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Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan Hit Manhattan

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On February 16, 1940, a freezing blizzardy day, Woody Guthrie—short, intense, and aged twenty-seven—ended a long hitchhiking journey East and debarked in Manhattan, where he would quickly make a name for himself as a performer and recording artist. Nearly twenty-one years later, on or about January 24, 1961, a cold and post-blizzardy day, Bob Dylan—short, intense, and aged nineteen—ended a brief auto journey East and debarked in Manhattan, where he would quickly make a name for himself as a performer and recording artist—not as quickly as Guthrie had, but quickly. Dylan had turned himself into what he later described as “a Woody Guthrie jukebox,” and had come to New York in search of his idol. Guthrie had come to look up his friends the actors Will Geer and Herta Ware, who had introduced him to influential left-wing political and artistic circles out in Los Angeles and would do the same in Manhattan.

Two different stories, obviously, of two very different young men a generation apart—yet, more than he might have realized, Dylan partly replayed his hero’s entrance to the city where both men would become legends. Whether he knew it or not, Dylan the acolyte and imitator was also something of a re-enactor.

Almost three years later, having found his own songwriting voice, and having met and learned more about Guthrie, Dylan, in one of the eleven free-verse poems that served as the liner notes to his 1964 album *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, recalled his early days in New York but remarked on how *distant* they seemed from Guthrie’s:

In times behind, I too
wished I’d lived
in the hungry thirties
an’ blew in like Woody
t’ New York City
an’ sang for dimes
on subway trains
satisfied at a nickel fare....
an’ makin’ the rounds
t’ the union halls



*Bob Dylan (1963) and Woody Guthrie (circa early 1940)
Courtesy of the Bob Dylan Picture Archive (www.dylanstubs.com)
and The Woody Guthrie Foundation (www.woodyguthrie.org)*

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but when I came in
the fares were higher
up t' fifteen cents an' climbin'
an' those bars that Woody's guitar
rattled . . . they've changed
they've been remodeled...
ah where are those forces of yesteryear?
why didn't they meet me here
an' greet me here?

“In times behind”: at the end of 1963, far from nostalgic, Dylan was already on the road that would eventually lead to making art out of the all-night girls whispering on the D train, in a decidedly sixties, not thirties, New York. The old times were alluring; they seemed simpler, less expensive, full of scuffling CIO union hall solidarity, lived in a moral universe of black and white, of “Which Side Are You On?”—but those times were scattered and buried deep. Besides, Dylan had declared, in an earlier piece of free verse, “I gotta write my own feelins down the same way they did before me.”¹

Still, for Bob Dylan, then as now, moving on and making it new never meant artistic repudiation, despite what some of his injured admirers have claimed over the years. “The folk songs showed me the way,” he insisted; “[w]ithout “Jesse James” there’d be no “Davy Moore,”” he explained; “An’ I got nothing but homage an’ holy thinkin’ for the old songs and stories.” More than thirty years later, he would still be describing “those old songs” to one writer as “my lexicon and my prayer book.”²

The time span between Guthrie and Dylan’s arrivals, between 1940 and 1961, saw the expansion, decline, and early transfiguration of the politicized culture of the Popular Front, especially in New York. Initiated and orchestrated by the Communist left (which included Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the rest of the Almanac Singers and the Almanacs’ offshoots) to advance its cause, Popular Front culture in its various forms was always connected to Communist and pro-Communist politics. But it also spread outward during World War II to inform and inspire a broader culture of the common man that flourished in the national mainstream until the end of the 1940s. Dylan and his fellow folkies, the sixties newcomers, were impressed and inspired by some of the best of that displaced art of “yesteryear,” and they were not the only ones.

A few blocks up MacDougal Street from where Dylan was playing in the Gaslight, maybe on some of the same nights, in a little *boîte* around the corner on Eighth Street, you could hear Barbra Streisand, not yet twenty, deliver her renditions of her favorite 1930s and 1940s songwriters, including the team of Yip Harburg and Harold Arlen—the latter an on-again, off-again Republican voter, the former decidedly not. In 1962, young Streisand also appeared on a revival album of the 1937 pro-union theatrical *Pins and Needles*—originally sponsored by David Dubinsky’s stalwartly anti-communist International Ladies Garment Workers Union, yet written and performed in the Popular Front music show style, and with musical contributions from, among others, Marc Blitzstein. Fifty years later, just considering the work of Streisand and Dylan, the music that evolved from the polyglot Greenwich Village of the early 1960s not only endures, it flourishes—a remarkable swatch of the nation’s cultural history that is also a permuted cultural inheritance from the 1930s and 1940s. Along with his own living songs, being a large part of that bestowal is one of Woody Guthrie’s greatest artistic legacies.

