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Analyzing the Interpretation of the Civil War in Bluegrass Music

Abstract

While the Civil War has long fit well thematically within the existing bluegrass idiom, the way that bluegrass has approached the war over time has changed greatly. Despite bluegrass largely originating from areas with little enthusiasm for the Confederacy during the Civil War, and the genre not emphasizing partisan aspects of the war for several decades, several cultural changes culminated in the late 1960s to turn the genre on a heavily pro-Confederate tilt, with numerous songs in the early- to-mid 1970s glorifying the Confederate States of America and its leaders, while also emphasizing Lost Cause arguments. To see how this unexpected bias arrived in the music, this paper first investigates the way that proto bluegrass genres honored the Civil War, and then traces the impact of the popular folk music movement before finally looking at popular political movements and their impact on the topic.

Keywords

Civil War, Bluegrass, History, Musicology, Reconciliation, Emancipation, Country Music

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ANALYZING THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CIVIL WAR IN BLUEGRASS MUSIC

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The Civil War has had a lasting impact on all facets of American society and culture, but one of its more counter-intuitive results was its influence on bluegrass and the musical memories of generations of bluegrass fans. Though several studies have investigated the war's role in country music,[1] none have focused specifically on its role in bluegrass. This is especially pertinent given the divisive nature of the war's legacy in Appalachia, where much of bluegrass music originated in the mid-twentieth century. Bluegrass has typically viewed the Civil War through a reconciliationist lens, focusing on themes that fit well within the bluegrass idiom—such as separation from one's homeland or the loss of one's family—rather than the genesis and other ramifications of the war. Moreover, the racial and social volatility of the 1960s led to an increase in Confederate nostalgia and identification with the Old South in bluegrass music. While this pro-Confederate wave has since been replaced by a return to reconciliationist themes, there also

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[1] See, e.g., Andrew K. Smith and James E. Akenson, "The Civil War in Country Music Tradition," in *Country Music Goes to War*, eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 1-25; Phoebe Strom, "Defining Dixie: Southern Political Discourse in Country Music," Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies, Rhodes College, 2013.

exists a growing body of work with emancipationist messages.

The interpretation of the Civil War in bluegrass is also of interest due to the genre's musicological origins. A modern reinterpretation of traditional folk music, blended with elements of country, jazz, and gospel, bluegrass has often been defined by its conservatism. When gospel music began shifting to a more pop-based approach in the late 1940s and early 1950s, acolytes of traditional, unadorned gospel singing flocked to the burgeoning bluegrass scene. Accordingly, bluegrass has remained more openly religious than perhaps any other genre not formally tied to a confession. Its conservative tenor famously led urban folk artists to supplant bluegrass with their own brands of "popular folk" and blues in the 1960s.[2] But the popularity of bluegrass on college campuses in the same decade, along with the development of "folknik" communities and the "newgrass" movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s, worked to introduce a new wave of anti-establishment (often non-Southern) mindsets. This led some fundamentalists, including Don Pierce, longtime owner of the label Starday Records, to eschew bluegrass for its association with "people of doubtful loyalty."[3] As such, bluegrass has found relatively

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[2] Jens Lund and R. Serge Denisoff, "The Folk Music Revival and the Counter Culture: Contributions and Contradictions," *The Journal of American Folklore* 84, no. 334 (1971): 401-02.

[3] Quoted in Jens Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," in *The Sounds of Social Change*, eds. R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972), 90.

recent popularity with both conservative and progressive audiences, in a musical as well as a political sense.

The mountain origins of bluegrass are equally important to this investigation. While the popular narrative of its emergence from Appalachia is oversimplified, it is true that the earliest bluegrass musicians and much of its source material originated in the rural mountain regions of the former Confederacy. Interestingly, many of these enclaves housed strong pockets of Southern Unionism during the Civil War, though these feelings were not universal. Given that the birthplace of bluegrass tended prominently toward Unionist sentiment compared to the remainder of the South, the fact that the genre later took to Confederate nostalgia becomes all the more surprising.

Before analyzing bluegrass itself, we must first examine the role of the Civil War in the musical forms that preceded it. Since more than fifth of the material in the bluegrass repertoire is drawn from the well of American folk music, it is important to understand how the conflict was received in folk songs.[4] Additionally, it is important to examine how the genre typically known as “hillbilly music” interpreted the war, as bluegrass is generally understood to be an outgrowth of this movement.

The Civil War in Folk Music: 1861-1945

Folk music from the Civil War, whether songs invented by soldiers on the march or popular music known by entire

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[4] L. Mayne Smith, “An Introduction to Bluegrass,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (1965): 250.

armies, had a decidedly mixed impact on Appalachian repertoires. Despite the war's destructive consequences in the region, folklorist Newman Ivey White noted in 1952, "It seems strange that there are so few Civil War ballads in the mountains."[5] Indeed, if one takes western North Carolina as representative, songs relating to the Civil War did not seem to comprise an overly important part of mountain repertoires in the early and mid-twentieth century. White's *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* found only "half a dozen pieces" stemming directly from the war.[6]

