranny of the Red Scare, absurdly lighthearted culture, and intensely rigid hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Though Woody Guthrie was their idol, there was an overwhelming gap between their lives and his. In this conundrum, Pete Seeger was

⁵⁰ For an expansion of this criticism, see the chapter "Black as Folk" in Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 84-131.

their guide. As Filene has analyzed, Seeger did not attempt to hide that he was not “the folk” even as he adopted a lifestyle inspired by them. Filene writes,

But instead of segregating the clashing elements within him, [Seeger] openly displayed the internal discord, identifying and analyzing the disjunctions in his identity as both common man and aristocrat, amateur and celebrity, traditionalist and populizer. [...] Much of Seeger’s influence on middle-class youths depended on the fact that as he immersed himself in folk culture, he left behind markers for those who would follow. Keeping his unlikely origins in view illuminated the cultural distance he had traveled and made the journey seem possible to others.⁵¹

Some of these “markers” included Seeger’s constant willingness to tell his story from the start, acknowledging in front of crowds his more-than-comfortable childhood in an intellectual family and being honest about his gradual path toward the folk world. Also, in the act of glorifying Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, and countless other “folk” whose songs he sang, telling lengthy stories about them in his famously didactic introductions to each song, he created a distinction between himself and them. He was even known to tell audiences the occasional self-deprecating tale in which he came across as a “wannabe-hobo.” (For example, the first train he jumped never left the freight yard.) Furthermore, despite his simple existence upstate, he was open about the fact that he was, indeed, a “commercial” artist with an income in the six-figure range by 1960. Finally, and perhaps of most impact on aspiring folksingers, Seeger was adamant in his belief that the definition of folk music lay more in the process than in the music itself. As slippery as this definition was, Seeger insisted that any song born of everyday life was an “authentic” folk song—

⁵¹ Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 203-204. Also see a series of debates on authenticity in *Caravan* issues from 1957, beginning with Dave Van Ronk’s article under the pseudonym Blind Rafferty: “The Electra Catalog – A Sarcophagus,” *Caravan*, August 1957, 5.

that if you sang about your life, you could not necessarily become “the folk,” but you could become a folksinger.

*

It is clear that somewhere between the publication of Sandburg’s *American Songbag* in 1927 and the start of the folk revival in the mid-1950s, the folk world’s conception of authenticity became decidedly masculine, despite divides between black and white. There were surely female folk musicians of the Depression era and beyond. For example, Aunt Molly Jackson, a Kentucky-born union activist and political songwriter, migrated to Greenwich Village in 1930 and participated in the folk scene along with Guthrie, Seeger, Lead Belly, and others. With experiences of incredible tragedy—her first husband was killed in a mining accident, while her father and brother were blinded in another—her story rivaled that of Woody Guthrie in terms of adversity brought on by industrial capitalism. One of her most popular songs was “I Am a Union Woman,” with its hypnotic call to action in support of the National Miners’ Union:

*I am a union woman
Just as brave as I can be
I do not like the bosses
And the bosses don't like me.*

Join the NMU, Join the NMU

*I was raised in Old Kentucky
Kentucky born and bred,
But when I joined the union,
They called me a Russian Red.*

Join the NMU, Join the NMU

*This is the worst time on Earth
That I have ever saw,*

*To get killed out by gun thugs
And framed up by the law.*

Join the NMU, Join the NMU

Despite making enough noise to be briefly jailed for her union activity, Jackson never reached the level of recognition of her male peers, though she did receive glowing profiles in literature of the folk revival. "Aunt Molly Jackson," the 1962 book *Folk Music USA* read, "the great fighting, singing union leader from Kentucky who died two years ago, was the friend of the miner and of the underdog anywhere. Her songs spread courage and hope."⁵²

A stark performer, known for her heavy dialect that often veered toward vulgarity, Jackson's politics led her to stand out among other Appalachian women like Susan Reed and Jean Ritchie, who mostly sang ballads. Still, she could not overtake white men like Guthrie and Seeger in terms of popularity.

Another woman fated to only mid-level fame was Ronnie Gilbert, the sole female member of The Weavers. Building on Depression-era enthusiasm for folk, the group formed in Greenwich Village in 1948 as a commercial version of the previous decade's Almanac Singers, with Pete Seeger and Lee Hays included as carry-over members. As opposed to the rural women who had moved to New York, Ronnie Gilbert was the first prominent female folk musician from the city. The daughter of two Brooklyn-based Eastern European immigrants, she grew up attending union rallies as well as taking dance and piano lessons. She was part of a critical moment

⁵² Seeger qtd. in Howard Grafman and B.T. Manning, eds., *Folk Music USA* (New York: Citadel Press, 1962), 49.

in which America's first self-identified folk group attempted to "go commercial" while vowing not to compromise its leftist values. The resolution brought folk standards into the mainstream in a way no solo performer had yet managed to achieve, with the group's greatly softened version of Lead Belly's "Irene Goodnight" reaching Number One on the *Billboard* pop chart in the summer of 1950.⁵³

The Weavers are often credited for creating a model that other professional folk groups would follow; however, facing a level of national attention no woman in the folk world had yet experienced, Gilbert also navigated an extra layer of gendered expectations. Rejecting the matching costumes of almost all other popular groups, the members of The Weavers chose their own clothes for each performance, pioneering the "professional informality" other folksingers would follow. The three male members wore similar casual suits, but Gilbert, with the help of Pete Seeger's wife Toshi Seeger, took greater risks. Varying her look from show to show, she sometimes performed in a full-skirted gown, but she also inched toward less conventionally feminine looks with simple button-up blouses and business-like skirts—a far cry from the sequins and tulle of groups like The Chordettes or the elegant dresses of solo acts like Patti Page. More significantly, her powerful contralto (the lowest female register) challenged gender norms dramatically. About Gilbert's voice, Mary Travers of Peter, Paul, and Mary wrote,

And surely for me part of the reason that I could sing folk songs was because of Ronnie Gilbert.

⁵³ Cohen and Petrus, Eds., *Folk City*, 77; *The Weaver's: Wasn't That a Time!*, Directed by Jim Brown (New York: United Artists Classics, 1982).

When I first began to sing, most of the better-known people who were singing folk songs had those sort of Kentucky mountain sopranos. I of course was anything *but* a soprano! So when I heard the Weavers I found another voice, one that was definitely the voice of a strong woman, someone able to stand on her own two feet and face adversity.

And she had a courageous voice: There was a tremendous sense of joy and energy and courage in her voice. She was able to be very gentle, too; she did wonderful ballads and lullabies and things; but there was that trumpet sound she had that I found very encouraging, because it said, oh, you too! You're *not* a misfit, there's somebody else out there with a big voice!⁵⁴

Like her shifting appearances, Gilbert's ability to sing both gently and powerfully allowed her to embody both the lightness expected of post-war female singers and a revolutionary boldness. Though her only model had been female singers who stood alone in front of their bands, Gilbert sang in harmony with the men of The Weavers, performing as an equal even as she stood out as the sole woman. A varied repertoire, ranging from the Child ballads to union marches, was yet another added element in this shapeshifting.

With her clear ability to appeal to contradicting expectations of the mainstream and the folk world, particularly its young women, perhaps Gilbert could have become one of the folk revival's earliest female stars. Sadly, even her dynamic voice could not withstand the building social and political repression of the 1950s. In fact, her displays of strength surely made her a more attractive target in the intensifying Red Scare, which quieted the folk movement in the first few years of the decade. By 1952, accusations of The Weavers' communist ties resulted in the group being blacklisted. As clubs and record companies rescinded all offers of business,

⁵⁴ Mary Travers, "Ronnie Gilbert," liner notes for The Weavers, The Weavers 1949-1953 Box Set (Bear Family Records, 2000).

fearing crippling association with a blacklisted group, The Weavers saw themselves relegated to lesser and lesser dives and eventually disbanded. Though they would briefly reform in 1955 when Gilbert was still only 29, she did not see a resurgence in her fame.

Taken all together, women made great strides within the folk movement from the 1920s up until the Red Scare—greater than in many other cultural arenas. Even in the Depression era, which created stars out of decidedly masculine figures—drifters, industrial workers, activists, and rule-breakers of all types—women maintained a foothold with songs both old and new. The disruptions of World War II and the reactionary period following the war were a challenge for anyone aiming to make a career in folk music, women especially. However, if anything was clear, it was that this was a deeply rooted movement in which women had always played a role. They would continue to hold a place on the ever-evolving folk stage. In fact, for a moment, they would dominate it.

Chapter 3: Odetta, Race, Gender, and the Folk Revival

Woody Guthrie famously played a guitar that bore the message, “This machine kills fascists.” Placed there sometime during the build-up to World War II, his words encapsulated the ethos of folk music in the 20th century. Folk was no longer the exclusive territory of academics romanticizing a quainter past, as it had been at the turn of the century. Political progressives of the Depression-era had seized these songs as the weaponry of anti-authoritarianism and marshaled them in fights for social justice from that moment forward. Endless debate over the definition of the canon and the authenticity of folksingers was, at its core, an ever-evolving conversation about the embattled past, present, and future of the United States.

By the mid-1950s, the crippling force of the Red Scare was subsiding, and the civil rights movement was beginning to draw mainstream attention. Rock ‘n’ roll had defined the childhoods of many of the folksingers who would make their names in this era, but the commercialization of the genre was beginning to neutralize it politically and aesthetically, leaving a generation uniquely poised for cultural revolution in need of a new outlet. A generation of young women, in particular, had felt the energy and promise of that sound but had been barred from participation as performers—one of countless consequences of a rigidly patriarchal society that equated female passivity with patriotism.

It was clearly a national moment in which folk music could play its well-worn political role, and yet another folk resurgence was, indeed, gathering steam. Not only were the musicians of folk's old guard still active, with Pete Seeger still preaching Guthrie's message, sometimes playing a banjo circled with the message, "This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender." At the same time, the most curious of young rock 'n' roll fans had worked their way backward, discovering the roots of the form and with them a newly energized appreciation for African American musical heritage. So many interwoven threads were coming together to create an unprecedented "folk boom" during which folk music dominated American popular culture. Referred to as the folk revival, scholars tend to mark its start at the moment in November 1958 when the Kingston Trio's version of "Tom Dooley" rose to the top of the *Billboard* charts and its end at the moment in July 1965 when Bob Dylan "went electric" at the Newport Folk Festival.

As in previous decades, the folk community of the late-Fifties and early-Sixties was extremely white. Up until the mid-1950s, its members had focused largely on labor and class-based issues and anti-war messages, while also making broad commitments to promoting equality in general. With such major events as the desegregation of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, racial equality could no longer be a peripheral issue, even in the whitest progressive circles. That is to say, if America's ongoing folk movement had any hope of being the socially relevant cultural force its members believed it was, this latest evolution needed to marshal folk music primarily in service of African American struggles for justice. Accordingly, this era's folk community would have to

confront American racial inequality at a depth it had not yet achieved, both in terms of its message to the world and in terms of its hierarchies within.

Folk remained vastly white until it exploded in myriad directions in 1965, so the movement's overall contribution to racial justice has been subject to debate.¹ I would like to weigh in on that debate in this chapter by focusing on Odetta Holmes and her relationship to the racialized and gendered subjectivities of folk performance. By the end of 1957, Odetta was deeply engaged in the process of redefining Blackness within the folk world. In this chapter, I argue that Odetta used folk practices to turn the folk world on its head during her rise, replacing expected performances of criminality, poverty, simplicity, sensuality, and general misadventure with a persona far less definable and far more organic. In her refusal to be confined by static racial tropes, Odetta was not outspoken on the topic of gender. However, it is clear in retrospect that her rare positionality as a Black female star at the start of the American folk revival allowed her to step onto stages across the country and rewrite the aesthetics of an entire movement as its leaders looked on and applauded—not fully understanding, it seems, that this woman had lit the fuse that would blow the folk world up from within in 1965 when, as the story goes, Bob Dylan plugged in his amp.

My contention—that through her overt fight for racial liberation, Odetta simultaneously yet more subtly advanced women's rights—owes a great deal to

¹ For authors with an awareness of the hegemonic whiteness of the folk movement and folk revival in particular, see Filene, *Romancing the Folk*; Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders*, 84-131; Christine Kelly, "Folk as the Sound of Self-Liberation: The Career and Performance Identity of Odetta," in Irene Fattacciu and Claudio Fogu, eds., *Zapruder World: An International Journal for the History of Social Conflict* 4 (2017). doi:10.21431/Z3H013.

scholars who have studied Black women's performance before me. In particular, I am indebted to Ruth Feldstein's thought in *How It Feels to Be Free*, though her temporal scope in the peak of the civil rights movement allows her to analyze clear connections between political activism and performance that are a bit more nuanced in this late Fifties moment. I also rely heavily on theoretical grounding provided by Black feminist writers Hortense Spillers and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, as well as queer theorist and historian Shane Vogel—all of whom explore female gender construction within the context of the long history of sexualization of Black women's bodies and give me a framework for analyzing the "ungendering" Odetta experienced in the folk revival.²

As this chapter will show, Odetta's rein as the Queen of Folk was fleeting. The same paradoxical dynamics that allowed her to slip into a place of great power within the movement—namely, folk's propensity for tokenizing female performers and Black performers combined with its inability to pigeonhole a performer as determinedly multidimensional as Odetta—ultimately pushed her out. The previous chapter focused on the racialized aspects of Odetta's intervention upon the hierarchies of folk—the ways in which, as a Black performer, she upset a system that preferred to see its members of color performing misery by infusing her repertoire with multi-faceted stories and styles. Now I attempt to add layers of gender and sexuality, for in the process of fighting for racial dignity, Odetta resisted

² Deeper into this chapter, I work with text from all of these authors and cite their specific works as they come up. For a broad introduction to the Black feminist thought I am building upon, please also see the section entitled, "Historiography of Women in Folk Music" on pp. 25-30 of the Introduction for further detail.

the hyper-sexualization that beset Black performers and female performers, and particularly Black female performers, before her. In opposition to the model of blueswomen past, she worked to maintain a gender-neutral persona, one that allowed her to explore the largest range possible of human identity from her place upon the stage. But the press and the folk movement itself had anointed Odetta the “Queen” of folk. It was only a matter of time before the gendered expectations of that title caught up with her.³

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With the folk movement’s concept of authenticity historicized, it should now be clear that Odetta was stepping into an extremely complicated position when she took the stage at the Café Bizarre in 1957 at age 27. Lead Belly had died, penniless yet legendary, in 1949. In his wake followed a trail of lesser-known African American bluesmen born before the Great Depression, none of whom had been allowed the standing to carry the American folk movement through its next turning point. Woody Guthrie, having been diagnosed with debilitating Huntington’s Disease in 1952, was rarely seen in public as he checked in to and out of various hospitals in New York and New Jersey. Even as the Red Scare receded, many folk musicians had not withstood its impact years earlier. Meanwhile, at age 38, Pete Seeger led a growing mass of disillusioned white teenagers in worship of folk heroes whose times had passed. This new generation had gravitated toward folk in their search for

³ Music journalist Lucy O’Brien corroborates, “It seems if each decade could only allow one token woman to ‘break rank’ and play acoustic rather than dance music...in the ‘50s and ‘60s it was folk/gospel singer Odetta.” Lucy O’Brien qtd. in Sheila Whitley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 13.

an escape from the rigidity of their parents' America. At this point, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan were just two teenagers of this crowd, both still in high school in their respective towns of Palo Alto, California and Hibbing, Minnesota. Thus, while many refer to the late Fifties in the Village as the golden "early days" of the folk revival that would sweep the nation, it should be noted that in the broader context of folk history, the movement was, in some ways, running on fumes even as it was hurtling forward.