In the case of Guthrie and Dylan, the story of the bestowal has become a familiar, even clichéd set piece of a younger man picking up an older man’s mantle and persona and then running with it. But the history is richer and more complicated than that. The similarities and continuities of their respective Manhattan arrivals, for example—the thicker social context—are too often neglected. (It is worth remembering that we are considerably more than twice as many years removed from the young Bob Dylan coming to New York than he was from the young Woody Guthrie coming to New York.) The barrooms and union halls and social forces of the hungry thirties may not have met and greeted Dylan in 1961, but some of the people did, and not just Woody Guthrie. So, in fact, did at least one of the barrooms.

It could not have been otherwise for anyone seeking out the stricken Guthrie in New York and finding him at the Sunday gatherings at Bob and Sidsel Gleason’s apartment in East Orange. There Dylan met and sang to his hero and mingled with other younger folk music enthusiasts like John Cohen, Ralph Rinzler, and Peter LaFarge, but he also mingled with a shifting assembly that included, among others, Pete Seeger, Harold Leventhal, and, from time to time, Alan Lomax. Back in Manhattan, *Sing Out!* magazine carried on a sectarian succession

Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan Hit Manhattan (cont.)

of Seeger's People's Songs from the 1940s; Sis Cunningham, a former Almanac, started up *Broadside* magazine in 1962; Moe Asch and Folkways Records were still very much going; Lee Hays, Earl Robinson, and others were in or around the scene, or at least dropped by from time to time. There were many other genealogical and musical tendrils, including some that crossed generations, like those that connected Robinson's sometime collaborator David Arkin to his son Alan, the future actor, to Alan's fellow hitmaker with the Tarriers, the non-political Erik Darling, to Darling's eventual replacement in the group when Darling joined the Weavers, Eric Weissberg. For many more people than Pete Seeger, the so-called folk revival of the late 1950s and early 1960s was an unbroken continuation of what they, with Woody Guthrie, had undertaken two decades earlier and had been doing all along as best they could.

Young Dylan's New York physical surroundings in the early 1960s also overlapped with the peripatetic Guthrie's from the early 1940s. Guthrie spent his first New York night, ironically, in the relative luxury of the Geers' Fifth Avenue apartment close to the theater where Will Geer was playing Jeeter Lester in the Broadway production of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*. But before he and his wife-to-be Marjorie moved out to Sea Gate in 1943, Guthrie lived mostly in various apartments in Greenwich Village, including the four communal so-called Almanac Houses, the second of which, at 130 West 10th Street, became the basement home of the Almanacs' famous Sunday hootenannies. Twenty years later, Dylan, too, would bounce around the Village until he moved into his own apartment on West 4th Street. And although there was nothing quite like the Café Wha?, or Gerde's, or the Gaslight for Guthrie or the other Almanacs, one of Guthrie's favorite drinking and singing hangouts, the longshoremen's White House Tavern, six blocks from the last of the Almanac Houses on Hudson Street, would become one of Dylan's hangouts as well. That neighborhood's cityscape had changed hardly at all in twenty years, and neither had a large part of its soul.

All around the city, meanwhile, there was plenty of yesteryear still left for Dylan to see, to touch, and to hold onto. When he wrote his own first songs about New York, Dylan had Guthrie and even Guthrie's New York very much on his mind, because of both it could be said, in Guthrie's phrase, that they "ain't dead yet." "Talking

New York Blues," on Dylan's first album, humorously narrates the story of his Manhattan arrival and first days of working in the Village coffee houses. Yet the song pinches a line directly from Guthrie's "Talking Subway Blues," "I swung on to my old guitar," while it tells a bit about a "rocking, reeling, rolling" subway ride by someone who had rambled in "out of the wild west." The song, whose form, of course, comes straight from Guthrie, also quotes—and attributes to "a very great man"—"Pretty Boy Floyd's" fountain pen line, making the tribute explicit. Dylan took the melody for "Hard Times in New York" from the Bently Boys' 1929 recording of "Down on Penny's Farm," but his descriptions seem to owe something to the song about the Rainbow Room that Guthrie called "New York City" in *Bound for Glory*. It wasn't just Dylan performing as a jukebox—he told his own Manhattan stories by complimenting and amalgamating them with Guthrie's. Imaginatively, New York in 1961 merged easily enough with the New York of 1940.