The *Brown* collection illustrates the complicated history of Confederate loyalty in Appalachia and the ways mountain residents interpreted the Civil War. A song like Pearl Webb's "Drummer Boy of Shiloh" from 1921 fit well within the existing body of mountain folk music, which has long valorized family values, as well as ballads of violent death and murder.[7] The lyrics neglect to specify which side the drummer boy fought for, focusing instead on his death. They detail his hopes of finding an eternal resting place: "He raised his eyes and clasped his hands / And prayed before he died." The song also centers the impact of a fellow soldier's death on his surviving unit: "Each soldier wept like a child / Stout heart and brave they were."[8] Similar motifs can be found in I. G. Greer's 1913 rendition of "The Last Fierce

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[5] *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, ed. Newman Ivey White (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1952), 289.
[6] *Brown Collection*, 488.
[7] Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," 249.
[8] Pearl Webb, "Drummer Boy of Shiloh," collected 1921, in *Brown Collection*, 537.

Charge" (also known as "The Two Soldiers"), though this song features explicitly partisan lyrics. In cases such as these, words such "Rebel" or "Yankee" could easily be interchanged with one another when adjusting for syllable and meter.[9] This agrees with Phoebe Strom's recent claim that Appalachian war songs "transcended the boundaries of North and South" to describe a common experience on either side of the Mason-Dixon.[10]

Also worthy of note are the remakes of preexisting folk songs undertaken during the Civil War itself. Smith and Akenson cite the reworking of popular songs on the part of both Confederate and Union soldiers. In particular they note a Confederate reskin of "The Yellow Rose of Texas," which laments the defeat of General John Bell Hood and the recapture of Nashville in 1864: "You may talk about your Beauregard / And sing of General Lee / But the gallant Hood of Texas / Played hell in Tennessee."[11] In a similar vein, a Union parody of "Just Before the Battle, Mother" mocks Rebel soldiers for "drinking mountain dew" and contains verses on Confederate desertion.[12] The *Brown* collection lists parallel examples, such as an adaptation of a seventeenth-century broadside entitled "The Soldier's

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[9] I. G. Greer, "The Two Soldiers," collected 1913, in *Brown Collection*, 539-40.
[10] Strom, "Defining Dixie," 8.
[11] "The Yellow Rose of Texas," collection year unknown, in *Country Music Goes to War*, 3; Smith and Akenson, "The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition," 3-4.
[12] "Just Before the Battle, Mother," collection year unknown, in *Country Music Goes to War*, 4.

Wooing," in which a rich father disapproves of his daughter's engagement to a poor young soldier.[13]

Mountaineers could also compose their own songs about the war, though this was generally less common than reworking preexisting songs; additionally, few of these original songs were ever transcribed of recorded. Speaking of what he termed such "native" American songs, folk music historian D. K. Wilgus notes that "few old ballads native to the area have survived."[14] One example of a Civil War folk song that did survive, however, is "Going Across the Mountain," recorded by Frank Proffitt in 1962. Written by Proffitt's grandfather, Wiley Proffitt, the song is distinctly pro-Union in nature: "Going across the mountain / To join the boys in blue." In spite of this, the lyrics focus primarily on the war's impact on the lives of soldiers and their families rather than partisanship.[15]

As indicated above, Appalachian repertoires featured an amalgam of material with varying degrees of pro- and anti-Union sentiment. The extent of Confederate sympathy in mountain folk music can best be summed up with the song "The Texas Ranger," collected in Boone, North Carolina in the early twentieth century. "The Texas Ranger" originally detailed an unspecified conflict between American Indians and White settlers in Texas; through the process of oral

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[13] Maude Sutton, "The Soldier's Wooing," collection year unknown, in *Brown Collection*, 289.
[14] D. K. Wilgus, "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly," *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 328 (1970): 159.
[15] Frank Proffitt, "Going Across the Mountain," *Frank Proffitt*, Folk-Legacy Records FSA-1, 1962, vinyl.

transmission, the army was transferred from its typical route toward San Antonio and the Rio Grande, and instead "marched from Western Texas / to old Virginia's Land," trading "Injuns" for "Yankees" and arrow for bullets.[16]

The representation of the Civil War in mountain folk music was therefore anything but unified. Musicians drew on a variety of sources and modified songs as they saw fit, reflecting the varied opinions on the war in Appalachia. The region was sharply divided between three groups: Unionists, Confederates, and those who felt the war did not apply to them.[17] The development of folk music also reflects how many residents of Appalachia felt about the loss of the Confederacy, as many cared more about the lived experience of the war's impact rather than ideological considerations.

All this changed with the Tin Pan Alley era of music production in the 1870s. The trend of popular music glorifying Southern culture began with Stephen Foster in the years just before the Civil War and reached its apex in the following decades. Phoebe Strom, summarizing the work of music historian Bill C. Malone, argues that this obsession with antebellum Southern life was an attempt to "mediate deep societal rifts along economic, racial, and regional lines," adding that "the longing to return to Dixie evident in so many of these songs likely expresses a wish for the first

[16] "The Texas Ranger," collection year unknown, in *Brown Collection*, 545-46.