If the folk paradigm had been Guthrie and Leadbelly in its last golden era, it seems that in this brief late Fifties moment, Pete Seeger and Odetta were slotted into those places to fill the void of leadership. Both were radically different from their respective predecessors, but both were still held to the same Depression-era definitions of folk authenticity. Seeger dealt with this conflict—essentially the fact that he was not Woody Guthrie—by humbly positioning himself as a foreigner to the "true folk," which was paradoxical in that his background mirrored that of most joining the movement. Meanwhile, Odetta saw herself cast as Lead Belly was before her, the movement's latest glorified "outsider," the folk. While Pete Seeger served as a bridge—both between classes and between eras—Odetta took on the higher-pressure roles of validating the movement's dedication to racial equality and ushering it into the civil rights era. She also happened to be a woman. Though Ronnie Gilbert had certainly broken a barrier during The Weavers' brief and shaky rise, here began the Village folk revival's first major test along gendered lines. There were quite well-defined standards for black male authenticity and white male authenticity. The concept applied to a woman, especially a woman positioned as

Lead Belly's heir in 1950s America, was largely uncharted territory in the folk world—just as it is largely uncharted in scholarship on the movement.

How did a Black woman become the Queen of Folk in Eisenhower's America? There were quite well-defined standards for Black male authenticity, white male authenticity, and even white female authenticity. There was a growing conversation surrounding race; but the concept of authenticity applied to a woman of color, especially a Black woman positioned as Leadbelly's heir, was uncharted territory in the folk world—just as it is largely uncharted in scholarship on the movement.

The only published analytical work on Odetta's early career that I know of is historian Christine Kelly's article, "Folk as the Sound of Self-Liberation: The Career and Performance Identity of Odetta."⁴ The article is valuable in that it contextualizes Odetta's rise to fame against the backdrop of late-1950s expectations of gender and sexuality for Black women as well as the way those expectations interfaced with the folk world's attempted commitment to counterhegemonic politics. As Kelly argues,

Odetta devoted her career to exposing racist cultural norms and the way that these norms shaped black subjectivity, beginning with her own identity and lived experience as a black woman performer. To do so, Odetta relied on the idiom of "folk" as she utilized her own musical repertoire, largely drawn from the Mississippi Delta region of the American South, to encourage empathetic listening among her audiences as her music reinvented the experiences of the communities from whom these songs originated. Though an imperfect medium, the folk genre enabled Odetta to transmit, through sound, the memory of past African-American communities, and in so doing, she exposed and dismantled the racist structures she navigated in her present-day context.

The analysis adopted in this paper refracts a narrative of Odetta's career development through an interpretive prism of race, class, gender and nation as it critically investigates how Odetta used a rare subject position as a successful, black woman

⁴ Kelly, "Folk as the Sound of Self-Liberation."

artist to shed light on social issues while also continuously seeking to put forth quality work as an entertainer.⁵

Kelly's contention that Odetta was able to step into and perform within certain cracks in folk's rigid matrices to achieve her own "liberation" is helpful in my own understanding of the way Odetta negotiated the expectations of folk performance. There is no denying that Odetta found empowerment through folk. However, in my estimation, Kelly underplays the cost Odetta paid to exist within the folk revival, as well as the extent to which she revolutionized folk for the coming generation. Odetta's success clearly came out of her ability not necessarily to "embrace," as Kelly phrases it, the racist and sexist lack of expectation with which she was received, but rather, to withstand it and work within it. And while Kelly focuses more on the strength Odetta derived from her participation in folk performance, I would like to emphasize the strength the folk movement took from her. She formulated an entirely new kind of folk persona: one that, for the first time in folk history, allowed a folksinger the freedom to have countless performative identities, to be anyone and ultimately everyone through song. This was surely empowering for her as an individual, but to call her career "self-liberation" is to deny the self-sacrifice it involved.

Odetta's Path to Folk

Born in 1930 in Alabama, Odetta's path to a stardom in the folk revival was unlike that of any other woman on the scene. For one thing, she fell in a unique age

⁵ Ibid., 1. Also see: Sasha Frere-Jones, "How Odetta Revolutionized Folk Music," *The New Yorker*, February 24, 2022.

bracket: approximately ten years younger than the “old guard” of American folk (Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, Cisco Houston, etc.) who forged their careers in the Depression; and approximately ten years older than most of the other performers who would find national fame through the folk revival (Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Judy Collins, etc.). What is more, she was the sole Black woman who gained national prominence in the early years of the folk revival. Raised in the rural South with a tumultuous family life, Odetta would not find her footing in the folk movement by romanticizing poverty, glorifying the blues, or embracing a denim-clad down-and-out style—all staples of the folk aesthetic. Instead, subscribing to her mother’s ideals of racial uplift, she was a proud and majestic performer, singing much of her repertoire in operatic cadence, draped in her trademark regal dresses and elaborate jewels.

This tension between her familiarity with the popular and her ingrained striving for the elite was a theme that ran through Odetta’s life and added great nuance to her identity as a folk performer. While many sought to escape their respectable roots, we might say Odetta was on a reverse journey within the same movement. A childhood move to Los Angeles in 1937, the result of her family’s search for a relatively more tolerant environment than the deeply racist Birmingham area, increased Odetta’s complexity in the folk context, given that she was indeed “from” the highly-idealized rural South while she was also essentially from the epicenter of American show business. Her talent for singing was evident early on, and her leanings toward the classical were in line with her family’s politics of respectability. Given the inescapable racism of the entertainment industry, she

was aware her chances of singing professionally were slim; but a dedicated program of voice lessons through in her adolescence led her to study European classical music at Los Angeles Community College at the end of the 1940s—all the while supporting herself with domestic work for a white family and other odd service jobs. Though she dreamed of an opera career, a 1950 open casting call for a summer stock revival of the Broadway hit *Finian's Rainbow* at the Greek Theatre led Odetta into the world of popular performance. She worked as a member of the show's chorus that summer, not only gaining on stage singing experience but also receiving an introduction to the progressive themes of folk music that inspired much of the narrative and score.⁶ The following summer, a reprisal of her role in *Finian's Rainbow* brought Odetta north to San Francisco, where a bohemian community of folk musicians embraced her. It was in exploring San Francisco's folk scene that summer at age 21 that Odetta renegotiated her resistance to a career in folk, which she had previously perceived as antithetical to her refined taste and goals.

Within three years of performing at nightclubs around San Francisco, Odetta had found a musical singing partner in the folk business, Larry Mohr, and released one of the first albums of the folk revival: *The Tin Angel Presents: Odetta and Larry* (1954). With her photo on the cover, guitar in hand, and a growing reputation for her vocal power and skill, Odetta was quite clearly the stand-out of the partnership. As the folk revival gained momentum in cities throughout the country, she struck

⁶ *Finian's Rainbow* led quickly to a singing role at the eclectic Turnabout Theatre in Hollywood, where celebrities of film's golden age enjoyed a late-night, circus-like revue that featured a puppet show and, true to the name, seats that turned 180 degrees at intermission to face a second stage. Zak, *Odetta*, 5-29.

out as a solo performer and soon began to see herself in reviews naming her “The Queen of Folk.”

Folk as Carnival

To understand the contradictory power Odetta wielded in this moment within the folk movement, I would like call upon the performance theory of the carnivalesque, which has roots in the analysis of Carnival celebrations that flourished in Europe in the late Middle Ages. Modern western popular culture’s precursor, Carnival grew out of the Christian church’s efforts to drive dancing and other forms of “festive behavior” out of the church. Prohibiting these practices in the religious context led to a dramatic rise in celebrations of a more secular character, which took place in town squares and other public settings on church holidays. While *Carnival* technically refers to the public feasting before Lent, the kind of celebrations that occurred during those days resurfaced on holidays throughout the year.⁷

Carnival festivities are significant in the context of the American folk movement in the way they upended social and cultural hierarchies through popular performance. No matter the particular holiday, the celebrations involved a specific set of collective, performative actions: namely dancing, drinking, feasting, masking

⁷ Anthropologists and cultural theorists, with Mikhail Bakhtin foremost among them in the late 1960s, have long taken interest in the power dynamics of these public festivities. For pioneering analysis of Carnival, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Boston: MIT Press, 1968). For an excellent modern application of Bakhtin’s theory that has informed my thinking substantially, see Barbara Ehrenreich, *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* (New York: Picador, 2006) 78, 89-95.

and costuming, and parading. Known in some scholarly frameworks as the *techniques of ecstasy*, these seemingly frivolous acts were empowering in unexpected and ultimately threatening ways. The most obvious performative rebellion is evident in the peasantry's tradition of satirizing the cultural elites by dressing up as royalty, priests, and other local authorities. Similarly, cross-dressing was a common practice for both women and men. With short, largely improvised skits as well as general spontaneous revelry throughout the town for days on end, these forms of collective masking made possible a temporary inversion of social hierarchies in which peasants became kings, laypeople became priests, and women became men. Even in the opposite case, whereby nobles mimicked peasants, normally fixed identities that structured the Medieval society were unsettled in a way that allowed, for a utopian day or so, a sense of freedom rarely felt otherwise.

By the late 1950s, the world of folk music was not so far from Carnival. Folk performance, by its very definition, had always involved a form of masking; what better way to describe the performance of a song passed down and around through countless years and over many miles? While these songs may have originally allowed their singers and audiences to feel closer to themselves—that is, to understand and express their own ways of life—folk as a genre had also always involved a strong cross-current of nostalgia, a longing for some identity “other” than one's own. The 1920s spirit of outsider populism had heightened this particular appeal of folk performance; by the time the folk revival was gaining speed in the 1950s, the backgrounds of those who performed folk songs were more distant from the songs' original writers than ever before. White suburban teenagers with radios

and televisions were singing songs of churning butter, exploring the frontier, sharecropping, sword-fighting—stories to which they could relate emotionally, perhaps, but ways of life they would never know.

While the “masking” I am describing was metaphorical, there were also associated physical elements of costuming that inverted the social order. Middle-class men of the Eisenhower era wore denim, a “size too tight” in one reviewer’s words; both genders procured wrinkled clothing and disheveled hair; the boldest white women dared to buy the leather sandals popular with Europeans and some Black American men.⁸ Most importantly, however, songs of the economically and racially oppressed united this relatively privileged community. If the reader is willing to accept a well-traveled song as a kind of mask, the folk revival can be seen as a modern version of Medieval nobility costuming as peasantry for a day. There was not the level of satire in which past Europeans had indulged, but there was a level of “romancing,” in Filene’s words, that was in its own way pernicious. That harsh critique stated, for so many young white people disillusioned with the power structures they had been set up to inherit and perpetuate, the folk revival’s masquerade was the entry into a life of unfixing previously static identities and remapping one’s future. It was far from perfect, but it presented itself to the white middle-class as one of few relatively accessible ways to escape oneself and one’s

⁸ According to Allan Block, the owner of a famed sandal shop bordering Washington Square Park, “In the beginning, most people saw sandals as something very European or feminine [...] Whit men wouldn’t buy them at all—only black men. Then, I think, people started relating the idea of exposed feet and natural leather and something handmade with folk music and crafts.” Weber, “Allan Block, Whose Sandal Shop Was Folk Music Hub, Dies at 90.”

participation in American systems of oppression. For that reason, my use of the word “masquerade” is not meant to be as demeaning as it may at first seem.

A community that operates through the inversion of social hierarchies, in theory, extends the carnivalesque possibility of reversal to all of its members. While folk’s cohort of white males masqueraded as the working poor, it is true that all who took part in the folk revival saw their identities depart slightly from what they would have been in the mainstream. If white men were at least superficially releasing their power in this universe, acting out a life of misery and lost control, someone had to take their traditional spot at the top of this performative social hierarchy. For white women, the folk stage did provide one of the only realms of American work where a woman could be in the spotlight, have her name celebrated, and chart the course of her own career; however, as we have seen, the chances for true departure from gendered expectations of passivity and delicacy were severely limited for this demographic as of the late-Fifties. Black men, forced into racist caricatures, encountered similar roadblocks; though they were worshipped as the “authentically” or, perhaps, the “originally” oppressed, if there could not be a white “King of Folk” in the folk matrix, there could not be a Black one—the perceived threat to white masculine dominance being simply too strong. Thus, for these two groups, the carnivalesque—which, even at its fullest, is only theorized to be a temporary inversion of power—was faint, an act of an act that did not truly break down any hierarchies.