But of course a lot was different too. The hurtling, bustling, immigrant early 1940s New York had only begun to become not just the greatest city in America but the capital of the twentieth century itself, which it was by the time that Dylan arrived. The Communist left that had provided Guthrie and his friends with gigs and community as well as a cause had become a different kind of subculture, of which the surviving folk crowd was an important element—marginalized by the McCarthyite blacklist and convulsed by the CPUSA's chronic internal crises over the partial revelations about Stalin's terror and the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and more. Fresh cultural as well as political winds blew across Manhattan, into and out of the Village, including fresh sounds and fresh poetry, some from the famous or soon-to-be famous, some not, some brand new, some very old but collapsing the ancient into the present: "love songs of Allen Ginsberg/an' jail songs of Ray Bremser," Dylan wrote, all mixed up with Modigliani's narrow tunes, the "dead poems" of Dylan's tragic young pal Ed Freeman, Miles Davis's quiet fire, "the sounds of Francois Villon," Johnny Cash's "beat vision," alongside (last but hardly least) "the saintliness of Pete Seeger." Then there was "beautiful Sue"—Suze Rotolo—"the true fortuneteller of my soul."³ And the Beatles were just beginning to happen.

Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan Hit Manhattan (cont.)

After what he has smilingly called his “crossroads” experience, Dylan had started writing and singing his own fresh sounds. But that left him to reckon with Guthrie, by now relocated from New Jersey to Brooklyn State Hospital. More precisely, Dylan had to reckon with his image of Guthrie. Dylan wrote that Guthrie had swiftly become his last idol “because he was the first idol I’d ever met/face t’ face/. . .shatterin’ even himself/as an idol”—an auto-iconoclast. The breaking of idols, the recognition that they are only human, normally leads to uncertainty, fear, and a collapse of faith, but with Dylan and Guthrie it was different. In place of the idol, Dylan could see the artist who carried what Dylan called “the book of Man,” let him read from it awhile, and thereby taught Dylan what he called “my greatest lesson.” Stripped of hero-worship, Dylan’s faith in Guthrie’s songs abided.⁴

What lesson Dylan learned, true to form, he did not say directly at the time, although he would say much more over the decades to come. His mind was certainly on idolatry, as young listeners were now beginning to idolize him, thereby causing a menacing press to try and expose him in its own terms and tear him apart with innuendo and rumor, while all along some in the Popular Front folk-singing old guard (and some of their children) were trying to turn him into their own kind of idol, the next Woody Guthrie, the troubadour carrier of their tattered hopes for a brighter political day. Dylan, although keenly ambitious, wanted none of the constraints and destructiveness of this worship: it was enough for him to stand exposed every time he performed in public. As for the incessant questions about how it felt to be an idol—well, after his experience with Woody Guthrie, he wrote, “it’d be silly of me t’ answer, wouldn’t it. . .?”⁵

The other lessons had nothing much to do with any cause that Guthrie endorsed—nothing “trivial such as politics,” as Dylan would say in his notorious speech to the Emergency Civil Liberties Committee in December 1963.⁶ (Dylan didn’t even think of Guthrie as a political or a “protest” singer: “If he is one,” he has recalled, “then so is Sleepy John Estes and Jelly Roll Morton.”) There were the lessons of Guthrie’s language—the elegant simplicity of his ballad lines, but also what one reviewer called “the glory hallelujah madness of imagery” in *Bound for Glory*, which had helped consolidate Dylan’s idealization of the man.⁸ Making those words live, there was the sound of Guthrie’s voice “like a stiletto” and “with so much intensity,” as Dylan would remember in

his memoir *Chronicles*, along with an effortless diction in which “everything just rolled off his tongue.”⁹