[17] Wilma A. Dunaway, "Civil War in the Mountain South," Slavery and Emancipation in the Mountain South: Evidence, Sources, and Methods (Virginia Tech Faculty Archives, 2013).

southern migrants, especially black migrants, to leave the North."[18]

These themes continued through the late 1920s, when hillbilly music first entered on the national scene. The first recorded example of what is now commonly referred to as a hillbilly musician appeared in 1929, with Eck Robertson and Henry Gilliland recording multiple sides for the begrudging Victor Talking Machine Company. Much has been made about the roots of early hillbilly musicians and their ties to the Confederacy—Robertson and Gilliland even purportedly arrived at their first recording session clad in Confederate dress uniforms, as they had just attended a Confederate veteran's reunion. Similarly, popular old-time fiddler Fiddlin' John Carson was a noted member of the Ku Klux Klan, and frequently preformed at fiddlers' conventions organized by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Yet several historians have downplayed these connections; in Smith and Akenson's summation, "Conventions of old Rebel soldiers and fiddlers sometimes went hand in hand," not because they necessarily supported one another, but because their participants often tended to overlap.[19]

More difficult to ignore, however, were the political activities of many early hillbilly artists. After the 1915 lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish factory worker and suspected murderer of Mary Phagan in Atlanta, Fiddlin'

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[18] Strom, "Defining Dixie," 6-7.
[19] Smith and Akenson, "The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition," 7.

John Carson reportedly took to the steps of the city courthouse and sang, "The Christian doors of heaven have sent Leo Frank to hell;" this eventually became the folk ballad "Little Mary Phagan." Carson's case was hardly unique; populist politicians of the 1910s often used traditional music to draw rural support,[20] and old-time fiddling was widely employed in the campaigns of radical politicians, including "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman and the White supremacist James K. Vardman.[21] Even more indicative of hillbilly musicians' conservative leanings were the topical anti-evolution songs of the 1920s, such as Vernon Dalhart's 1925 song "The John T Scopes Trial: The Old Religion's Better After All." Written following the titular "monkey trial," which saw populist politician William Jennings Bryan represent the state of Tennessee, Dalhart's lyrics railed against evolution and the removal of God from public schoolhouses.[22] A rash of similar hillbilly songs, including Uncle Dave Macon's "The Bible's True" from 1926, were published around the same time.[23]

Fundamentalist songs like Dalhart's, as well as pro-South songs such as Uncle Dave Macon's "I'se Gwine Back to Dixie" from 1927, undoubtedly sold well among the rural audiences they targeted; however, these songs did not

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[20] Lund, "Fundamentalism, Racism, and Political Reaction in Country Music," 83.
[21] Stein, "Living Right and Being Free," 9.
[22] Vernon Dalhart, "The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion's Better After All)," track A1 on *The John T. Scopes Trial (The Old Religion's Better After All)*, Edison Records 51609-R, 1925, vinyl.
[23] Uncle Dave Macon, "The Bible's True," track A1 on *The Bible's True*, Vocalion 15322, 1926, vinyl.

necessarily represent the ideals of Appalachian audiences.[24] Instead, they were often performances required by artists' record labels, who believed such songs would sell based on the popular "race-based" music advertising techniques of the time. As Phoebe Strom has written, "Hillbilly music was far less overtly pro-Southern than the mainstream music of the time," adding that the shoehorning of musicians to play stereotypically Southern songs was caused by a "pre-established and widely popular conception of tradition."[25]

As can be seen, "native" Appalachian folk music focused primarily on the hardships of the Civil War and its impact on people's daily lives; it was hillbilly music that initiated the overt glorification of the Old South. Neither, however, focused greatly on the war, concentrating instead on the lives of common people and how the war changed traditional lifestyles. Hillbilly musicians and Tin Pan Alley songwriters in particular often focused on plantation life or the old homestead while neglecting to mention slavery or other issues surrounding the Civil War. With a review of the war's impact on the two main genres that lyrically preceded bluegrass music, the reception of the Civil War in bluegrass can be more clearly understood.

The Civil War in Bluegrass: 1945-2000

The music of the "classic" ensemble of Bill Monroe and His Bluegrass Boys, which first formed in 1938, has set the

[24] Uncle Dave Macon, "I'se Gwine Back to Dixie," track A1 on *I'se Gwine Back to Dixie*, Vocalion 5157, 1927, vinyl.
[25] Strom, "Defining Dixie," 6; 8.

repertoire for every bluegrass musician to follow, with many of his early releases becoming "standards" of the genre. Though an outgrowth of hillbilly music—due in part to the genre's movement toward pop in the 1940s—bluegrass heavily relied on one thematic element of hillbilly music in particular: songs focusing on the singer's rural home, and especially those that yearned nostalgically for a home now lost.[26] This is of prime importance, as the migration of Appalachian farmers to urban areas during the Great Depression and the Second World War was a major factor in development of the bluegrass idiom. As historian and musician Steve Watt has put it, "Bluegrass is *not* the music of Appalachian farmers… It *is* the music of these people and their descendants who have been forced off their farms."[27]

Bluegrass also continued to rely on themes already popular in Appalachian folk music, including death, the daily struggle of life, and salvation. A look into Bill Monroe's early discography immediately reveals each one of these values, with "Mule Skinner Blues" being a work song, "True Life Blues" and "Rocky Road Blues" focusing on the struggles of daily life, and "Shake Mother's Hand" and "I'm Traveling On" carrying religious messages. Moreover, "I'm Going Back to Old Kentucky" represents the bluegrass artist's longing for return to a rural lifestyle.