As we have seen, most Black women performers had been barred from the folk world for decades, with the blues-based performance of sensuality, once their

primary model for success within the racist confines of mainstream entertainment, now far too radical to appeal to white audiences. The carnival of folk was still a patriarchy in 1957—one that considered itself quite refined at that—and was not going to open a space for a Black woman overtly channeling the stars of the Harlem Renaissance. Male expressions of sexuality, intertwined with the various working-class masculinities folk endorsed, apparently did not threaten this world's veiled elitism, but the female equivalent did. What is more, while a Black male ex-convict held a certain familiar fascination to white audiences pre-conditioned to expect as much, a Black female prisoner would surely not hold the same allure, such were the expectations of all women at the time. A belief in Black male criminality, and the associated stake in white female virtue, was the centuries-old guarantor of white masculine dominance in America. If a sensual Black woman was too great of a threat in this system, a virginal Black woman posed her own challenge. This matrix along with Cold War expectations of passive femininity and folk world claims of egalitarianism, indeed, provided no clear path for a Black woman.

At the same time, the folk world sought new African American stars and was somewhat open to female talent. It was into this significant gap in a complex and fragile set-up of intersecting expectations that Odetta stepped, ready to perform. A powerful combination of historical timing, her navigation of gender norms, her refusal to lean into racist stereotypes, and her unique take on folk performance allowed her to fully exploit the “ecstatic possibility” of the carnivalesque and become the “Queen of Folk,” a royal the burgeoning folk revival desperately needed.

Odetta and the Techniques of Ecstasy

At the time of Odetta's debut on the folk scene, attempts to understand and explain her were shaky at best, reaching for tidy comparisons to Leadbelly and other great African American stars but also uncomfortably aware that she defied expectations. In the only known review of the Café Bizarre show, Hoffman dodged description, writing,

Odetta and her singing have been described by better writers than I. If you've seen Odetta, there's no need for me to try to describe her. If you've heard her records, you can attempt to imagine the quality of Odetta in person. If you haven't heard Odetta, there's no use my talking to you until you go out and hear her sing.

White critics and audiences struggled to put Odetta into words because she was breaking new ground in the folk world, where new ground was hard to come by. Her contribution was not just in her unique repertoire, one that injected a direly needed set of racially conscious songs into the scene. Her radical quality was much more in her refusal to abide by traditional standards of authenticity, particularly those that attempted to define and police Blackness. On a purely biographical level, she rejected stumbling comparisons to Leadbelly that would pigeonhole her racially. In order to do so, she took a cue from her friend Pete Seeger and displayed a rare willingness to explain and expose the performance that went into her music. For example, in an interview about two months following her Café Bizarre show, before playing on a South Bend, Indiana television program called "Home Maker's Time," she claimed Leadbelly as her "favorite folk singer" but did not stop there:

She uses "Leadbelly's" case to illustrate the difference between a "folk singer" and a "folk song singer."

"I'm a folk song singer – that's someone who sings folk songs. I never lived where they were sung naturally – that is passed from father to son."

After a brief synopsis of Leadbelly's troubled life, the article went on to conclude with a final quotation:

"People like Burl Ives, Harry Belafonte, and I can sing the songs," Odetta says, "but Leadbelly lived them."⁹

With such explanations, Odetta managed to honor Leadbelly while also separating herself from him, making clear that she would not tolerate narratives of her life that romanticized hardship and made her the movement's latest glorified yet ultimately powerless outsider. She often emphasized that she had grown up mostly in Los Angeles studying classical music, and many have remarked that she moved from the intense shyness of her first few years to "diva"-style comportment behind the scenes.¹⁰ She constantly balked at comparisons made to other performers, fighting to be seen just as herself. In short, she refused to be "the folk" and, in so doing, demanded a level of respect, equality, and agency that white urban audiences had rarely extended to a white performer in the folk context, much less a Black performer.

Discourse orbiting her performances was only the beginning of Odetta's disruption of the power structure surrounding folk music; at the core of the political and social work she accomplished was her style of performance itself. In the afore-

⁹ Joseph B. Tierney, "Odetta Brings Concert of Folk Music," *South Bend Tribune*, South Bend, Indiana, November 21, 1957.

¹⁰ Zak, *Odetta*, 82.

quoted *South Bend Tribune* article, she set forth an aesthetic philosophy to match her self-identification as “a folk song singer” instead of a “folk singer.” The text read,

Odetta insists that she is not a “purist” who wants ballads sung the way they were a century or two ago.

“After all, how do we know how they were sung before records were made?” she asks. But on the other hand she feels that some folk song singers damage the songs in their repertoire by tampering with melodies and rhythms.¹¹

Here she weighed in on the oldest debate in the genre: how a folk song should be sung. While the white men and women on the fifties scene increasingly fixated on copying the exact intonations and phrasings of the singers on venerated folk recordings, Odetta had a vastly different sense of allegiance to the songs she sang. That is, for her, authentic performance was not in technically recreating a past musician’s sound or conforming to stereotypes of Blackness, but rather in embodying the song itself. In Odetta’s own words, she once explained, “I do find that, as I’m singing, I’m on another level. I’ve received inspiration from it. As the music starts I become a receiver. I receive from the center of center. I don’t know if I’ll ever have the words to put to what comes through.”¹²

To fully explain a performance style described by the performer herself as beyond words seems rather audacious. But what I can offer by way of analysis is that Odetta introduced interpretation into a world of impression, embodiment into a world of reenactment, and, crucially, innovation into a world of repetition. If other performers on the scene were simply donning masks via folk song—and probably

¹¹ Tierney, “Odetta Brings Concert of Folk Music.”

¹² Howard Jay Rubin, “The Magic and the Power: An Interview with Odetta,” *The Sun: A Magazine of Ideas*, no. 109, December 1984.

expecting the depth of Odetta's performance to be about the same—Odetta was *becoming* via folk song. While others were fixated on past (and present) personalities, Odetta—though not without her own heroes—was more fixated on the songs themselves; and through performance of those songs, she not only learned a much more honest version of African American history than she had received in school, but also found that she could access the emotions of the people whose stories she sang. This emotional exploration allowed her to confront her rage and better understand her place within America's racial struggle. While it would be unfair to say white musicians were performing folk songs in a superficial way, Odetta's recollections of her early folk years as a journey of self-discovery and self-liberation certainly stand out among folk memoirs from the era for their introspective, even spiritual take on the power of folk performance.

For a prime example of Odetta's interpretive abilities, we can turn to her renditions of several African American work songs. "Water Boy," a song she likely discovered on a 1934 Paul Robeson record, stunned white audiences into silence as early as her days at the Tin Angel.¹³ Far from Robeson's polished version, which featured his soothing bass baritone and a melodic piano accompaniment, Odetta's version was jarring and intense. She would begin the song with a long and loud a cappella call, "Waterboy!" followed immediately by a staccato, one-chord down-strum on her steel string guitar. Nothing about this opening was designed to please a crowd; as fans and critics alike often wrote, from the second Odetta began to sing, her deep voice shook the room, metaphorically and, quite possibly, literally. Within

¹³ Zak, *Odetta*, 81.

the first two verses, in which she continued alternating dramatically between vocal call and guitar strum, audience members would likely realize that this singer was doing something more than just singing:

Waterboy, where are you hiding [down-strum]
If you don't come right here [down-strum]
Gonna tell you pa on you [down-strum]
There ain't no hammer [down-strum]
That's on a this mountain [down-strum]
That ring like mine boy [down-strum]
That ring like mine [down-strum]

I'm gonna bust this rock boy [down-strum]
From here to the Macon [down-strum]
All the way to the jail boy [down-strum]
All the way to the jail [down-strum]

Maintaining a steady rhythm with an increasingly anguished call for water, Odetta was clearly channeling this song's incarcerated laborer, doing a kind of performance so transformative that it bordered on theatre.¹⁴ Perhaps most transporting was the unique use of her beloved guitar, "Baby," to create an accompaniment closer to noise than music, the sound clearly meant to represent a Black man's hammer striking a rock. Thus, in a revolutionary twist on Guthrie's "this machine kills..." insignia, Odetta showed a white audience her take on weaponizing folk music. Through her career, her guitar, like her songs, would be more nuanced than the instruments of the white leftists who came before her. It would surely fight injustice, but it would

¹⁴ For an expansion of this idea, see Carrie Thaler's reflections in Zak, *Odetta*, 109: "You know, the folk song would be about a broken-hearted lover and you could just see the people, whether they'd be Irish or from the islands or whatever, she just became that person, with dialect, body language and just something spiritual that happened. And there was an amazing transformation that would happen over the course of an Odetta concert and the audience just became transfixed and in love... And then we'd go backstage and there would be 'Detta and I thought, *How could this be the same person?* I never could figure it out."

do so by helping Odetta herself and her audiences feel that injustice in their bodies—its rhythms, its harshness, its volume and weight. Countless reviewers and fellow performers remarked on this exceptional material brand of performance, one that struck the body the way rock ‘n’ roll once had and would again. The bluesman Guy Davis said, “I remember her pounding on the side of her guitar.” Bernice Johnson Reagon remembered,

...she slapped the guitar. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. In Georgia, where I grew up in the country, the roads were built by chain gang labor. I knew the sound, because as the men worked, they sang. But I never thought I’d hear it coming from a concert stage.¹⁵

The middle verses of Odetta’s “Waterboy,” though certainly not calming, were slightly less experiential, with Odetta strumming and singing more quietly along to the song’s melody. However, she would famously build to three final verses repeating the first few in which she punctuated the lines not with her guitar, but with her voice. Though the sound she made evolved over the years, it was always a guttural kind of pop or scream, a bursting “Gahh!” at once angry and afraid. The sound, unlike anything theretofore heard in American folk music, equated Odetta’s voice with the hammer. The impact was two-fold. First, the sound tragically called to mind the extent to which such labor dehumanized African Americans, a dehumanization so deep that the words of a song had to be constantly interrupted with the singer’s own mechanical beating. At the same time, the sound of oppression blurred with the sound of rage. If Odetta’s voice was a hammer-like scream, by the end of the song, it was also a scream-like hammer—a tool to build the future.

¹⁵ Ibid., 128.

In these songs, Odetta saw herself embracing a role, and the intensity of these early performances was part of her effort to transform herself. She explained,

When I started singing folk music, the bulk of the repertoire was work songs. I got my hate and frustration out with the work songs, and it was good to get it out — but it came to me at one point that I would have to stop becoming the prisoner in the work songs. I would have to act it, not become it, because becoming the prisoner was like using my whole body to grab at my throat. And anything or anybody that affects my throat has to get *out* of my life.¹⁶

She went on to explain that when she ceased to “become the prisoner,” the songs lost their power:

I missed the kinds of responses I had gotten when I was singing out of sheer unadulterated hate. Because there were times when I would finish “John Henry” or “Waterboy” and people would stand and scream and stomp and applaud. It was as if they were shaking off the feelings I had put out there. They had to get rid of it, too.

One of the first songs that got up and walked out my door was “John Henry.” Someone requested it, and I started singing it and I remembered back to when it was sung out of hate, and the energy it had then. I couldn’t settle for less. I wasn’t able to do that song anymore. I couldn’t settle for less than what it had been.¹⁷

What is striking is that Odetta was able to become herself—internally better understanding her identity and externally crystalizing her reputation—by so openly imagining, empathizing with, and embodying others. And though her work songs and spirituals stood out, her repertoire was not limited to such distinctly African American music. Especially in the beginning of her folk career, when she still performed with Larry Mohr, she sang countless songs that white folksingers had championed, featuring “characters” more common in white folk culture. For example, she often performed Woody Guthrie’s comical children’s song, “Car Song,”

¹⁶ Rubin, “The Magic and the Power.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

improvising outrageous car noises, similar to Guthrie's but distinctly her own.

Additionally, she regularly sang "I Was Born About 10,000 Years ago" as a duet with Mohr, with a twang to her voice and a country-style guitar accompaniment.

Performing this 19th century song that Guthrie and other white folksingers had made famous, she brought to life a world-weary "historical bum"—one that previous audiences had surely imagined as a white male—this time in the body of a Black woman in 1953.

From humorous to serious, from Black to white, old to young, classical to country, Odetta became everyone on stage. In the world of folk songs, where myriad stories and "characters" were supposedly accessible to every singer, Odetta was one of very few performers taking full advantage of that genre-specific opportunity to explore and transform oneself endlessly. To return to the idea of the techniques of ecstasy, one might say Odetta was engaged in kind of one-person carnival in which she performed all the roles nightly; on her stages, audiences witnessed not just a simple inversion of power, but an infinitely more complex assertion that, through performance, anyone could be, or at least relate to, anything. If a Black woman could perform an oppressed prisoner and then, in the same set, a white Depression-era traveler, a mythic railroad worker, and an operatic gospel singer, an antebellum sailor, why could a white woman not be a man, a black person a white person, an audience member a performer, a criminal a king?

Odetta Ungendered

Delving more deeply into Odetta's relationship to and impact on gender norms within the folk movement leads this rather uplifting discussion of folk's "ecstatic possibilities" to a crashing halt: though Odetta did not shy away from discussions and performances of race, she generally avoided overt expressions of gender. She herself said that she preferred to maintain a gender-neutral persona on stage, her exact language being, "I am neuter."¹⁸ Audiences, in turn, deprived her of gender in deceptively laudatory ways. The folksinger and radio show host Oscar Brand, for example, remembered, "She was a person that was more of a spirit than any kind of human being."¹⁹ Even modern work denies Odetta her gender with statements like Christine Kelly's: "If Odetta appeared to masculinize the folk tradition, she further unsettled her listeners by feminizing the blues."²⁰

Here it is critical to acknowledge as my foundation scholar Hortense Spiller's work regarding the historical context of "the total objectification" of the Black "captive body" and the ways such context impacts Black female performance. As Spillers writes, Black women are

not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interior violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the "overseer," standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society [Davis 9]. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh "ungendered"—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.²¹

¹⁸ Rubin, "The Magic and the Power."