There was the kinetic, usually comedic current in Guthrie’s work that leavened his social commentary and his tales of individual struggle and strife. One example: in the early 1940s, Guthrie (with Leadbelly) purposefully turned an old, catchy, and otherwise hard-to-take “nigger in the cornfield” ditty, “You Shall Be Free,” into “We Shall Be Free,” an extended joke about hypocrite preachers that throws in a sneezing chicken and a wild escape jumping a gully and jumping a rose bush. On his second album, Dylan rendered the same melody as “I Shall Be Free” updating, fracturing, and deepening the joke, poking fun at preaching politicians and television ad madness while rollicking around, one minute getting a phone call from President Kennedy, the next minute chasing a girl in the middle of an air-raid drill, jumping not a rose bush but a fallout shelter, a string bean, a TV dinner, and a shotgun. Two years after that, in “I Shall Be Free #10,” Dylan reverted to Guthrie’s talking blues form, turned Guthrie’s sneezing chicken into a funky dancing monkey with a will of his own, while he commented on leftist-liberal hypocrisy and Cold War paranoia and phony friends in one deadpan joke after another.

Above all, there was Guthrie’s direct humanity, especially as captured on *Dust Bowl Ballads*, recorded for RCA Victor a little more than two months after he hit Manhattan. Guthrie “was a radical,” Dylan recalls in the 2005 Martin Scorsese film *No Direction Home*, which is to say he cut to the quick: “You could listen to his music and learn how to live.” Here were stories of men and women confronting psychic as well as physical devastation, beaten to the pulp of permanent homelessness this side of the grave, who somehow mustered the hope to keep moving—hope that Guthrie intended his art to amplify and project. The stories came out of the hungry thirties’ Dust Bowl, but their empathy knew no temporal or geographic bounds: they were songs, Dylan writes in *Chronicles*, which “had the infinite sweep of humanity in them.”¹⁰

Dylan explained his reckoning with Guthrie elliptically and poetically from the stage of Town Hall in April 1963—and as we reckon with Guthrie on the occasion of his centenary, it is worthwhile considering young Dylan’s reckoning of nearly fifty years ago, half the

Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan Hit Manhattan (cont.)

way back. The title of this free verse, “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie,” could not and cannot be taken literally: Dylan may have been putting to rest that night a persona that he had outgrown, but he was not putting to rest thinking about his former idol and the former idol’s art.¹¹

It’s unclear how familiar Dylan was at the time with Guthrie’s script from 1944, “Talking About Songs,” in which Guthrie declared his hatred for lyrics that said “you’re just/born to lose—bound to lose,” that “yer either too old or too young/or too fat or too slim or too ugly or too this or too that,” that instead he was out to sing about how, no matter how badly life had knocked you down, “this is/your world.”¹² But it certainly sounded as if Dylan knew it, as he raced through a myriad of ways in which “your head gets twisted and your mind grows numb/when you think you’re too old, too young, too smart or too dumb.” Everyone needs hope, he intoned, hope that can’t be found in possessions or beauty aids or the lures and snares of celebrity and sex, hope that could be approached two ways: by looking for God at your choice of church or by looking for Woody Guthrie at Brooklyn State Hospital, although both could be found in wondrous natural majesty.

Recalling Woody Guthrie’s and Bob Dylan’s arrivals in New York deepens an understanding of some of the uproar caused by Dylan’s artistic shifts in the mid-1960s. Dylan’s supposed betrayal of authenticity and political engagement, which are abstractions, upset a sub-culture that had a lasting presence in New York. Very much alive in 1961, it consisted of people who perceived and even promoted him as a vehicle of their own hope after long seasons of disquiet. When young Dylan resisted and broke away—a gradual process that only culminated at Newport in 1965—he not only shattered illusions; he challenged deep conceptions characteristic of the Popular Front, or of some of its abiding faithful, about what an artist and performer ought to be. “Ought” is a word I’ve always thought makes Dylan jump; he called into question identifications that were aesthetic and communal as well as political just by being himself.

But Dylan’s ambitious rebellion—which to him was a matter of growth—was not the purely destructive act so many perceived it to be. Dylan’s lexicon and prayer book are, to be sure, immense, and they include, even inside folk music, far more than the songs of Woody Guthrie, or even of Guthrie’s many influences such as the Carter Family. But Guthrie, the former idol, is still very much

there as a transcendent force and muse. Listening to Dylan’s brand new album, *Tempest*, I was struck by its concluding elegy to John Lennon, and remarked to no one in particular that Dylan had recorded nothing quite like it since “Song to Woody” fifty years ago. Then to hear Dylan on the rest of the album—re-entering Guthrie’s version of “Gypsy Davy” and populating it with his own cast of characters; having his singer-character, on another track, declare, he “ain’t dead yet”—makes it plain that, for America’s greatest songwriter, the spirit of Guthrie and his music is very much alive within him and without him, like a force of nature to be heard in a rustling wind, glimpsed in a canyon sundown, reflected so that all souls can hear and see it.