As these songs indicate, bluegrass was initially a music of enduring the present and yearning for the past. As

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[26] Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," 249.
[27] Steve Watt, "Letter to a (Hard-Driving) Bluegrass Band," *The Radical Teacher* 3 (1976): 32.

such, bluegrass musicians would have no reason to honor the Confederacy, despite their glorification of the South in general. Though singers missed their old communities and expressed those longings through music, the Confederacy, along with similar topics such as slavery or plantation life, were marginal in their collective memories. This is perfectly logical; after all, it was the secession initiated by the planter class that wrought such misery in the mountains, even as Appalachia was a region noted for its distinct lack of slavery. Early bluegrass songs focused instead on love, life, and religion, rather than the Civil War. These themes were followed by most every major bluegrass band in the genre's early years, continuing into the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1959, the folk movement began to zero in on bluegrass music as its popular style of choice. The American folk revival accepted bluegrass as a legitimate style of folk for three reasons: first, most bluegrass instruments were acoustic and unamplified; secondly, many of the songs played by bluegrass bands were shared with the emerging folk movement, as they were drawn from the broader folk tradition; and finally, as bluegrass historian Neil Rosenberg has written, the genre's "instrumental styles… were seen as exciting innovations based on folk styles."[28] Shortly after the folk movement discovered bluegrass, themes surrounding the Civil War began cropping up in bluegrass songs.

The popularity of bluegrass with folk-based groups was not directly responsible for the renewed emergence of

[28] Neil Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style: The Emergence of Bluegrass," *The Journal of American Folklore* 80, no. 316 (1967): 149.

Confederate imagery. Rather, it was brought about through the creation of new war ballads by folk musicians. Former history teacher and songwriter Jimmy Driftwood is credited with the start of this movement after the release of his single "The Battle of New Orleans" in 1959 and its subsequent cover by Johnny Horton. Driftwood's success led to a small spate of folk-style historical ballads, most notably Johnny Horton's "Johnny Reb," first written in by Merle Kilgore in 1959.[29] Driftwood capitalized on the moment with his release of *Songs of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb* in 1961.[30] This album, along with Reno and Smiley's *Folk Songs of the Civil War* from the same year, marked a new era in bluegrass music.[31] As Charles Wolfe has noted, "By the 1920s… Civil War songs and storied were receding into the misty past."[32] Yet the 1960s represented a new outgrowth of Civil War music in bluegrass.

Also taking place in the late 1950s and early 1960s was the chaos of the civil rights movement. Desegregation led to a number of country songs appearing with anti-Black and pro-segregation messages, largely from anonymous musicians with names such as Johnny Reb or The Sons of Mississippi. While this brand of segregationist music never had a large impact on bluegrass, its connections with the rise of "Southernization" in wider American culture, with

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[29] Wilgus, "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly," 174-75.
[30] Jimmy Driftwood, *Songs of Billy Yank and Johnny Reb*, RCA Victor LPM-2316, 1961, vinyl.
[31] Reno & Smiley, *Folk Songs of the Civil War*, King Records 756, 1961, vinyl.
[32] Charles Wolfe, "Bloody War," in *Country Music Goes to War*, 26.

Governor George Wallace of Alabama its most prominent political leader, are undeniable.[33] While the movement can only be briefly summarized here, the most basic outcome of Southernization was a greater acceptance of the South as a legitimate cultural region throughout the US, with the Confederacy becoming representative of the South as a whole through the use of Confederate imagery by pro-Southern revisionists.[34] In short, the coalescence of civil rights and the folk movement allowed Civil War memory to become what Smith and Akenson succinctly termed "a touchstone of white southern identity."[35]

This trend of Southernization explains why a people-group who historically had weak ties to the Confederacy have since become bound up with Confederate nostalgia. Artists in the early 1960s were only one generation removed from the "first generation" of bluegrass musicians who migrated to the North and Midwest from Appalachia during the Great Depression. Through the later 1960s, these new musicians came of age in a world where the idea of the Confederacy was widely used to represent the South. Thus, the outgrowth of pro-Confederate songs during the civil rights movement fit within the broader trend of artists honoring their previous homelands, even if their ancestors may not have been proponents of secession.

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[33] Stein, "Living Right and Being Free," 26.
[34] Strom, "Defining Dixie," 21; Stein, "Living Right and Being Free," 26-27.
[35] Smith and Akenson, "The Civil War in the Country Music Tradition," 19.

One of the earliest bluegrass songs referencing the Civil War that did not originate from a history-themed album was recorded in May 1963. Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs' "Poor Rebel Soldier" perpetuates numerous tropes regarding the Confederacy and Southern superiority as found in revisionist history. The narrator first meets the Confederates on a positive note: "We run Grant's big army in the land where it snows," where soldiers are kept warm by the "hot blood" running through their "rebel veins." Later, however, he deserts the army because he "Can't find me no woman in this Yankee land."[36]

The song went over well with the college folk scene. Flatt and Scruggs first debuted "Poor Rebel Soldier" at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, and their live recording attests to the audience's enthusiastic response. Though the song does portray the Confederacy in a somewhat unflattering light (the narrator's desertion runs contrary to popular claims regarding the staunch loyalty and honor of Confederate soldiers), it does represent the first documented instance of bluegrass artists recording Civil War song not for explicitly historical purposes. It also represents the adoption of a reconciliationist approach to the war among bluegrass musicians that had previously been popular in folk music. This interpretation of the war would remain popular in bluegrass music until the late 1990s.