¹⁹ Oscar Brand qtd. in Zak, *Odetta*, 62.

²⁰ Kelly, "Folk as the Sound of Self-Liberation."

²¹ Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Diacritics*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (1987), 65–81.

While Spillers acknowledges that there is radical potential within the ungendered Black body, in the context of this analysis of the folk revival, it is critical to remember that she emphasizes the forced nature of what could be perceived as a liberating form of androgyny.

Any attempt to analyze Odetta's attempted expressions of gender neutrality onstage must also take into account Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's pioneering work on the construction of distinct femininities within the confines of the U.S.'s discreetly drawn races. Higginbotham's core argument is that Black women face a vastly different version of sexism than white women, one that is rooted in the sexual violence and forced labor enslaved African American women experienced. This painful history and the stereotypes that arose from it, according to Higginbotham, exclude Black women from the kind of gender, sexuality, and class-based treatment white women experience.²² By the mid-1950s, for example, the domestic ideal that shaped expectations surrounding American women's lives played out in different ways for white women than for Black women. While white women struggled with the pressures to be sexually restrained, "good mothers," Black women negotiated a society that had constructed their image in opposition to those "female" extremes. Odetta stood, literally, at centerstage before a white world that had, for centuries,

²² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," in *Signs* Vol. 17 No. 2 (Winter 1992), 251-271. See specifically Higginbotham's analysis of the ways folk culture clashed with certain Black communities' conceptions of respectability.

denied Black women the very attributes they now demanded of women: a thriving personal life rooted in an intensely stable nuclear family where a breadwinning father figure took the lead. In the context of a crowd invested in racial equality, Odetta's task seemed to be nothing short of claiming and redefining Black womanhood for the burgeoning civil rights era.²³ It is my contention that, faced with such a monumental charge, Odetta made an enormous contribution by wiping the gender slate clean, so to speak, in the microcosm of folk performance: stepping away from the pernicious stereotypes of Black womanhood while also refusing to conform to expected white femininities. Though liberating, this work was not without grief, for Odetta's race barred her from stepping back into gender and kept her in a kind of limbo she would never publicly move past.

The Gendered Repertoire

A starting place for understanding Odetta's leanings toward gender neutrality is a look at her early repertoire, the songs at the core of her rise to fame in the mid-to-late Fifties. On the four albums she released between 1954 and 1959—her first four and those that captured the attention of the young women (and men) who would become folk's biggest names in the Sixties—only about five of the songs were traditionally sung by women. On 1957's *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues*, there was "Easy Rider," a blues number first recorded by Ma Rainey in 1924, and "If I Had a Ribbon Bow," a traditional song of unclear origin in which a woman longs for a

²³ For more on racial liberalism in the context of sexual conservatism see Feldstein's analysis of Mamie Till in *Not June Cleaver*, 288.

ribbon to “tie her hair” and gain social acceptance.²⁴ On her second album of 1957, *At the Gate of Horn*, there was “All the Pretty Little Horses,” a mournful lullaby with verses written from the perspective of a mother struggling to care for her own child while also taking care of another’s. Also on that album, there was “Maybe She Go,” a song about which Odetta wrote briefly in her self-penned liner notes, “MAYBE SHE GO was written by a woman who lives in Berkeley, Calif., May Kathryn Deiaplain. The song appeals to me because I too have suffered from the predicament of indecision.”²⁵ Finally, on 1959’s *My Eyes Have Seen* was “I Know Where I’m Going,” a Scottish ballad in which a woman tells a story of audaciously loving a man with a bad reputation.

On a purely lyric-based level, these were the only songs on Odetta’s first albums that featured a first-person narrator who clearly identified herself as a woman. It is of note that these were not the songs for which Odetta was known—that is, they were not the songs that reviewers highlighted, that crowds anticipated, or that devotees generally learned.²⁶ As we have seen, Odetta’s star power lay

²⁴ For one of the earliest American print publications of “Ribbon Bow” song, see John J. Niles, *Seven Kentucky Mountain Songs as Sung by Marion Kerby and John J. Niles* (New York: Schirmer, 1928), 5.

²⁵ Odetta Holmes, Liner Notes for Odetta Holmes, *Odetta at the Gate of Horn*, Tradition Records, New York, New York, LP, 1957.

²⁶ This statement is based on the broad knowledge of Odetta’s career and reputation overall that I have gathered over the course of my research. For corroboration, see any example of album or concert reviews across decades emphasizing stand-out numbers that are not the aforementioned songs, such as: James Reed, “Odetta’s Voice, and Spirit, Remain Strong,” *The Boston Globe*, December 22, 2006; Jacqueline Trescott, “Up from the ‘60s, Odetta Finds a Song: The Private Blues of the Folksinger,” *Washington Post*, January 16, 1980; John Haskins, “Odetta Lives Her Folk Music,” *The Kansas City Times*, May 15, 1969; Fr. Norman J. O’Connor, CSP, “Odetta, The Genuine Article: The Superb Artistry and Spiritual Depth of a Sad Folk-Singer,” *The Boston Sunday Globe*, March 1, 1959. Also see various

within far more conventionally masculine narratives. In her famous renditions of work songs like “Water Boy” and “John Henry,” she sang with immense power about pulverizing rocks with a hammer on mountains, calling for water, returning to prison. This was not the work of Black women—backbreaking in its own way—but rather the extremely heavy manual labor expected of enslaved and, later, imprisoned Black men. She would then pivot to an Irish lament like “The Foggy Dew,” clearly the story of a white male soldier fighting for independence, another kind of heroic persona not generally adopted by or open to folk women. That could have been followed by any number of southern “hillbilly songs,” sea shanties traditionally sung by male crews, or midwestern dustbowl ballads that expressed and often glorified the masculine nomadism that Woodie Guthrie had perfected. To this day, the gambling/drinking song “Jack o’ Diamonds” (also sometimes called “Rye Whisky”) on *Odetta’s Sings Ballads and Blues* has been recorded by at least 25 musicians, ranging from Blind Lemon Jefferson in 1926 to, recently, Dave Matthews. Of those musicians, Odetta is the only woman.²⁷

By contrast, Odetta’s white female contemporaries were releasing and performing entire albums full of first-person tales in the voices of mothers, wives,

retrospectives of Odetta’s career that emphasize her work songs and spirituals, including: Bill Clinton, “Remarks by the President at Presentation of the National Medal of the Arts and the National Humanities Medal,” *The White House*, September 29, 1999; Tim Weiner, “Odetta, folk artist and civil rights inspiration, dies at 77,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2008; John S. Wilson, “Odetta: Folksinger Who Survived the Rock Years,” *New York Times*, January 13, 1981.

²⁷ One of Odetta’s contemporaries, a white pop/cabaret singer named Betty Johnson, recorded a love song called “My Jack of Diamonds” on Atlantic in 1958. With its very different melody and lyrics, the song appears to have no connection to the folk song discussed here although the two are sometimes conflated.

and other overtly heterosexual female characters. At the risk of oversimplifying Jean Ritchie's repertoire, haunting and impactful in its own nuances, the songs that comprised her solo albums in this same period (approximately 1953-1959) included copious women's love ballads, mostly Appalachian Mountain versions of Scots-Irish ballads.²⁸ Broadening this schema slightly beyond first-person narratives, Ritchie also specialized in children's songs and lullabies, which men could sing but very rarely did publicly. Other prominent women of the Fifties folk scene—the Kossoy Sisters of Village fame, the women of the Carter Family, Texan soprano Carolyn Hester, harpist Susan Reed, multilingual world-traveler Cynthia Gooding—were also well-versed in songs and performances that positioned them clearly as mothers, wives, homemakers, and female lovers interacting with men. Even Village star Barbara Dane, whose affinity for the blues was exceptional for a woman of any race in this moment, was singing a repertoire made up of the tales of a spurned woman in and out of love. All of these women were beginning to challenge masculinist folk norms in their own ways, but my point here is to highlight that Odetta stood out among them in how rarely she sang from conventionally female points of view. There was, indeed, an unofficial body of "women's songs" in folk. Odetta was not singing them.

²⁸ Of note is that fact that Ritchie, known as "The Mother of Folk," wrote and recorded overtly political songs about coal-mining and strip-mining in this period but released them under the masculine pseudonym "Jon Hall." For more, see Sue Sturgis, "Remembering Appalachian Folksinging Legend Jean Ritchie," *Facing South*, June 12, 2015, <https://www.facingsouth.org/2015/06/remembering-appalachian-folksinging-legend-jean-ri.html>.

Folk Sexualities

Given this dearth of the passive, domestic, and motherly in Odetta's repertoire compared to the broad array of men's stories she sang, it would be tempting to argue—as some have—that she took on a clearly masculine persona, in essence becoming “one of the boys” as Janis Joplin is said to have done a decade later to survive within the world of rock ‘n’ roll. I want to resist this tendency to masculinize Odetta, for it does a great disservice to her complexity as a woman, denies the depth of the sexism she faced, and reinforces racist notions of acceptable femininities that would deem anyone not white not female.²⁹

When all else is stripped away, the key for defining a performer's gender within the world of music seems to be a performer's sexuality.³⁰ In particular, a domineering heterosexuality was required for a performer to be seen as masculine in the postwar era. The more common example is the drug and alcohol-fueled,

²⁹ For particularly telling reviews, see, for example, Robert Shelton, “Folk Joins Jazz at Newport,” *New York Times*, July 19, 1959 in which the author compares Odetta to Jonathan Swift's mythical giant Gulliver.

³⁰ Among the most helpful theories on performance—especially musical performance—and sexual objectification I have read for this project, there is the following series of essays on the commodified eroticism of women in the context of American popular culture: Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985). Also see previously cited passages from Shane Vogel, Angela Davis on the amplified burden faced by Black female performers. For a specific look at the sexualization of women performers of the 1960s counterculture as “either romanticized fantasy figures, subservient earth mothers or easy lays” see Sheila Whiteley, “Wonderful World, Beautiful People: The 1960's Counter Culture and its Ideological Relationship to Women,” *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22-43. For two excellent histories on the roots of such sexualization in popular performance, see Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008) and Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000).

electrified desire that would create a generation of male rock gods and win Janis Joplin nominal entry into their boys' club. But folk music's subtlety and propensity for love over lust (at least compared to rock 'n' roll) belied its own surprisingly similar premium on heterosexual desire. For most Black men and their white emulators, the longing imbued in the blues confirmed one's masculinity. For men not going the blues route, the required sexuality was laced into in folk's lyrically intricate tales of adventure, of an anti-material and unpredictable life free from social constraints. In this male folk romance, women were indeed more likely to be freed from their conventional roles as faithful girlfriends, Earth angels, mothers, and wives and given more bohemian descriptors. ("My one true love" comes to mind.) However, these titles were not any less of a trap; in the context of the male folk adventure, these women were often discovered on the road, essentially as part of it. If not that, they were either being left behind or vilified for going their own way. In a whole body of traditional murder ballads, women perceived as sexually deviant were simply slain.³¹ When we zoom out and ask what all the men of the folk movement had in common, from Leadbelly to Woody Guthrie to the Clancy Brothers, isn't it a kind of poetic ability to express desire for women? They were not all singing political songs. Nor were they all singing prison songs. But they were all, at least a few times a set, singing about someone they loved or wanted or both.

³¹ Happy Traum, interview with author. For another compelling take on the idea that the Child Ballads were brought to America, in part, to police women see Lucy Ward and Lisa Ward, Co-hosts, "Peggy Seeger," Episode 001, February 2, 2021, *Thank Folk For Feminism*, Podcast, <https://thankfolkforfeminism.co.uk/episodes/page/2/>.

These kinds of subtle expressions of sexual prowess, especially with their implications of non-monogamy and premarital sex, were as off-limits to folk women as of Odetta's moment as they were required of folk men; they were one body of songs, united by the theme of romance, that she did not approach, even with the license the folk tradition afforded her to change lyrics and switch pronouns.

Setting aside the blues momentarily, let us look more closely at the inflexible gender binary inscribed in the typical white male ballad. Try to imagine Odetta singing "Tom Dooley" in 1958 when the Kingston Trio's version came out. An Appalachian song widely credited for launching the folk revival into the mainstream, it was based on the true yet impossibly convoluted story of a mid-19th century love triangle. The facts known are that in 1866, Confederate veteran Tom Dula (pronounced "Dooley") was convicted for stabbing his former lover Laura Foster to death on a North Carolina mountaintop. Rumors surrounding the murder—those upon which the song is based—crafted a story of a chivalrous man who only confessed to the murder to protect the reputation the actual murderer, his other lover, Laura's cousin Anne. The verses describe the murder from Dooley's point of view. In the Kingston Trio's version, one member would take a solo for each one:

*I met her on the mountain
There I took her life
Met her on the mountain
Stabbed her with my knife*

*This time tomorrow
Reckon where I'll be
Down in some lonesome valley
Hangin' from a white oak tree*

The chorus shifts to a more communal perspective. In the Kingston Trio's version, all three men would sing the refrain:

*Hang down your head Tom Dooley
Hang down your head and cry
Hand down your head Tom Dooley
Poor boy you're bound to die*

With its upbeat tempo, its repetition of “poor boy,” and its centering of the male murderer’s story, the song comes across as a dirge. (In fact, rather fantastical rumors held that the ghost of Tom Dooley himself had written it sitting on his own grave, which perhaps accounts for the extreme shifts in narrative voice.) The implication, even without the backstory, is that an innocent man is dying for his true love’s honor. Whatever the case, the song glorifies a man who very possibly stabbed his one-time partner to death or, at the very least, was “manly” enough to protect a living woman who had committed the act. It is a warning to women who might cheat more than it is a warning to a men who might cheat, lie, and murder. Odetta was, indeed, willing and able to take on laments for brave men treated unjustly, but not this kind.³²

Odetta and the Blues

Aside from male love stories in all their variations, the only other collection of folk songs that approached this kind of sexual expression was women’s blues—the songs that were, in this very moment, helping a young and ostracized Janis Joplin in Port Arthur, Texas find her voice. Odetta, however, avoided the blues

³² The members of the Kingston Trio are known to have enjoyed expanding and speculating on the lurid details of the Tom Dula case backstage. Richard H. Underwood, *Crimesong: True Crime Stories From Southern Murder Ballads*, 116-123.

almost completely in this stage of her career. To understand this avoidance, we must look beyond lyrics to the non-discursive elements of her performances, namely her complex relationship with audiences early in her career. Scholar Christine Kelly—the only scholar to my knowledge who has devoted critical attention to Odetta—has described this relationship as one defined by a mixture of terror and rage, given that Odetta was both intensely self-conscious due to the racism she had endured growing up and, by her own admission, soothed and even liberated through her performances of anger via folk songs.³³ Looking back on these early days of her career, she would later say, “I was furious and I was angry and I hated...everything, everybody, including myself” and that she had “a dragon” within herself. These emotions at the core of Odetta’s persona—her self-hatred mixed with hatred of the world that judged her—were not so much contradictory as they were interdependent, fueling each other through Odetta’s constant, painful experience of seeing herself through the white world’s point of view. This double-consciousness would not have been the defining element of her aesthetic without the presence of her white audiences, whose very existence was both the object of her desire and the source of her rage. In fact, from the moment Odetta began performing professionally, she cut out and saved reviews with near-militant meticulousness in a series of personal scrapbooks. In a November 1959 Connecticut newspaper article, it was reported,

Odetta, a perfectionist herself, is her own severest critic. She may work as long as a year on a single song and will not offer it publicly [sic] until she is fully satisfied that her rendition is precisely as she wants it. When a song enters into Odetta’s

³³ Kelly, “Folk as the Sound of Self Liberation.”

repertoire, it becomes hers wholly. And once it becomes Odetta's, few other folk singers even attempt it again, refusing to challenge her supremacy.³⁴ Each performer has their own complex relationship with their audience; Odetta's was particularly charged with a need to fight back, and this is where her discomfort with women's blues begins to make sense.