Notes:

¹ “For Dave Glover” (1963), a poem that appeared both in the magazine *Broadside*, issue #35, and in the program for the 1963 Newport Folk Festival. A copy of the *Broadside* version appears on the blog site “Bob Dylan’s Musical Roots,” <http://bobdylanroots.blogspot.com/2011/02/bob-dylan-songs-in-broadside-magazine.html>, accessed 18 December 2012.

² *Ibid.*; Jon Pareles, “A Wiser Voice Blowin’ in the Autumn Wind,” *New York Times*, 28 September 1997.

³ Bob Dylan, “11 Outlined Epitaphs,” liner notes to *The Times They Are A-Changin’*, released 10 February 1964, available on the blog site “Beat Patrol,” <http://beatpatrol.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/bob-dylan-11-outlined-epitaphs-1963>, accessed 18 December 2012.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Bob Dylan, “Remarks to the Bill of Rights Dinner, Emergency Civil Liberties Committee,” New York, NY, 13 December 1963, transcript available online at <http://www.corliss-lamont.org/dylan.htm>, accessed 18 December 2012.

⁷ Bob Dylan, *Chronicles, Volume One* (New York, 2004), 83.

⁸ Horace Reynolds, “A Guitar Busker’s Singing Road,” *New York Times Book Review*, 21 March 1943.

⁹ Dylan, *Chronicles*, 244.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dylan, “Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie” (1963), poem available on [bobdylan.com](http://www.bobdylan.com), at <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/last-thoughts-woody-guthrie>. Recording available on Dylan, *The Bootleg Series, Volumes 1-3 (Rare and Unreleased)* 1961-1991, released 26 March 1991.

¹² Woody Guthrie, “Talking About Songs,” script for WNEW radio, New York, NY, 3 December 1944, quoted at <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/biography/biography3.htm>, accessed 18 December 2012.

Reading Cage

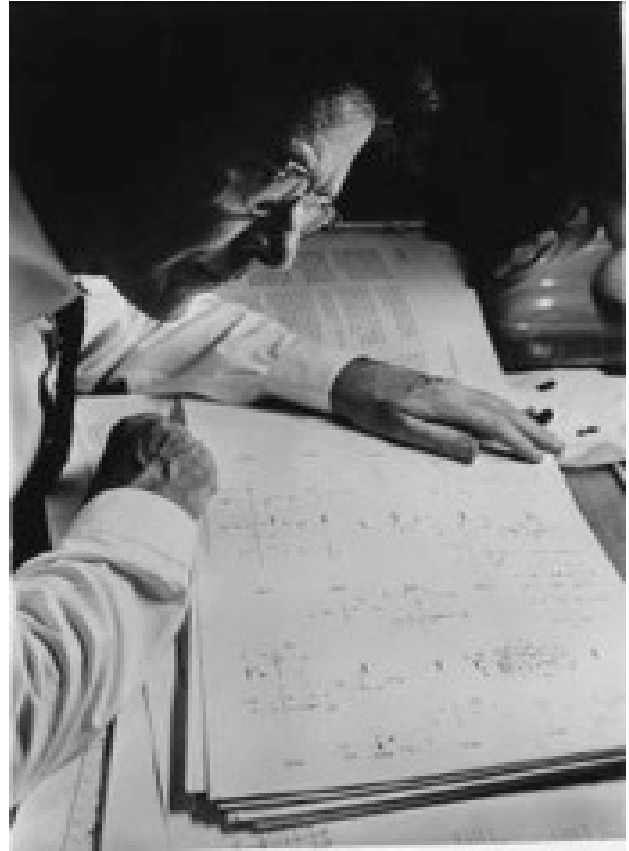
By Richard H. Brown, University of Southern California

...it was a Saturday; there were six of us having dinner in a restaurant on the Hudson north of Newburgh; we arranged to meet in Mexico...in order to realize this rendezvous, all of us (knowing how to say Yes) will have to learn to say No – No, that is, to anything that may come between us and the realization of our plan.