That bluegrass took on a largely reconciliationist perspective—downplaying the realities of slavery while

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[36] Flatt & Scruggs, "Poor Rebel Soldier," track B5 on *Recorded Live at Vanderbilt University*, Columbia CL 2134, 1964, vinyl.

emphasizing the devastations of war—makes sense given the audiences that the genre catered to at the time. Chief among these were the more liberal college crowd, who were uninterested in hearing songs that overtly glorified the South; the folk crowd, who simply wanted to hear songs that sounded historical, regardless of their accuracy; and younger Southerners, many of whom believed that the Civil War was not fought over slavery due to popular revisionist arguments.

Bluegrass has always been a music rooted in a sense of place. Musicians often hailed—and continue to hail—from the South, especially the mountain South, with George O. Carney finding in 1974 that approximately seventy percent of bluegrass musicians came from below the Mason-Dixon line.[37] In the late 1950s, the folk movement first made the Civil War an acceptable theme in bluegrass; at the same time, reactionary conservative politics were working to rebrand the South, drawing ties in the process to the Confederacy. When one considers that the South became conflated with the Confederacy metonymically, the growing popularity of pro-Confederate ideology in bluegrass music in the mid-1970s is easy to understand.

Taking a step back from bluegrass and examining country music more holistically, Confederate imagery took the genre by storm in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the new subgenres of Southern rock and outlaw country. Both idioms "made the South the possession of a

[37] George O. Carney, "Bluegrass Grows All Around: Spatial Dimensions of a Country Music Style," *Journal of Geography* 73, no. 4 (1974): 35.

younger generation and a broader political base."[38] As several music historians have noted, by this time "Bluegrass and Country-Western performances [had] converged in style and repertory," with bluegrass concurrently becoming more open in terms of repertoire and expression of non-traditional ideas.[39] This can largely be explained by the genre's expanding popularity outside the South with the open-minded college festival crowd. During this period, bluegrass saw a greater blending of styles but retained a pro-Confederate outlook on the Civil War due to the popular Southernization tactics of the time.

One group dating from this era of greater outside musical influence was Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, which began performing in 1968. Starting out as a country band that incorporated brass alongside traditional country instrumentation, Danny Davis epitomized the growing fusion of genres and styles at the time. A self-described Yankee from Randolph, Massachusetts, Davis spent years convincing labels in Nashville that his blend of country and brass would sell, but was instantly popular among country and bluegrass fans alike once given the chance to record. One of Davis's songs, "From Dixie With Love" from 1972, was a medley of "Dixie" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."[40] Combinations of Confederate songs with patriotic ones were not uncommon; for instance, Mickey Newberry's "American Trilogy" from 1971 blended the

[38] Strom, "Defining Dixie," 37.
[39] Rosenberg, "From Sound to Style," 149.
[40] Danny Davis and the Nashville Brass, "From Dixie With Love," track B3 on *Live—In Person*, RCA Victor LSP-4720, 1972, vinyl.

same songs as "From Dixie With Love," along with the spiritual "All My Trials."[41] These songs demonstrate the reimagining of "Dixie" in the public mind, with many Americans treating it as a patriotic song in praise of the US as a whole, indicative of broader shifts in attitude towards the Confederacy.

While a full study of "Dixie's" reinterpretation is beyond the scope of this article, it would be difficult to discuss Confederate memory in bluegrass without at least touching on the song. As can be heard in his introduction to "From Dixie with Love," Davis considers "Dixie" one of the most popular songs in American history. According to Carl Bryan Holmberg, as of the mid-1980s (and, to a certain degree, likely into the present), "The song 'Dixie' still produces enough impact that it is loved in many American communities, especially in rural areas… the song's *music* has made its way into American psyches as a commonplace for the 'Southern' way of life."[42] This helps explain why "Dixie" has often found its way into instrumental licks or solos in songs that otherwise have no relevance to the Confederacy.

A more recent example of "Dixie's" status as a stand-in for the wider South is Bill Emerson's "The Grey Ghost" from 1987.[43] Emerson was inspired to write "The Grey

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[41] Mickey Newberry, "An American Trilogy," track A1 on *Frisco Mabel Joy*, Elektra EKS-74107, 1971, vinyl.

[42] Carl B. Holmberg, "Toward the Rhetoric of Music: Dixie," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51, no. 1 (1985): 72.

[43] Bill Emerson & Pete Goble, "The Grey Ghost," *Tennessee 1949*, Webco WLPS-0123, 1987, vinyl.