Women's blues was not entirely friendly—that is, these songs could indeed express hostility and even rage—but overall, the accepted blues aesthetic involved far more warmth and vulnerability on the part of the performer than Odetta was willing to embody. In today's genre-less world of rarely-live music, it is increasingly difficult to conceptualize that musical genres historically demarcated much more than a particular sound; they were also linked to distinct modes of interaction—unspoken contracts—between audience and performer which developed and then crystallized over time. For women of the golden age of the blues like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, audience expectations had been rooted not just in the risqué lyrical content of their songs, but in a parallel intimacy between performer and viewer, a kind of emotional connection built around the singer's defenselessness that the genre came to promise. This connection was close but one-sided in the sense that blueswomen expressed deeply personal pain and longing in a radically unguarded way, while the audience did not, simply by virtue of being an audience, reciprocate such openness.³⁵

³⁴ "Tonight With Belafonte," *Record-Journal* (Meriden, CT), November 30, 1959; Zak, *Odetta*, 109, 198.

³⁵ Hazel Carby, "The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (New York: Verso Books, 1999), 7-8; Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 39-41; Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret*, 175-183.

Unlike bluesmen, blueswomens' roots had been in vaudeville and then in segregated cabaret clubs, urban entertainment venues with white, ticketed guests expecting the exotic as opposed to the more organic front porches, homes, farms, and juke joints of the rural South. (Even in the case of men's prison blues—far from an organic context—musical performance was still, in its original form, a private means of coping or a shared activity among fellow prisoners.) Odetta was willing to embrace this male tradition to an extent, but when it came to what scholar Shane Vogel calls “the fraught intimacies” of women's blues, she struggled both internally and externally. Blueswomen were not just glamorous with their feathers and sequins, but coquettish. With sensuous, personal stories of romance in the first person, they offered themselves through song to their audiences; they begged to be loved, defined themselves through the theme of love, and, when they were not loved, embodied an intense loneliness. Whatever the emotion, the audience became the singer's object of desire in a blues performance, not the other way around.³⁶ This power dynamic, established in a different era, was deeply at odds with Odetta's racial consciousness, unable at a core level to evoke the ire she needed to express or to protect her where she felt she needed protection. In Christine Kelly's words, Odetta's performances were “an act of self-abnegation.” She offered her songs, but—lacking any folk songs that allowed her to do so in a comfortable way—she did not offer herself.³⁷

³⁶ Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret*, 170.

³⁷ Odetta's own statements on sexuality in performance and the sexual stereotypes Black women faced are minimal, in part due to her adherence to respectability politics that discouraged such openness. Little is known about the artist's personal life. Further research

Simply put, Odetta chose to use the power of her place on the stage differently than any performer before her. She would not grovel or cry; she would not perform in any way that could be construed as longing for, surrendering any power to, her audience. In fact, she inverted the expected audience-performer relationship by sending waves of rage toward her viewers, shouting through visceral arrangements of songs that, far from rendering her vulnerable, rendered her fierce.

Odetta Beyond Song

Odetta's refusal to live within the confines of American femininities extended far beyond her repertoire and performance style, but, very much like her musical choices, her choices offstage somewhat unintentionally blazed a trail for future feminists. To begin, she was one of the first female singers to go by her first name only. Though dropping her last name surely helped her in later years when speculation surrounding her romantic relationships ebbed and flowed, it does not seem she did so from an overtly feminist point of view. The decision came out of her early days at the Tin Angel in San Francisco, when club owner Peggy Tolk-Watkins made the suggestion. Odetta reasoned that it was a good move, not to veil her marital status (single at the time) or to assert her independence, but simply because reviewers often spelled her last name (Feliious) wrong. She also felt "Odetta" alone

on her brief and ultimately poorly received foray into the blues in the late 1960s is needed. Christine Kelly makes a start in her previously cited article.

sounded “strutty.”³⁸ After her last shows with Larry Mohr in 1954, she struck out solo and generally occupied the stage alone with her guitar—an anomaly for a woman on the early folk revival scene.

In a similar vein, Odetta’s personal life remained clearly delineated and hidden from her public life, while most other women built their careers in folk as singing partners to their husbands or other family members.³⁹ As of 1958, when the folk revival was just exploding into public consciousness, she expressed a desire to prioritize family over career,

I don’t want stardom. I don’t want stardom. There’s too much for one to do and to experience for say a stardom like Mr. Belafonte, who has great responsibility. If he comes up with a hit, somebody in some office is saying, ‘OK, where is the other one?’ These are no conditions to work under...Because a career minded person, I’m not. I couldn’t get along with just career.

However, as her fame grew in the following months, and as her personal life became more complex, she would eventually leave aspirations for a family behind. She married three times through her life, the first time to actor Don Gordon for less than a year during the folk whirlwind in 1959, and never had children. As with most musicians, travel defined her life and made commitment to one city, much less domestic roles, difficult. Long before Bob Dylan made being a “rolling stone” with “no direction home” an idealized countercultural state of mind, Odetta had embraced that identity, declaring herself “a rambler, really.” Just a year after saying

³⁸ Zak, *Odetta*, 46.

³⁹ See women cited in normative family or family-reminiscent groups above: Jean Ritchie, Ronnie Gilbert, the Carter Family, the Kossoy Sisters, Peggy Seeger, Jo and Paul Mapes. Notable exceptions from the pre-Baez 1950s include: Cynthia Gooding, Barbara Dane, and Susan Reed, though her brother was on the scene.

she was not career-minded, splitting her time between folk revival hotspots in New York and Chicago, she responded to a question about having children, “It wouldn’t be fair to them. They could not have a normal family life. Later on, perhaps we’ll adopt children.” Fittingly, she called her acoustic guitar “Baby.”⁴⁰

These choices, many of them compromises made of necessity, enhanced the self-abnegation and resulting self-liberation Odetta achieved via folk performance. With her existence so dedicated to her career, she had so much less of a home-based private life than any other folk woman on the scene. She could not be cornered into the public performance of conventional private identities expected of women—wife, girlfriend, singing partner, mother—because she simply did not possess those identities. This negotiation of expectations that surrounded her did a great deal on two fronts. First, women had an example in their private lives of a woman who had chosen career over family and succeeded. Second, in the figure of Odetta alone with her guitar, the folk stage—and perhaps the American stage in general—had rather suddenly become a space not mirroring, but rather, divorced from social norms, a space where imagined worlds could play out.⁴¹ Again, we see Odetta stepping away from convention, making sacrifices to open a space for women following her to reinhabit old roles in new ways both onstage and off.

Odetta on Defense

⁴⁰ Zak, *Odetta*, 71, 106, 117.

⁴¹ My thinking here is informed, broadly, by José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Just as Odetta's independence and rage could not be divorced from her self-hatred, a strong counterpoint fans and critics often read as warmth and modesty came through in her performance style. If her rage neared but did not quite match the conventionally masculine, these more self-conscious, peaceful elements of her style were often described in feminine terms. Returning to her repertoire, spirituals were a key body of songs that tempered Odetta's expressions of anger and won her comparisons to female spiritual singers of the past and present. Though Odetta deeply identified with the pain imbued in these sacred songs, it was not lost on her that they tended to be among the least provocative, least aggressive in her sets. They united audience and performer on so many levels: in their appeal to forces beyond the human realm, in their Christianity, in their seemingly transcendent age, and, most importantly, in the communal clapping and singing they often inspired. As expressions of racial suffering couched within aesthetics of hope and unity, spirituals were a valuable tool in Odetta's arsenal of song in that they allowed her audiences an emotional "break" while still keeping the focus on the African American struggle—and, by extension, allowed Odetta a moment of clearly non-masculine performance.

Though Odetta did not voice a gendered strategy, her propensity for interspersing harsh affect with softer emotions can certainly be read as a means of diluting the violence associated with the masculine with the passivity associated with the feminine—a means of placating crowds not prepared for a full set of radical song delivered by a woman. Here is where those more conventionally-feminine songs framed previously as outliers factor in to Odetta's early popularity; in the

context of her more forceful numbers, the rare lullabies and lovestruck ballads existed to enhance the gender ambiguity (or neutrality) that she needed to maintain in order to achieve fame within the folk world as the first woman to be delivering messages as political as hers. Here too we can sense the reasoning behind her shy demeanor between songs and her ever-shifting tone—the deep contralto of her work song arrangements juxtaposed against the classical soprano of her spirituals and ballads, roughness mixed with operatic elegance, shouting bursts outward alongside shaking breaths inward. Not only could Odetta perform a vast array of human emotion; she also knew on some level that she had to in order to sidestep accusations of masculinity and expectations of femininity.

Despite her best efforts to navigate and perform the masculine and feminine within herself in a way that would not expose her to yet more racial hatred, even Odetta's deeply-crafted shapeshifting was ultimately not an escape from a world that ruthlessly demanded clarity on its own terms. The medium of folk performance facilitated a great deal of empowering self-transformation for her: she could transform her voice, her songs, and her entire persona all within one night via this vast body of story songs. But she could not change the most superficial of descriptors: her physique. Very tall and large, Odetta's figure stood in opposition to every other delicate white woman's body on the folk scene and to most other women in American popular culture at this moment of leggy pinups and blond bombshells. Her need to be gender neutral was, at its core, not tied not to a kind of gender liberation 21st century readers might be inclined to interpellate; ultimately, it was a defensive choice born of her fight for respect:

SUN: I commented to a friend last night what a radiant smile you had on stage. And he said, “You know, when she’s singing, you don’t see her as black or white or man or woman, just a *being*.”

ODETTA: Isn’t that interesting? In my private life now, I wear something where some part of my legs will show, but until recently, getting dressed and looking in the mirror, I hadn’t seen my legs [in] years. In performing, it has to be long — either pants or skirt, dress, whatever. In that, I am neuter. I remember years ago I went to Atlanta. I was asked to sing at a college and it was late morning, so I wore a daytime dress. I was standing up there, trying to sing but I was distracted. I couldn’t get myself right. Isn’t that the weirdest thing? The whole of me has to be clothed. As the whole of me is clothed, I can better become the kid or the worker or the this or the that. I’m just neuter.⁴²

Analysis of Odetta’s billowing gowns may seem to be a shallow point of culmination for this section; but she existed within a shallow world, one that ultimately held her to and judged her by racist and sexist standards of physical beauty. Her gowns were just surface-level expressions of a much deeper self-consciousness, one the singer often clearly linked to the racism she faced, but one which also betrays an interwoven struggle to be accepted as an unconventional woman on the folk scene and in popular culture in general. The size of a man was not particularly open to criticism or interest in the era, but a large woman of any race posed a physical threat to deeply-held notions of female fragility. At best Odetta could expect language in reviews that likened her hyperbolically to thunder, storms, and bombs—not just large but also dangerous things. At worst, she saw herself described as a man or as a kind of genderless “universal” being. She also contended with her management continually insisting upon picturing her only from the neck-up in promotional material and on album covers, with only one album in 1967 breaking the rule by showing her draped in a shapeless, orange and yellow striped

⁴² Rubins, *The Magic and the Power*.

gown. As Ian Zak writes, “The put-downs quietly trampled Odetta’s soul, but she wouldn’t say so publicly until much later.”⁴³

With such shame surrounding her physique, it is evident that her iconic dresses were a shield to thwart the racist and sexist onslaught of attempts to categorize her. If she hid her gender, perhaps she could alleviate at least one form of discrimination. Her distinctive guitar playing, too, with her distinctive heavy strum, contained rhythms of defensiveness. She herself referred to her style as “self-defense.”⁴⁴ Sadly, for this performer, constant reaction to and pushing against racist and sexist tides forged her identity. She clearly held those forces at bay, but the struggle rendered her career both a triumph and a tragedy.

To close this section, I would like to return to the moment recounted in Chapter 2 of Odetta making her Village debut at the Café Bizarre in 1957. Primed to enter a scene concerned with racial justice, white audiences of the folk world responded to Odetta’s anger with an unprecedented, if performative, level of grace. That is, reviewers, fellow musicians, audiences at large, seemed ready and eager to accept a new power balance in folk performance that involved listening, from a position of humility and even shame, to Black perspectives on the country’s history, even while the performer delivering those messages was on the defensive. She was met with glowing reviews. And for Odetta, these heated moments—the enraged work songs, the age-old spirituals, the intensely mournful sea shanties, the tales of

⁴³ Zak, *Odetta*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

struggle at war—were at the core of her own pursuit of freedom through folk music.