-John Cage, *A Year From Monday* (1967)

2012 marked the centennial of John Cage's birth, and with it a host of celebrations, from academic symposia to concert series, in honor of one of the twentieth century's most controversial composers and musical thinkers. A year ago, at the beginning of my final year of a dissertation fellowship, I decided to introduce my own honorary project: I started a blog. The name, *A Year from Monday* (www.ayearfrommonday.com), came from the title of Cage's second major publication, and conveniently fit the timeline of the centennial. John Cage was born at Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, just a few miles from my apartment in East Hollywood, on 5 September 1912, and 5 September 2011 just happened to fall on a Monday. I decided thus to allot a small part of my fellowship year to the project each Monday, beginning 5 September 2011, and ending, a year from Monday, on 5 September 2012, the date of the centennial. Each Monday was devoted to reading one or two essays by Cage from his vast collection of writings, and posting 1000-2000 words of my own commentary. The concept itself felt very Cagean: a disciplined action performed according to a predetermined temporal grid with no expectation of the outcome, and above all a devotional commitment to the spirit of his writings and the historical context surrounding their creation.

The music critic Alfred Frankenstein once described John Cage's first publication, *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), as "a story of how a change of mind came about." Kyle Gann, writing in the preface of the recently released 50th anniversary edition of the work, reminisced that "*Silence* by John Cage is the book I've reread most often in my life. It's that kind of book. I kept rereading it partly because what it seemed to mean kept changing...The text remains the same; I change."¹ It was this concept, combined with an intellectual impulse to comment on the many misconceptions surrounding the large body of "Cagean lore," that guided my weekly ritual. Much like the experience of reading Cage's vast correspondence collection at Northwestern University, I found myself discovering sides of Cage's personality and mind



John Cage, studying the score of Atlas Eclipticalis (1961)
Photographer: Unknown
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust

that were often overlooked, either by me, a junior scholar, or by others who focused exclusively on what I would call "sound byte Cage," where incongruous quotes are taken from a larger text and placed alongside a neighboring argument. The problem with this large body of information, which includes Cage's published writings, interviews, and extensive correspondence, is its heterogeneity. While a book such as *Silence* does seem to encapsulate a period in Cage's life, other volumes increasingly embrace the idea espoused in Cage's many "Diary" entries: a linear collection of thoughts subjected to various degrees of "chance procedures" (more on this later) that spread out like a mosaic into a network of interpenetrating ideas, each paradoxically both relevant and irrelevant, and more often than not, irreverent.

In the process of weekly reading and blogging the project slowly coalesced around several issues of significance to contemporary Cage scholarship. The first was the very concept of "Cage studies." The vanguard generation of Cage scholars worked tirelessly to defend him within intellectual circles using traditional musicological means.

Reading Cage (cont.)

Scholars analyzed and interpreted Cage's works through manuscript studies to demonstrate the intellectual profundity of his approach to chance and indeterminacy, and coupled these findings with detailed archival documentation and first-person interviews to create a clear historical picture of his life and work. This work tended to avoid the critical parameters of contemporary music scholarship, especially criticism of Cage himself, and as a result Cage has found a comfortable place within academics. However, recent scholarship has gently upset this model by exploring more contemporary modes of inquiry: identity studies, composer hagiography, and particularly critical theory, for which Cage's writings are ripe for investigation. Naturally, this has sparked tension. Consider the recent remarks by John Adams in *The New York Times*:

'Cage studies' is by now a small industry. The flow of new books about him, his music and his aesthetics seems unstoppable, and it is not unthinkable that he will eventually dethrone the likes of Joyce or Proust as the favored subject of college humanities departments. The problem with so much writing about Cage is the difficulty of finding critical balance. He has gone from being unfairly considered a fool and a charlatan to an equally unreasonable status as sacred cow. Criticizing Cage's aesthetic doctrines is by now a perilous venture because his defenders have become so skilled at turning any questioning around and using it as proof of the critic's poverty of awareness.²

I've witnessed some of this intellectual back-and-forth at recent conferences devoted to Cage, and it mainly centers around biographical details of his life that are to varying degrees, mischaracterizations, false remembrances, and in certain cases, fabrications. The best "Cagean lore" is then repeated in interviews and biographies. A perfect example is the anecdote claiming that Arnold Schoenberg once described Cage as an "Inventor of Genius." This was in fact a second-hand account from Los Angeles impresario Peter Yates in a letter from 1953.³ Whether this account accurately characterizes the original statement is open to speculation, but perhaps equally important is its perpetuation within the larger cultural construct of "Cage" in contemporary scholarship. It is because of these various minor discrepancies that those wishing to construct elaborate theoretical ideas based on Cage's biography are so easily subject to criticism; many details of Cage's life are still considerably contested, and scholars have used these factual and analytic details as a shield against the influx

of critical discourse surrounding Cage. That said, it does seem that a new balance is being struck within Cage studies, where critical and theoretical models emanating from the composer's aesthetic are augmented by thoughtful and engaged historical research to further cement the grounds of any assertions about Cage.