Ghost" after learning that First Lieutenant Franklin Williams, a member of John Singleton Mosby's elusive band of Confederate rangers, was born and raised near his home in Fairfax Country, Virginia. When asked about his song's musical references to "Dixie," Emerson verified Holmberg's point in writing, "I incorporated elements of 'Dixie' into 'The Grey Ghost' to lend it some authentic southern flavor."[44] Thus, bands incorporating "Dixie" into their music did not necessarily do so out of Confederate sympathies (though this should not be entirely excluded), but because the song had become symbolic of the South rather than the Confederacy alone. Further demonstrating this shift in meaning is an episode from George Wallace's presidential campaign in 1964, when he visited Milwaukee and was greeted by approximately three thousand factory workers singing "Dixie" in Polish. Wallace later recalled a moment after his speech when "one fine-looking man grabbed me and said, 'Governor, I have never been south of South Milwaukee, but I am a Southerner.'" Wallace agreed; "Of course he was."[45]

The late 1960s and early 1970s were the heyday of Confederate imagery in bluegrass. Songs such "Atlanta Is Burning" by The Boys From Indiana,[46] "Graycoat Soldiers" by Norman Blake,[47] and "Legend of the Rebel Soldier" by

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[44] Bill Emerson, email message to the author, April 5, 2019.
[45] Quoted in Stein, "Living Right and Being Free," 26.
[46] The Boys From Indiana, "Atlanta Is Burning," *Atlanta Is Burning*, King Bluegrass Records KB 530, 1974, vinyl.
[47] Norman Blake, "Graycoat Soldiers," track A5 on *The Fields of November*, Flying Fish 004, 1974, vinyl.

The Country Gentlemen[48] are just a few of the dozens of pro-Confederate songs released by prominent bluegrass artists. Perhaps the song that most overtly glorified the Confederacy was Bob Smallwood's "Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)" from 1975. The track opens with a question: "Could there be any greater cause / Than the one you fought for and lost?" and goes on to lament the deaths of several prominent Confederate leaders. The lyrics also carry blatant Lost Cause messages, stating, "Victory for you they said could never be / But you'll always be a winner to me."[49]

While many of the pro-Confederate songs released during this era continued to reflect a reconciliationist attitude toward the war—with Sherman's March to the Sea a particularly popular theme—their favoritism toward the Confederacy was more marked than in previous years. By the late 1970s, though, bluegrass artists' interest in honoring the Confederacy had gradually become less pronounced. In 1977, for instance, folk musician Bill Steele wrote the song "Cedar Forest" about a Union soldier who deserts his regiment during the "foolish… politician's war," searching for a life of peace and contentment in marriage.[50] Similarly, the McPeak Brothers' "The Last Time" from 1978 details a

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[48] The Country Gentlemen, "The Legend of the Rebel Soldier," track A2 on *The Award Winning Country Gentlemen*, Rebel Records SLP 1506, 1972, vinyl.
[49] Bob Smallwood, "Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)," track A1 on *Rebel Soldier (Your Memory Will Never Die)*, Old Homestead Records OHS 90030, 1975, vinyl.
[50] Bill Steele, "The Cedar Forest," track B2 on *Chocolate Chip Cookies*, Swallowtail ST-7, 1977, vinyl.

soldier's separation from his wife and homeland.[51] The following year saw the release of the Cache Valley Drifters' "Masters/Dixieland Lady," a medley focusing on the separation of slave families prior to the Civil War and destruction of (presumably White) homelife during the war.[52]

Another song that illustrates the public's changing attitudes toward the Confederacy is a medley from David Pengelly's 1977 release *Recorded Live*. Before playing an instrumental blend of "Dixie" and "Marching Through Georgia," Pengelly asked his Decatur, Georgia audience, "How many Yankees have we got in the audience tonight?" He was predictably met with little enthusiasm. However, when he followed up with the question, "How many Rebels have we got here tonight?" the reaction was, though somewhat more enthusiastic, nearly just as taciturn. The medley itself began with a solo banjo rendition of "Dixie," which elicited little response. But the second (and notably pro-Union) song immediately goaded the crowd to clap along in unison; Pengelly then lost all momentum he had gained by launching back into a slow version of "Dixie." The song's closing was met with a polite yet restrained cheer from the audience—perhaps half of the reaction to other

[51] The McPeak Brothers, "The Last Time," track B2 on *Bend in the River*, County Records 711, 1978, vinyl.
[52] The Cache Valley Drifters, "Masters/Dixieland Lady," track A3 on *The Cache Valley Drifters*, Flying Fish FF 081, 1979, vinyl.

bluegrass numbers from his show such as “Rockytop” and “Dueling Banjos/Foggy Mountain Breakdown.”[53]

A decrease in Confederate sentiment through the late 1970s might not seem intuitive. After all, this was a period when Georgia governor Jimmy Carter was elected President, so-called “forced busing” was a hot-button political issue across the nation, and *The Dukes of Hazzard*, with a Confederate battle flag emblazoned on the roof of the Duke brothers’ car, the General Lee, was the top-rated show on television. Yet it was precisely this greater acceptance of the South in American popular culture—similarly represented by the expansion of major sports franchises into the South, such as the NHL’s Atlanta Flames in 1972 and the NFL’s Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 1976—that contributed to the decline in Confederate imagery and the substitution of the Confederacy for the South more broadly. Another reason for bluegrass music’s distancing from the Lost Cause was the public scrutiny faced by groups with overt Confederate associations and the new labeling of Confederate symbols and ideas as hateful.