She later recalled,

We were living at a time when I couldn't say I hate me and I hate you and I hate. But I'm frustrated. I've been told that I'm worth nothing. I've been told I'm dumb. Hollywood has told me that. School has told me that. White population has, society has told me that... As I sang those songs, nobody knew where the prisoner began and Odetta stopped and vice versa. So I could get my rocks off, being furious.⁴⁵

Her friend Carrie Thaler later corroborated,

You know, the folk song would be about a broken-hearted lover and you could just see the people, whether they'd be Irish or from the islands or whatever, she just became that person, with dialect, body language and just something spiritual that happened. And there was an amazing transformation that would happen over the course of an Odetta concert and the audience just became transfixed and in love...And then we'd go backstage and there would be 'Detta and I thought, *How could this be the same person?* I never could figure it out.⁴⁶

In reaction to a 1962 concert in Africa, the Nigerian writer Peter Enahoro added,

When she sang "Oh, Freedom," I felt like a slave. She didn't just sing, she was the part and you could feel her straining, crying to the heavens above, tearing and wrenching her heart out. The 3,000 audience roared for more.⁴⁷

If we return to theories of Carnival, we can begin to understand how the masking inherent to folk performance allowed this unlikely truce between an enraged Black performer and her white audience to come into being night by night. The key is that, as with all performance events, Odetta's shows were a temporary reality in which the stakes for inverting social hierarchies and norms felt, on some level, much lower than they were in everyday life. What is more, it was critical that a *woman* was delivering this message of rage in the "mask" of many different men. For

⁴⁵ Odetta interview on *National Public Radio*, December 30, 2005, accessed at <https://www.npr.org/2005/12/30/5074594/odetta-remains-a-powerful-voice-for-justice>.

⁴⁶ Qtd. in Zak, *Odetta*, 109.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Zak, *Odetta*, 119.

white audiences, I suspect, this was actually far less threatening on the surface than if a man had been singing these songs. Through folk Odetta was at least two people at once: a shy and nonthreatening woman on the defensive and an enraged Black prisoner in a position of immense power over the audience. This was the delicate balance that needed to be struck not just for Black performers to make progress within the folk world, but also for women. Odetta once said, "I never do the same performance twice." That refusal to repeat the past was key to folk's next flowering.

Chapter 4: The Queen of Folk

Folk's Madonna

The folk world had a chance in Odetta to celebrate the dawn of a new and more flexible kind of womanhood in the postwar era. That was not what happened. Odetta had carefully sidestepped a complex web of racist and sexist stereotypes during her rise to fame. With her formality and avoidance of women's blues songs in the early years, audiences were not as inclined to sexualize her as they had Black women past. With her refusal to sing the traditional ballads of various female victims, there was no possibility of her becoming another of folk's delicate cast of ethereal sopranos—a fate already precluded in the era by her skin color and physique. Only one trope remained either to be denied or deployed in the narrative of Odetta's folk career: that of the desexualized mammy, a Black woman who existed only to care for others. I argue that this trope is what ultimately brought Odetta down. With the appearance on the scene of a slightly younger soprano of Scots-Irish and Mexican heritage, the fleeting Queen of Folk saw her meticulously built image of strength, power, and racial dignity begin to unravel.

As noted in Chapter 1, Joan Baez was eleven years younger than Odetta and had grown up idolizing her from afar, learning her style and bits and pieces of her repertoire over the years. In 1958, Baez's father took a faculty position at MIT, and the family moved to Cambridge, where a less unruly, more collegiate version of the Village folk scene was well underway. Within six weeks, 17-year-old Baez had dropped out of Boston University's drama program and established a footing singing in the new "coffee houses" of Harvard Square, intellectual hubs of the

burgeoning counterculture. Within a few months, Baez was offered a paid, bi-weekly gig at Club 47, Boston's first folk club. By May of 1959, which would have been the end of her freshman year, Baez was recording on a compilation album entitled "Folksingers 'Round Harvard Square," produced by Harvard students on a label called Veritas in a friend's basement. Of Baez's six solo numbers on the album, it is very likely she had learned at least two ("Sail Away Ladies" and "Lowlands") from recent Odetta records.¹ The album, picturing a barefoot Baez seated and playing a guitar alongside the two male contemporaries also being featured, was released many months later with the kind of language in the liner notes that would follow the singer for decades:

Seen in the hazy greenish spotlight of a local coffee house, surrounded by an attentive following, the lovely Joan Baez looks, for all her eighteen years, like a priestess at some ancient rite. Possessing a rich soaring voice, her control of volume exerts a dramatic effect on her audience, often leaving them quite breathless.²

Word of Joan Baez and her striking high soprano spread swiftly, and early reactions to the woman who would become one of the most recognizable faces of the folk revival and the counterculture as a whole have been well documented.³ However, what has not quite been done is an analysis of Baez's rise within the context of Odetta's fall. Though reviews and articles did not overtly juxtapose the two women, I believe the surface-level differences between Baez and Odetta

¹ This timeline is culled mostly from Joan Baez's memoir and associated news articles. Note that Baez would take legal action against a 1963 attempt to reissue this album, which makes it difficult to find presently.

² "Folksingers Round Harvard Square," Liner Notes, Veritas Records, LP, Cambridge, 1959.

³ Liz Thomson, *Joan Baez: The Last Leaf*, 35-57.

provided the fuel for this next moment of the revival in which Baez's career took off and Odetta's plateaued. That is to say, the record industry and media depicted Baez as something of a foil to Odetta when, in reality, the two women had a great deal in common. By implication, Baez's career represented far more continuity with the folk women who went before her than narratives that celebrate her as a kind of unique, "once-in-a-generation" voice suggest to this day.

The similarities to which I am alluding could only possibly be missed in hindsight, by modern readers who take the kind of independent and political womanhood Baez and Odetta pioneered through their music careers for granted. To start, like Odetta, Baez occupied the stage alone with a guitar and without a partner. Of the women taking stages in American popular music in this moment pre-1960, there is no other prominent example of a performer who played her own instrument and performed under her own name, taking the stage alone—an image with profound power to communicate that women could embark on their own musical journeys without need for a band, a male partner, or even backing musicians. Furthermore, behind the scenes, Baez followed Odetta in being among the first women to exercise near-total agency over her own music career. Again, in our contemporary moment, it may be difficult to conceptualize what a break from the norm these women represented, but it was truly radical for a female act not to be orchestrated, marionette-style, by a powerful and deeply-capitalist male managerial team. From her repertoire to her wardrobe, to her arrangements to the very movements she made on stage, Baez the singer was a fiercely self-styled performer, very much like Odetta.

To fast-forward to her first major record deal, though the moment seems to have come on fast-forward in reality, in late 1959, Baez made the altogether-shocking decision to turn down John Hammond, Albert Grossman, and the Columbia machine offering her an eight-year contract and a guarantee of “the big-time.” She went instead with Vanguard, a relatively unknown label run by then twenty-nine-year-old leftist music scholar Maynard Solomon. For the next eight years, never signing a formal contract, Baez stayed with Vanguard and dodged any number of external attempts to direct her career she may have encountered on a larger label. Among the “luxuries” Vanguard afforded Baez was the autonomy to speak her mind politically, a freedom that would allow her to become an outspoken supporter of the civil rights movement and later anti-war movement. Framed differently, Baez had the freedom to further develop Odetta’s model of fighting for racial justice through folk song. And as a half-Mexican woman from a leftist family, Baez had personal stakes in this fight very much like Odetta.

None of these continuities were (or are) emphasized. What was (and is) emphasized was Baez’s voice. She continued to sing in the extremely high bel canto she had taught herself in her high school years to win acceptance into the choir, certainly an impressive style but not exactly exceptional given that it was the standard for female singers in the 1950s.⁴ Baez’s version of this classical technique was particularly full, clear, and loud; there was a kind of strength to it that others singing in the style did not possess. In other words, with her unmistakable high

⁴ Laurie Stras, “Voice of the Beehive: Vocal Technique at the Turn of the 1960s,” in *She’s So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music*, ed. Laurie Stras (UK: Ashgate, 2010), 33-55.

vibrato, she eluded the total fragility other women of folk struck with their breathier timbres while also avoiding a Broadway-style brassiness. Baez's voice was strong, but not a showbiz belt—more a crystalline pierce, an “achingly pure soprano” as famous folk critic Robert Shelton would later write. What is more, she maintained that unwavering high vibrato with remarkable, one could even say mechanical, consistency not just throughout her career but literally through each song she sang. She needed no break or breather, it seemed, and offered none, hitting high note after high note with the same consistently astounding tone.

Few have ever publicly criticized Baez's voice. In fact, it was quickly enshrined as a sacred sound and has remained sanctified ever since, even as it has grown deeper and slightly huskier with age. If there is one generally agreed upon flaw, it might be its flawlessness—its sheer consistency which, at times, draws disapprobation of those who would prefer a more “emotive” performer. However, even these critiques, which are, like the ebullient praise, generally by men, miss a larger point. Baez had the perfect voice for a woman of the time: not too weak, but also not too strong—or, perhaps, both weak *and* strong simultaneously.⁵ The register in which she sang was undeniably feminine in the simple sense that, with the exception of choir boys and eunuchs, only women could reach such notes. Thus, it reinforced a gender binary that Odetta had challenged. It was also, by Baez's own admission, “very white,” by nature of its tonal heights and clarity or, to put it in

⁵ Susan Douglas includes brief mention of Baez but no analysis of her voice in *Where the Girls Are*, 146-150.

more commonly used terms, its “purity.”⁶ Thus, a lone teenage soprano on the eve of the Sixties coupled whiteness, virginity, and femininity in an old, comfortable way.

But what made this voice distinctly Baez’s was its unrelenting flawlessness, that endless vibrato that wavered only as it was supposed to and never broke or even faded. An element oddly missing in Baez reviews and scholarship is awareness of the politics behind Baez’s choice—and it was indeed a choice though she would often refer to it as “a gift”—to approach her entire repertoire with the same steadily awe-inspiring sound, a tone perceived as both intensely vulnerable and intensely powerful in Baez’s unique ability to wield it loudly, confidently, without fail. Odetta often sang ballads in her own coloratura soprano—one that arguably was not that different from Baez’s—but Baez did it all the time, giving audiences a kind of comforting predictability I believe critics have underplayed in their analyses of her revolutionary career. This is all to say, perhaps Baez’s popularity was as much in her vocal consistency as in her mythologized singularity. Though Bob Dylan would become the “voice of a generation” in his mindset and worldview, the dominant narrative is that Joan Baez *had* the voice of her generation literally, sonically—an era defining sound.

Of course, it was not just the relentless clarity of Baez’s soprano that won her the kind of fame Odetta never achieved. Baez’s voice was the sound at the core of an entire persona that matched it, both strong and fragile at the same time.⁷ A large part of this complex persona arose from a relatively simple set of biographical

⁶ Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With*, 51.

⁷ Douglas touches on this idea briefly in her passages on Baez in *Where the Girls Are*, 108, 146.

features she happened to possess in the right time and place. For one, she was a teenager in both looks and spirit; her interest in freedom songs was rivaled only by her proclivity for some of the most dramatic heartbreak songs in the folk canon. She writes about her arrival upon the Boston scene, filled with long-haired folk girls,

I had cut [my hair] short just before leaving California, and now waited impatiently for it to grow out into tresses so that I could be like them, and like all the fair and tender maidens in all the long and tragic ballads. The melodic, repetitive songs of love forsaken spoke to my young and fragile heart, and I would sometimes get so carried away with a song that I wept while trying to learn it.⁸

Baez sang the forlorn love ballads that Odetta avoided, with “Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” and “Fair and Tender Maidens” among her earliest favorites to perform. For the most part, these were songs in which a woman presumably as “pure” as Baez’s voice endured the trials of love without defenses, but never went as far as to channel her sadness into anger towards the men who had caused it. In another anecdote, Baez recalls her early intensity with such themes:

As my repertoire expanded, my rigidity stayed the same. Each new song was as desperately serious as the last. One evening two young men got the giggles while I was singing, and I realized, to my embarrassment, that it was because the songs had been unrelenting in their plots of death, misery, and heartbreak [...] I groped around my mind for one single cheery song with a happy ending, and finished the set with “John Riley,” because John Riley lives through a war to come back and claim his own true love after seven years, and she is actually alive to be claimed. But it sounded exactly like all the rest, and the giggling persisted. After that night, I made it a point to add some “humorous” numbers to the repertoire, my first concession to commerciality.⁹

Even with a few “humorous numbers,” Baez embodied a Child ballad heroine, a delicate and

⁸ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

sad-eyed woman dominated by longing for her true love. Her eventually long hair mimicked that of the other girls of folk, who themselves mimicked classical standards of white female beauty in rather radical compliance with folk's anti-industrial ethos. (While men embodied modern laborers with denim and shirt sleeves rolled, women had not worn their hair long and natural as a trend for many decades. The unkempt style channeled Pre-Raphaelite muses, classical goddesses, and other women of the rural and antiquarian past.) Baez rarely wore shoes and dressed as a "bohemian Mona Lisa" in loose shifts and dangling earrings inspired by Odetta's. Even her natural hair, so treasured in folk spheres, was just a white woman's version of what Odetta had pioneered. But while these choices confounded Odetta's audiences, in concert with Baez's voice, her whiteness, her thin frame, and her timing just on the verge of full-blown womanhood, they won Baez resounding praise as "achingly pure." For those who wanted to see her as such, Baez was angelic, feminine innocence reinforced, a quality very few were able or willing to find in her greatest role model, Odetta.