The second issue of importance to contemporary Cage scholarship is the actual definition of his aesthetic parameters, and, concurrently, the notion of "post-Cage" within various artistic circles from the 1960s to the present day. Many of the fundamental tenants of Cage's negative aesthetics were first introduced in his early publications. Parsing his often circuitous words, peppered with a seemingly endless series of aphorisms and anecdotes, is an exacting process that many have grappled with to varying degrees of success. Recent works by Benjamin Piekut, You Nakai, Branden Joseph, Julia Robinson, Rebecca Kim and others have approached the "Cage aesthetic" under a number of guises, all of them focusing in particular on the core essays found in *Silence* and *A Year From Monday* that in many ways defined the Cagean stance for several generations.

While some have claimed that Cage clearly defined a specific set of principles in the pages of these early publications, my close readings of individual essays led to a different conclusion. Cage was a prolific writer, and he embraced any opportunity to engage in an eclectic variety of spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic ideas, even if he knew little about them. Overall Cage assembled a unique set of heuristics culled from philosophers, writers, and spiritual gurus ranging from Henri Bergson, Carl Jung, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan to Sri Ramakrishna, Joseph Campbell, Aldous Huxley, and Meister Eckhart. His aphorisms and notable quotes functioned similarly to his many popular anecdotes scattered throughout his first two publications and recorded as "Indeterminacy" with David Tudor in 1959. It is tempting for the reader to extract these truisms from Cage's own words and take them at face value, thus perpetuating a tradition that defines Cage according to ideas that are not necessarily his own.⁴

Taken as a whole, the writings from Cage's first thirty years (approximately 1938-1968), gradually develop a sophisticated model of listening that redefines the ontology of the musical artwork. These writings define music according to the ontological question of being, or existence, a notion epitomized by Cage's famous experience in an anechoic chamber, where he realized that, even in a

Reading Cage (cont.)

situation in which there empirically are no sound waves echoing within the space, the subjective human body still resonates within its own cavity, and thus, “there is no such thing as silence.” To be sure, Cage’s aesthetic was rife with inconsistencies and contradictions, and it would be unfair to many of the great theorists of the later twentieth century to say that he fully developed a specific set of ideas and maintained them throughout his career. Each essay represents a historical point in Cage’s lifelong pursuit of a variety of aesthetic and musical ideals, each turning a new corner, abandoning or reinforcing old ideas, and providing intellectual fodder for others to develop into theory.

Cage situated his musical discourse within the high-minded confines of the Western art music tradition, and to further augment his claims he carefully constructed the layout and organization of his writings to present a false chronology, thus luring the unsuspecting reader into a circuitous yet enticing intellectual trap. Philip Gentry, whose recent research explores the history of Cage’s publications at Wesleyan University Press, points to the presentation and layout of *Silence* in particular as one example of this misleading chronological exposition of ideas.⁵ Take for example, the opening seventy-five pages of the work, which are in many ways a confrontational stance against the European postwar avant-garde, a largely aggrandized conflict made famous by Cage’s 1958 sojourn to Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music, where he presented the triptych, “Composition as Process” (1958). These essays, combined with the opening triptych of “The Future of Music: Credo” (ca 1940 or later), “Experimental Music” (1957), and “Experimental Music: Doctrine” (1955), and ending with “History of Experimental Music in the United States” (1959), set the dividing lines between American experimentalism and the European avant-garde. However, to read these essays successively belies the underlying polemic arguments inherent in Cage’s major theoretical essays. For starters, *Silence* begins with Cage’s most-cited essay, “The Future

of Music: Credo.” Several scholars, myself included, have noted that the 1937 dating of the essay in *Silence* is incorrect—the only surviving fragment of this essay is dated 1940, and it only includes the capitalized portion of the essay.⁶ In addition, it seems, based on surviving evidence and correspondence, that Cage in all likelihood extensively reworked the original short statement during his residency at Wesleyan University when he prepared the essays that would become *Silence* in 1961, and thus we should consider the essay itself as an amalgam of ideas from Cage’s early career rather than as a definitive and prophetic statement. Examples such as this abound within the hallowed pages of one of the twentieth century’s most important and revered collection of writings on music.