Accordingly, as bluegrass progressed into the 1980s and 1990s, the open lionization of the Confederacy became increasingly uncommon. Though narrated from the perspective of “Rebel soldiers… from Tennessee,” Larry Sparks’ “Last Day at Gettysburg” from 1996 returns to more typical reconciliationist themes, focusing on “The fires, the dead, [and] the dying,” and evoking images of an “angel

[53] David Pengelly, “Dixie/Marching Through Georgia,” track B1 on *Recorded Live*, Shannon Records [no catalog number], 1977, vinyl.

band" beckoning the soldier home.[54] In a similar vein, The Seldom Scene's "Dry Creek Run" from the same year tells of the death and destruction wrought by the Civil War, noting that the dead "weren't just blue and they weren't just gray," and that "Death took no sides when it came that day."[55]

Bluegrass in the Twenty-First Century

The late 1990s and early 2000s largely reflected a softening of Confederate sympathies, as well as an increased focus on slavery and the Union. Released in 1998, Blue Highway's "He Walked All the Way Home" tells of a soldier who walks home from the site of Lee's surrender to his home in Southampton County, Virginia. Though also told from a Southern perspective, as indicated by the reference to Appomattox Courthouse as the place "where the deed was sadly done," the song largely focuses on the "sadness [the soldier wore] like a mantle for the friends he lost in vain."[56] Also from this period is Kevin McClung's 2003 song "Tennessee," which focuses on a soldier's internal struggle with leaving home for war. With lines such as "I can't help but feel strange / Heading north in a pouring rain," the chorus

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[54] Larry Sparks, "Last Day at Gettysburg," *Blue Mountain Memories*, Rebel Records REB-CD-1726, 1996, CD.

[55] The Seldom Scene, "Dry Creek Run," track 1 on *Dream Scene*, Sugar Hill Records SHCD-3858, 1996, CD.

[56] Blue Highway, "He Walked All the Way Home," *Midnight Storm*, Rebel Records REB-CD-1746, 1998, CD.

asks an angel to “Make sure I find my way back home / To Tennessee” if the narrator dies.[57]

One album that affords a unique look at the shifting nature of Civil War memory in bluegrass is Lonesome Ride’s 2002 album *Crossing the Wall*. This album is of particular interest because it was created by bandleader Gary G. Smith while researching his ancestor’s role in the war. It is composed mostly of self-written songs, which include themes such as soldiers longing for home, the disruption of family life, and even a “brother-fighting-brother” song—a theme popular in the Appalachian folk tradition. While it neglects the African American perspective that has increasingly found its way into bluegrass in recent years, it does offer a relatively unbiased account of the war. This is what makes *Crossing the Wall* so interesting: though it perpetuates the old reconciliationist approach in its avoidance of slavery, it contains little to no overt glorification of the South, returning instead to themes of wartime hardship.[58]

Civil War songs in bluegrass slowed to a relative trickle in the mid-2000s. This can be tied to a decrease in public identification with the Confederacy since the 1970s, as well as a general avoidance of the Confederacy in music except among neo-Confederates, historical groups, or hate groups. Since the late 2000s, however, a new wave of Civil War bluegrass music has emerged. Liked in the 1960s, this

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[57] Kevin McClung, “Tennessee,” track 6 on *Minor Indiscretions*, Mountain William Music [no catalog number], 2003, CD.

[58] Lonesome Ride, *Crossing the Wall*, self-released, 2002, CD.

second wave is likely due in part to heightened racial tensions in American politics. Yet the new generation of Civil War songs exhibits an increased diversity of lyrical themes and a minimization of pro-Confederate viewpoints. This has become even more important due to the weaking hold of Southernization in American culture since the 1960s.

Even recent songs that sound pro-Confederate on the surface, such as Balsam Range's "Burning Georgia Down" from 2007, were not typically written with the glorification of the Confederacy in mind. Despite the song's protagonist referring to Union soldiers as "devils dressed in Blue,"[59] songwriter Mark Bumgardner wrote that he simply wanted to "keep it historically accurate while having the story being told from the perspective of someone who was there," and that he "didn't want to make any political statement or pass judgement by looking through the lens of history."[60] Rather, Bumgardner and co-writer Milan Miller sought to tell a story of tragedy, sadness, and pain, using the Civil War as a framework.

More representative of this newer batch of music is a trio of songs from The SteelDrivers' catalog, including their 2008 song "Sticks That Make Thunder" and their 2015 song "River Runs Red." The former is told from the neutral perspective of a tree watching a battle unfold, using dissociation to point out the senselessness of violence. The tree recounts that "Some were the color of the sky in winter

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[59] Balsam Range, "Burning Georgia Down," track 5 on *Marching Home*, Mountain Home Music Company MH11422, 2007, CD.
[60] Mark Bumgardner, email message to the author, April 10, 2019.