At the same time, just like her voice, Baez was strong and even intimidating. From the start of her career, she was politically inclined and committed to the idea of racial liberation. In advance of her first major performance in Boston, she made the decision to go by her full, given name out of fear that any other choice would be perceived as an attempt to hide her Mexican heritage—a decision that stands in intriguing juxtaposition with Odetta's. Interspersed with Baez's array of tragic love ballads were African American spirituals, with "All My Trials" and "What You Gonna Call Your Pretty Little Baby" among of her early favorites. Though she had not yet

incorporated overtly political music in the late 1950s, such spirituals were the first step toward becoming a political woman interested in racial justice, in addition to an ethereal beauty interested in boys.

Whether she aimed to or not, Baez was subverting the expectations of white femininity from within her seemingly “very white” identity. In fact, some of the very elements of her persona that allowed fans to find her “achingly pure” were simultaneously functioning on transgressive levels. The white folkwoman look—long undone hair, loose dresses, sandals, if anything—was pastoral enough to enhance the myth of feminine purity, but these recycled trends were also in direct opposition to Cold War standards of female beauty. Casual hair and clothes challenged tight curlers and crinoline. Baez surprised crowds by appearing onstage without makeup, at once sweet and shocking. Her bare feet and sandals not only gave her the look of some earthbound angel or classical goddess, but also gave her a risqué edge in the context of late 1950s female footwear. She won contradictory praise like “modest but alluring.”¹⁰ In short, Baez had struck a magic chord. Channeling longstanding folk ideals of pre-industrial authenticity alongside a 50s teen’s challenge to the older generation, she became folk’s rebel angel, moving women a step forward while looking far backward.

Two Queens

¹⁰ George Wein qtd. in Zak, *Odetta*, 79.

There were quite a few models in folk music for relationships between performers. Apart from literal family groupings and heterosexual duos of lovers, there was an informal yet well-entrenched tradition of older musicians mentoring those new to the scene, a version of the apprenticeship system that also existed in jazz.¹¹ Nearly every bluesman had at least one well-known male acolyte attached as an aesthetic follower and often a helper in old age. Blind Lemon Jefferson personally taught Lightnin' Hopkins; Son House famously influenced Muddy Waters and Robert Johnson; Leadbelly, ushered into the white folk world, taught Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie myriad songs, stories, and blues techniques; Pete Seeger went on to claim countless "grandchildren;" Bob Dylan would seek out Woody Guthrie as an ailing mentor, among others. Joan Baez seemed poised to become Odetta's mentee, but the social currents shaping the ever-growing folk industry shifted the two women into a less straightforward, ultimately far more competitive dynamic—one that would deploy Odetta's gender ambiguity against her in favor of Baez's more tangible femininity.

Several anecdotes relayed in Baez's autobiography provide a starting point for tracing this tension that came to define their relationship. The two women first crossed paths in June 1959 at Albert Grossman's Gate of Horn in Chicago, where Odetta had performed many times and where Baez had been invited to do her first professional run of shows outside of Boston, sharing the bill with established folksinger Bob Gibson. Grossman, notoriously brilliant and ruthless in his prediction

¹¹ Van Ronk, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, 17.

of music trends, had seen Baez play Club 47 and relentlessly coaxed her to Chicago, despite Baez's own reservations about a trip away from home for shows in "a den of sin called a nightclub." On one of the nights during Baez's two-week run, Odetta came in, evidently as an audience member, as she lived in Chicago at the time. Baez wrote of their first interaction,

One night the Queen of Folk, Odetta, came to the club. I was a nervous wreck waiting to see her and was at the bar when I realized that she had arrived. I watched her for a minute from across the room. She was big as a mountain and black as night. Her skin looked like velvet. She wore massive earrings that dangled and swung and flashed, and her dress looked like a flowing embroidered tent. She had a split between her front teeth which showed all the time because her face, between expressions of worry, surprise, concern, and mock anger, would shift back into a smile big enough to match the rest of her. Her chin jutted out round and full of dimples when she laughed, and I thought she was the most dignified person I'd ever seen.¹²

Baez's description, presumably written around her memoir's publication in 1987, clearly attempts to acknowledge and honor Odetta's racial identity, though it precariously straddles the same uneasy line between honoring and exoticizing that the entire folk movement did. To Baez, Odetta was a "dignified" Queen with a regal gown and shining jewels, a woman who could inspire awe and even fear. At the same time, Baez gives her earthy qualities clearly linked to her race. Such metaphors could surely be read as an attempt to capture Odetta's timelessness and power but, in this context, come too close to the age-old coupling of Africa and primitivism, as well as dehumanizing a very human woman. In similarly questionable attempts at praise, Baez refers to Odetta as "my heroine" on one page only to call her "my black angel" on the next.

¹² Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 59.

More important than Baez's ill-chosen wording, though, is the way these two women engaged in a subtle competition, at least in Baez's memory of the evening. In the anecdote, they meet in ambiguous territory, the floor of the club, where neither woman is formally performing or occupying the idealistic world performance creates. Though Odetta is at the club to see Baez, Baez also watches her, emphasizing her smile and laugh. In comparison to descriptions of Odetta's intensity onstage, including Baez's own, the emotions highlighted here are rather innocuous: mock anger, worry, surprise, concern—more evidence of an inclination to imagine Odetta's full power as a force limited to the fleeting boundaries of the stage. And while the seasoned singer has briefly inspired in Baez some fear, the strange end of the interaction ultimately deflates any threat she poses. Baez writes,

To overcome the panic welling up in my chest, I went up to her and flat out did an imitation of her singing "Another Man Done Gone." She looked at me surprised and then pleased, and then she enveloped me in her great velvet arms. I felt about six years old, and my heart didn't get back to normal for a week.¹³

One can only imagine how Odetta may have described this same meeting or what must have passed through her mind in that moment between surprise and pleasure upon seeing a young, white-presenting, relatively unknown singer imitate her. One can only imagine what Baez must have sounded like imitating Odetta, as there is no known Baez recording of the harrowing chant of "Another Man Done Gone." Did she sing the song in the piercing soprano that was already her signature by this moment? Or did she truly "imitate" Odetta as she would later do comical, spot-on impressions of Bob Dylan, aiming for her deep register and pained tone? Did this

¹³ Ibid., 59.

nineteen-year-old with a passion for social justice but a professed lack of interest in the backstories of these songs deliver this most intense of ballads with appropriate gravity?

What we can say, even without knowing the answers to any of these questions, is that in this critical meeting in music history, Odetta was simultaneously validated and disempowered. A young woman stood before her, embodying her, striving to become some version of her, sincerely interested in respecting and relaying the history of racial trauma she sang. What is more, this rising star came from and appealed to a non-Black world and could therefore help Odetta's songs and stories reach further into the white world she had already been working to educate musically. At the same time, Baez's fair skin could not have been painless to Odetta. The mentor-mentee relationship did not exist for the folk women. If there could only be "one chick per show" on any given night of performance, there could surely only be one "Queen of Folk" on the national scene. If Baez was going to incorporate elements of Odetta's aesthetic into her own persona—and it was clear from this moment that she was—then Odetta's best chance for survival would be to be better at her own act. Odetta was surely aware of these dynamics after years as a Black woman in this white-dominated business, but a young Baez was determined to find only warmth and laughter in the whole situation, especially in the woman whose title she so clearly challenged. The expectation that Odetta would be endlessly giving, a trope against which she had built her career, seemed to be following her in the form of a naïve, excitable, and, for a brief time longer, largely unknown Joan Baez.

Newport Folk 1959

If their Chicago meeting was a warm-up, the first Newport Folk Festival several months later put Baez and Odetta's relationship on full display. A watershed moment in the folk revival, the festival took place in Rhode Island over three days in July 1959. Having noted the growing interest in and profitability of folk music at his Boston club, Storyville, jazz musician George Wein had decided to launch a sister event to the wildly popular Newport Jazz Festival, which he had started in 1954. Echoing descriptions of the Café Bizarre launch, Wein noted that Odetta was critical to the event's very existence:

If I had to pick one person responsible for the establishment of the Newport Folk Festival in 1959, it would be Odetta [...] We had Sunday afternoon sets at Storyville in those days and I saw that hundreds of young people were filling in the club, buying \$1 ginger ales, just to hear this magnificent artist whose beauty and power of self-presentation reached deeply into their musical minds.¹⁴

Though she was the star attraction, behind the scenes, Odetta was quietly negotiating the uncharted territory of having a young woman like Baez on the scene. After her enormously successful run at the Gate of Horn—a test of sorts—Baez was also invited to the Newport Folk Festival to sing during Bob Gibson's set as his guest. Not only would Baez be there; Odetta seems to have been placed in an ambiguous role as her mentor-caretaker for the journey. From their home in Chicago, Odetta, her new husband Dan Gordon, and her latest bass player picked Baez up at her family home in Massachusetts on the eve of the festival. There, Baez's mother asked

¹⁴ Zak, *Odetta*, 76.

Odetta to watch over Joan during what was sure to be a boisterous event.¹⁵ The promise may have been very casual or even comical, and Odetta may have been nothing but happy to take Baez under her wing at this point. However, an uncomfortable dynamic between the two women was crystallizing incrementally. Juxtaposed against Baez, Odetta was suddenly older, responsible, and motherly despite having no children of her own. In contrast, Baez was cast as innocent, in need of an older woman's protection and guidance in the notoriously masculine world of music. The counterculture was relatively tame in this moment, with themes of free love and drugs not yet unleashed, but Joan Senior clearly trusted Odetta to shield Baez from trouble. Again, this was not the typical mentor-mentee dynamic between the men of folk, where untold rowdiness and sexual freedom were an expected part of the lifestyle, and fame was not limited to one party at a time. It is hard to imagine a mother extracting a promise from Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, or Leadbelly that he keep an eye on her son. Men did not face the well-worn fate Odetta now faced even while she had never truly inhabited its first step: the clear trajectory from ingenue, to desexualized matron, to forgotten star.

An estimated fourteen thousand people attended the first Newport Folk Festival. Though there was not a formal headliner, Odetta and Pete Seeger were featured on the first page of the program, reflecting the hierarchy that had been in place for several years; Odetta was still undeniably the reigning Queen of Folk. Seeger closed the main show on Saturday night, but Odetta's set was directly before his and

¹⁵ This anecdote can be found in nearly identical variations in Baez, *And a Voice to Sing With*, 59-62; Thomson, *Joan Baez*, 39-41; Zak, *Odetta*, 79.

several songs longer. She sang the Leadbelly song “Cotton Fields,” the spiritual “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” the Irish rebel lament “Foggy Dew,” the work song suite “I’ve Been Driving on Bald Mountain/Water Boy,” and Guthrie’s “Great Historical Bum.” As an encore, she performed “Another Man Done Gone” and a cowboy song called “Muleskinner Blues.” Though just a fraction of her repertoire, these songs were emblematic of a standard Odetta set as of 1959. There were stories spanning diverse racial and national identities—stories of foreign wars, underdogs’ battles, back-breaking labor, travel, slavery, and imprisonment. In “Cotton Fields” Odetta sang lines about being a baby in a working mother’s arms: “When I was a little baby, my mama would rock me in the cradle in them old cotton fields back home.” Other than that, there were no stories of home or motherhood. As usual, there were no love songs.

Baez’s performance on the following evening, Sunday, sent shock waves through the folk world. Bob Gibson called her up, and she appeared, in her words, looking like “the Original Bohemian” with a guitar, no makeup, an orange crocheted Mexican shawl called a rebozo, and “dangling earrings like my heroine, Odetta.” It had rained the entire festival, and some accounts have Baez taking the stage barefoot with mud coating her feet. In her memory, she wore her “gladiator sandals” (which she also calls “Bible sandals”) that laced up below the knee. Whatever the case, her persona as an innocent young woman not quite of this corrupt place or time came through most powerfully in the two songs she sang in duet with Gibson: “Virgin Mary (Had One Son)” and “Jordan River.” A song with a beautiful yet chilling melody and hauntingly slow pace, “Virgin Mary” overtly linked Baez with Mary herself with

simple, repetitive lines, “Oh, guess I’ll call him Jesus” and “Oh, Glory hallelujah. Oh, pretty little baby.” She then retired her guitar to clap and sing “Jordan River,” an African American spiritual. The song continued religious themes while bringing the tempo up—apparently at Gibson’s behest—eliciting gospel-style handclaps from the crowd. As if she were a member of a church choir, Baez’s repeated each line Gibson sang and added higher and higher pitched backing vocals. In the context of her budding fame in what had been Odetta’s world, it is hard to miss the layered meaning of Baez’s cry, “I want my crown! / I want my crown!”

It is of note that Baez’s Newport performance was a slightly different version of the act for which she had gained recognition in Boston; appearing with an established male singing partner instead of solo enhanced her credibility without marring her virginal image, for Gibson was markedly older than Baez and known to be a married man. If anything, the duet set-up would have placated those unprepared to see Baez as she usually performed, alone and in full control. It would seem that the choice of spirituals as opposed to Baez’s regular tragic love ballads could have had a similar nullifying impact, denying Baez any sexual agency while rendering her immensely desirable in all her purity. Finally, the short set sandwiched within Gibson’s own set did not give Baez chance to do her usual banter from the stage or to integrate any of the “lighter” songs she had learned audiences wanted; one joke from the rather impish Baez could have shattered the entire angelic illusion achieved that night. (Even one true statement could have. At a Boston show just months before, she had attempted to win over a gang of Hell’s Angels in the audience by telling them she too rode motorcycles, which was, in fact,

true.¹⁶) Though Baez would (and already had) reinhabit folk womanhood after Odetta's great intervention, her Newport Folk debut was not particularly revolutionary from a gender perspective—except, perhaps, for her sandals or lack thereof and the underlying fact that she was a young, single woman on the eve of a cultural revolution much larger than herself.

Folk's Virgin Queen (Reactions/Reception)

The folk community was, as ever, ready to document and discuss this moment in its history essentially as it unfolded, a tendency that allowed dominant folklorists to control narratives with authority now generally reserved for music journalists and, increasingly, fans. Workshops and seminars happened concurrently with performances, with one on Sunday morning called, "What Is American Folk Music?" drawing a substantial amount of attention. An argument broke out between panelists during their discussion of Odetta's version of "Another Man Done Gone" the previous night. Alan Lomax asserted, "The woman from whom the song was collected lives in Alabama, her name is Vera Hall, and she's a dishwasher. She's the one we should be hearing."¹⁷ He was pointing to the shift occurring in folk in general, the influx of trained performers from urban areas who had not necessarily been rooted in the local traditions that had created and sustained their songs. He was not the only one to decry the infiltration of "showbiz." In fact, many leading

¹⁶ Baez, *And a Voice To Sing With*, 55-56.