/ Some were as blue as the night," in reference to the gray and blue of soldiers' uniforms. It goes on to describe death and destruction in natural terms, saying, "When the light came again there was death on the wind / As the buzzards made way for the worms."[61] "River Runs Red" is less esoteric, stating bluntly, "No winners or losers / When you count the dead." The song emphasizes that both sides suffered tremendous losses: "Now Rogers was from Alabama / And Thomas an old New York town / But soon they would die like blood brothers / In the stream where their souls would flow down."[62]

Both of these songs focus on the death and violence wrought by war, furthering a reconciliationist understanding of the Civil War in bluegrass. But The SteelDrivers followed a more emancipationist path in 2010 with the song "Can You Run," which tells the story of a slave family watching the advance of the Union Army. The lyrics directly attack the slave society of the Old South: "Can you run to the freedom line of the Lincoln soldiers / Where the contraband can be a man? / […] Wrap these hands of mine around a gun / And chase the taste of bondage from my tongue."[63] Rhiannon Giddens' "Julie" from 2017 tells a similar story, but speaks directly to the fears of Southern plantation owners over the loss of their slaves. Giddens, who is African American,

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[61] The SteelDrivers, "Sticks That Make Thunder," track 8 on *The SteelDrivers*, Rounder Records 11661-0598-2, 2007, CD.
[62] The SteelDrivers, "River Runs Red," track 11 on *The Muscle Shoals Recordings*, Rounder Records 11661-9180-2, 2015, CD.
[63] The SteelDrivers, "Can You Run," track 5 on *Reckless*, Rounder Records 11661-0624-2, 2010, CD.

stated in a 2015 interview that she drew inspiration for the song from Andrew Ward's book *The Slaves' War*.[64]

Another way "Julie" differs from "Can You Run" is in its interaction between the slave and the plantation owner's wife, who tries to convince the slave not to flee. She employs a rhetoric of familiarity and complacency, saying, "You won't go / Leave this house and all you know / […] Don't leave here / [Don't] leave us, who love you, and all you hold dear."[65] Likewise, Giddens gives voice to anti-slavery themes in her song "At the Purchaser's Option" from 2017, which tells of the breakup of enslaved families and their endurance in spite of separation. The refrain declares, "You can take my body / You can take my bones / You can take my blood / But not my soul."[66] Gidden and her former band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops, along with such artists as The Ebony Hillbillies, represent a new growth of African American folk music, and will likely continue to write racially themed songs as long as the legacy of slavery continues to hinder American progress.[67]

Another emancipationist song is Mandolin Orange's "Wildfire" from 2016. The lyrics are explicit in their singling out of slavery as the cause of the Civil War, recounting that "too much money rolled in to ever end slavery / The cry for

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[64] Frank Carlson and Mike Fritz, "Rhiannon Giddens performs 'Julie,' a song inspired by a slave's story," PBS NewsHour, April 15, 2015.
[65] Rhiannon Giddens, "Julie," track 3 on *Freedom Highway*, Nonesuch 558805-1, 2017, CD.
[66] Rhiannon Giddens, "At the Purchaser's Option," track 1 on *Freedom Highway*.
[67] Chris LH Durman, "African American Old-Time String Band Music: A Selective Discography," *Notes* 64, no. 4 (2008): 808.

war spread like wildfire." The song continues with an attack on Southern racism, especially after Reconstruction: "The South was spent / But its true demise was hatred passed down through the years / It should have been different / […] But pride has a way of holding too firm to history / And it burns like wildfire."[68] Songs by Giddens, Mandolin Orange (now Watchhouse), and The SteelDrivers represent a departure from the reconciliationist messages of the past in their candid focus on slavery and the lives of enslaved people.

Finally, a song fitting better in the neo-folk tradition but still of interest here is "Ballad of the 20th Maine" by The Ghost of Paul Revere, released in 2015. The song recounts the story of Andrew J. Tozier, a real-life solder in the 20th Maine, and his division's near defeat at the Battle of Gettysburg. It carries a distinctly pro-Union sentiment, with lyrics such as, "We were steadfast as [Mount] Katahdin, hard as winter's rain / Take that rebel yell with you to hell / We are the 20th Maine."[69] The Ghost of Paul Revere represents a unique Northern perspective in bluegrass, reflecting the genre's growing popularity outside the South. As bluegrass continues to find new audiences, more Civil War songs with a Unionist point of view are likely to emerge.

As the above examples demonstrate, modern bluegrass has taken up a more balanced approach to the Civil War, incorporating African American and Unionist

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[68] Mandolin Orange, "Wildfire," track 2 on *Blindfaller*, Yep Roc Records YEP-2487, 2016, CD.
[69] The Ghost of Paul Revere, "Ballad of the 20th Maine," track 2 on *Field Notes Vol. 1*, self-released, 2015, CD.

perspectives, and finally corrected the reconciliationist view with the emergence of emancipationist music. Though Civil War themes in bluegrass were at a historic low by the 1980s, they have resurfaced in recent years due to heightened tensions over the war and its ongoing legacy. Moreover, the Lost Cause rhetoric so common in the early 1970s has largely faded from public performances and, while still extant in some corners, remains increasingly unpopular. The Civil War will undoubtedly continue to appear in bluegrass music due to the nature of the genre and how well the war fits within its traditional themes, but the rate and nature of these appearances will largely depend upon race relations and how the American society will continue to view the Confederacy and the Civil War as a whole.

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