¹⁷ Robert Shelton, "Folk Music Festival," *The Nation*, August 1, 1959. While there are live recordings of the festival acts, there is not a full recording or transcript of this workshop available as of now, so I have relied on details in Shelton's review.

folklorists framed this first national gathering of folk musicians as an uncomfortable step toward a more “inauthentic” scene: the “true folk” there were out of their home-spun element on these elaborate stages, and the urban “entertainers” were stealing those stages left and right.¹⁸

Anyone making claims of inauthenticity fueled the longstanding folk paradox by which critics and scholars insisted upon the existence of a celebrated yet eternally separate category of “folk.”¹⁹ However, in Lomax’s case, wielding the criticism particularly against Odetta was rather obtuse in its addition of sexism and racism to folk’s usual elitism. Pete Seeger, who had performed just before her, was immune from this same critique despite his solidly upper-middle class background. Cynthia Gooding, Barbara Dane, and Martha Schlamme—all white women who performed there—also seemed immune despite their middle-class lives. One cannot help but sense that attacks leveled against Odetta’s authenticity were, at least in part, born of the latent desire to keep an increasingly successful Black woman down; or at least born of an inability to conceive of Black femininity as anything other than a poor, elderly woman singing while washing dishes in a rural setting.

¹⁸ Izzy Young, “Newport Folk Festival” in *Caravan* No. 18 (August-September 1959), 25-27. Robert Shelton wrote in his *New York Times* review, “The festival is faced with a problem in bringing into focus a certain type of singer who may have been more at home in a kitchen or at a small concert hall. The gracious and delicate work of Jean Ritchie and John Jacob Niles and the raw-boned song-sermons of the Rev. Gary Davis have been heard to better effect in more intimate surroundings or on disks, but their face at a folk festival is undisputed. If jazz had its difficulties moving from the bistro to the concert hall, it is not too surprising that folk music may have problems in shifting milieus.”

¹⁹ See Chapter 2 thoughts on “Outsider Populism.”

The poet Langston Hughes, a longtime fan of the Newport Jazz Festival, was at this sister festival as a member of the board. No doubt attuned to racism at play in this world, given his love of the similarly white-dominated Harlem cabaret scene, he was inclined to defend Odetta's skill as a performer as opposed to fixating on her less-than-miserable background. In an interview after the heated panel, he asked, "How do we know that Vera Hall could do as well here as she has recording in her own home?"²⁰ The critic Robert Shelton, at the start of his run as folk's most famous chronicler, also countered old guard folklorists' takes, writing in his *New York Times* review,

The focus at the first concert was on Odetta, whose mahogany-hued, sonorous voice offered what this listener felt was the crowning performance of the week-end. Odetta began a bit reservedly, like Gulliver walking slowly to avoid stepping on the Lilliputians. By the time she got to "The Foggy Dew," appropriately sung as a heavy-mist swirled around her, she was overwhelmingly in form. Here was folk music identification married to theatrical vocal artistry at its best.

Though no one was going as far as to explicate the inherent blurriness between "the folk" and these new "entertainers," Hughes and Shelton at least showed a new openness to the ideas of craft and entertainment within the folk world—that is, a sincere willingness to find authenticity within and through the art of performance. "Theatrical" with its connotations of dishonesty was and is an unfair descriptor to apply to one performer over another—who is to say that Vera Hall's singing was not also theatrical?—but Shelton at least found this perceived theatricality to be an asset instead of a point of weakness in the folk context. Odetta did not have the authenticity of the backwoods or a dusty farm, he seemed to say, but she had tapped

²⁰ Langston Hughes qtd. in Shelton, "Folk Music Festival."

into the more mysterious, ultimately more liberating truth that could come from singing on a stage before thousands on a misty night. By applying that openness to Odetta—in fact, celebrating her—these critics implicitly supported women in the leap folk performance was making from centering impoverished, anonymous singers to launching national stars. The folk in general, with the folk women at the forefront, were slowly being freed from their romanticized place at the bottom of society.

Joan Baez had not yet made her Newport Debut at the time of this subtle debate between folk purists like Lomax and folk's newest generation. Nor would she attract anywhere near the amount of attention as Odetta that summer. However, there were surely signs of the dynamic to come in the brief mentions and reviews she did receive following Newport. Shelton wrote, "A star was born at the first Newport Folk Festival in the person of Joan Baez, a young soprano with a thrilling, lush vibrato and fervid and well-controlled projection." Izzy Young wrote in his Folklore Center Newsletter, "Bob brought out a young lady, Joan Baez to join him in his last two numbers we want to hear more of her." Simply put, Baez was not attacked as inauthentic. No folk purist called for a haggard or humble version of Baez to provide some "truer" rendition of her songs. The disparity is especially striking considering that Baez bore the supposed trappings of inauthenticity even more prominently than Odetta. Aesthetically, she sang with the same kind of polished, operatic (read: "theatrical") vibrato that critics decried in her counterpart. Biographically, her background was more privileged than Odetta's, more distant

from the roots of the songs she sang. She was vocal about her lack of interest in the history of these songs. Baez was an “entertainer” through and through.

Few ever would demand someone truer than Joan Baez, while claims of inauthenticity would slowly chip away at Odetta.²¹ There is more to the story of Baez’s rise and Odetta’s plateau, but a brief summary of both women’s careers following Baez’s appearance on the national scene seems apt at this point. In the remaining years of the folk revival, from summer 1959 through summer 1965, Odetta would release eleven more studio albums, switching to several blues albums by 1961 and covers of Bob Dylan songs by 1963 on *Odetta Sings Folk Songs*. Despite a switch in management from Vanguard to the much more mainstream RCA Victor label, none of these albums would crack the Pop Chart’s Top 100, and only *Odetta Sings Folk Songs* would make it on the chart at all, coming in at number 75.

Meanwhile, after Newport Folk, Baez would go on to record four studio albums and two live albums between 1960 through 1965, all under her extremely casual Vanguard contract. Each album would find its way to the Pop Chart’s Top 10.

Financially, Baez would reach a networth of 11 million over the course of her career. Odetta would lose monumental amounts of money and energy fighting a series of lawsuits from her original friend-turned-manager Dean Gitter.²² Another manager, Albert Grossman, would let her down in 1962 with his move from her home base of Chicago to New York and shift in focus to his new, more lucrative folk trio, Peter, Paul, & Mary. Baez would retain remarkable creative control over her career and

²¹ Kelly, “Folk as the Sound of Self-Liberation.”

²² Ibid.

withstand the impact songwriters would soon have. Odetta would lose popularity as “cover artists” went out of style. She would lose more time and energy to several film roles whose racist parameters she ultimately felt unable to fight.

Baez would encounter her own struggles—panic attacks before shows, a painful relationship with Bob Dylan, the pressures of heightened fame, and certainly waves of sexism associated with the role she would play in the civil rights movement. Furthermore, some of Odetta’s choices were arguably risky—to branch into Hollywood film, into the blues, into high-stakes record deals and known sharks like Grossman. But it is still undeniable that America embraced Baez in a way it never embraced Odetta and that it did so, in large part, because she was the first young and thin non-Black woman to walk down the path Odetta had blazed. Immediately, as of 1959, the entire folk industry was on the search for “the next Joan Baez” without ever recognizing they were, in a way, looking for the next, next Odetta.

In 1962, Baez would appear on the cover of *Time*, alone, wearing pants, holding an acoustic guitar between her legs. At the Newport Folk Festival in 1963, she would iconically hold hands with Bob Dylan and a circle of other folk stars, singing freedom songs to close the weekend. At that festival, for reasons unknown, Odetta watched from the audience. In 2010, at a White House celebration of music from the civil rights era, Michelle Obama would ask Baez to sing “If I Had a Hammer.” Baez would decline, later reporting to *Rolling Stone*, “That is the most annoying song. I told them, ‘If I had a hammer – I’d hit myself on the head. Ain’t gonna do it.’”

Here would be the place to insert Odetta's own view of the painful transfer of power I have traced in this chapter, to corroborate my projections with thoughts from the performer herself. But, perhaps not surprisingly at this point, those thoughts do not exist on any known record. The closest we can get is a 1984 interview in which she described a moment between herself and Baez:

...We as blacks can be overlooked, even now, within the industry. I do know if I were white or orange with whatever it is that I have going for me, I would be right out there on the top of the heap — although I might not have the same things going for me if I were white or orange. I know that, and I've lived with that all through my life. At one point, it infuriated me that whatever talent I had was overlooked.

There was one time in Nashville, when Joan Baez was there recording. She came over to see me at the club where I was working, and after the performance we were talking. I said, "You know, it's about time that I told you some of the things that I feel. I would not want to cut down on the popularity that you have, but there are times when I get insane with fury when I see how this system is working on us." And she said, "I know exactly what you mean." I had to do that because my resentment toward the system was getting ready to show itself in my relationship with her, and she had nothing to do with it.²³

And then there is Odetta's biographer, Ian Zak's, similar contribution. He writes,

"I would think that at some point it would have been difficult for her when I was so much in the limelight," Baez recalled of Odetta. "Cuz she was the Queen of Folk to me; that's how I thought of her, and then years later I realized I sort of had usurped the title. You couldn't usurp what she did." Baez didn't remember the handing-over of that crown ever being an issue between them, but Odetta did, and she carried a grudge around for years before finally baring hurt to Baez, probably sometime in the late 1960s or early 1970s. "Finally we were together, and I said, 'I need to talk to you.' And I told her about the resentments that I'd felt, and didn't feel that she was the focus of it; but I really did resent that the whole of society did whatever it did or didn't do for me, and she said she understood. But I had to tell her because whenever I'd meet her there was this barrier that she didn't work for, she didn't earn it."

Left with few other options as a Black female performer in front of mostly white crowds, Odetta had channeled racialized power and a respectable, if

²³ Rubin, *The Magic and the Power*.

restrained and underappreciated, version of femininity. She broke many folk conventions simply by avoiding them and inserting her own more flexible take on folk performance. If Odetta had torn down the rigid confines of folk womanhood in her time in the limelight, Baez now stepped in to inhabit fully a new kind of womanhood.

Conclusion

Navigating the time-worn intricacies of folk performance in concert with post-war expectations of femininity, Odetta, Joan Baez, and many other women of the early stage of the folk revival not only helped usher America into an era of greater racial equality. They also became transgressive members of their gender, setting an example for their fans, who happened to be the nation's largest generation yet. While this dissertation has drawn a comparative race-based analysis of the femininity embodied by Odetta versus Joan Baez, it is useful to zoom out and end on their commonalities as Folk Women. Just as girl groups began to dominate popular music in, 1959, the moment where this dissertation ends, Odetta and Baez began to dominate the alternative world of folk together. They sang political songs, embodied independent womanhood through their solo performances, and would both increasingly use their platforms as folksingers to participate in the civil rights movement. For women around the country and world, these two female singers broke through societal norms to elevate the amount of choice, respect, and creativity that women could envision themselves claiming. The spirit of folk feminism that they forged would, in time, give way to feminist movement and women's liberation movement in the United States.

The main theme of folk feminism that I have emphasized, especially in Odetta's case, is that the experience of intersecting forces of racism and sexism within the folk movement was a double-edged sword, one that caused women deep personal pain and life-long self-consciousness, but one that also led them to

repertoires and performance style through which they asserted their dignity on stages throughout the world. Similarly, though the folk community buoyed these women up in celebration of their deft ability to educate audiences about the history of America through song.

The same attitudes imbued with racial tokenism (Odetta seen and celebrated *only* for the color of her skin) and sexism (Odetta anointed the “Queen of Folk” but not seen fully as a woman due to her race) that led to her rise would also eventually lead to her fall. Through many career trials within the folk world, including the fact that she did not live to see the scholarly community adequately recognize her immense role in the development of American popular music, Odetta would remain steadfast in her insistence that the performance of folk songs had been the defensive power she needed to survive the onslaught of racism she faced in life. Ian Zak published *Odetta: A Life in Music and Protest*, the first full-length biography of this monumental performer, in the spring of 2020, just as I began to write the chapters I had sketched out on her. It has been an honor to synthesize Zak’s research with my own on the folk revival in order to add one of the many analytical perspectives her story deserves. I have found that understanding Odetta’s role in the folk revival is the linchpin to understanding the women folk performers of this era overall.

*

There is much scholarly work yet to be done on the folk women. This topic can be both expanded and deepened, with angles to suit a diverse array of writers. There are, of course, other stages of the folk revival with their corresponding prominent women in need of attention: following/contemporaneous to Odetta and

Baez, there was Judy Collins and Mary Travers; following them, there was Joni Mitchell. In the era of Mitchell's rise, folk exploded in countless directions, with women's music being one of the most relevant to this field of study. Many of these women, most prominently Janis Ian, got their start on the folk scene. Though wildly masculine, the era of late-1960s and early-1970s rock 'n' roll is also worth studying in the context of folk feminism. Through this project, I have come to see that these movements (60s folk and 70s rock) are more deeply connected than they may seem on the surface. If the folk women were the trailblazers of the folk revival, as I have argued, and if the folk revival was a turning point in American popular music—it follows, to me, that the folk women need to receive more credit than they have been given for the careers of, say, Jimi Hendrix, Mick Jagger, John Lennon, etc. As I see it, this electrified and hedonistic revolution in music began with a few women brave enough to reject the inanity of Fifties pop, pick up guitars, sing political, poetic songs, and propel a whole musical community to stardom. They made not only popular music but women in popular music a serious force. Thanks to these Folk Women and their bold, innovative use of age-old folk songs, today we have intelligent, seriously political, and fiercely independent female artists to lead the way forward.

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