As a musician it is tempting to indulge in an untrammelled analytic investigation of Cage’s later “chance” texts, which fall into their own indeterminate category of poetry. Surprisingly there is little scholarship on the method behind Cage’s poetry and prose. The project would not be difficult, given that Cage left us with nearly all of his working notes for these essays, held at Wesleyan University Special Collections. A few scholars, such as Marjorie Perloff and Christopher Shultis, have embarked on detailed readings of the

chance procedures involved in some of these later works, and the results of their findings, not surprisingly, once again assert the analytic profundity of Cage’s eclectic methods. Even short essays, such as the statement on Korean video artist Nam June Paik in *A Year From Monday*, were the result of meticulous sketches and calculations.⁷ In the same way that David Bernstein has noted that many of Cage’s chance-derived compositions such as *Music of Changes* (1951) contained editorial “choices” in their final assemblage, so too are many of the “chance procedures” in his essays usurped by subjective editorial changes. Chance was a means, not an end.⁸

There are many other aspects of Cage’s writings that I covered during my year of reading, and many more that



John Cage, compiling materials for *Silence* (1961),
Wesleyan University, ca. 1960-1
Photographer: Unknown
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust

Reading Cage (cont.)

were beyond the project. Cage's "mesostics," a unique approach to the acrostic, his many statements on other artists, his performative texts such as "Lecture on Nothing," and his highly developed approach to mosaic arrangements of preexisting texts, are perhaps best reserved for one thoroughly versed in twentieth century poetry or art history rather than a music scholar. However, the inherent interdisciplinarity of Cage studies forms part of his attraction as a research subject. As Adams has observed, there is ample opportunity for future research on the many eclectic collision points within Cage's oeuvre between medium-specific, and in turn, discipline-specific topics.

It is tempting to posit that all of this focus on Cage's writings justifies the perennial argument that he was a great thinker rather than a great composer. I find this problem to be simply a matter of distinction. Cage's earlier writings in particular informed and were directly driven by his compositional impulses and efforts to redefine the ontology of the musical artwork, and they are in every way intertwined with their concurrent musical works, both from an aesthetic and compositional standpoint. In this sense he inaugurated a new framework for musical production that closely mirrors the contemporary art world: a highly developed mode of discourse surrounds each aesthetic and intellectual turn that plays directly into the reception and consumption of a new piece of music. Musical production is thus intertwined with discourse and philosophy, making it not merely an object for aesthetic contemplation, but equally a philosophical and political statement. This intellectual framework best encapsulates the spirit of "reading Cage."

Finally, there has been much discussion lately of the notion of "public musicology," and the blogging framework provides one outlet for the dissemination of intellectual material in an open format. I can now say from experience that it is a difficult arena for any scholar to embark upon. Self-imposed exacting standards of timely and articulate output is an excellent way to develop skills expected of music reporters and cultural critics, and it is a skill that can only be learned in practice. The stakes are low, the rewards are few, but the experience is priceless.

Notes:

¹ Kyle Gann, foreword to *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), ix. The quote from Alfred Frankenstein comes from Cage himself, in his preface to *X: Writings '79–82'* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), ix, and as the reader may surmise, this too is an example of falling prey to the enticing world of "Cagean lore" by reprinting Cage's quotation verbatim.

² John Adams, "The Zen of Silence," *New York Times*, 19 November 2010.

³ Letter from Peter Yates to John Cage, 8 August 1953, Series IV, Correspondence, box 2, folder 7, item 24, John Cage Collection, Northwestern University Music Library, Evanston, IL.

⁴ For the definitive academic study of Cage's various appropriations see David Patterson, "Appraising the Catchwords, c1942-1959: John Cage's Asian-Derived Rhetoric and the Historical Reference of Black Mountain College" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996).

⁵ Phillip Max Gentry, "Writing *Silence*," paper presented to the National Meeting of the American Musicological Society, San Francisco, CA, November 2011.

⁶ Richard H. Brown, "The Spirit inside Each Object: John Cage, Oskar Fischinger and 'The Future of Music,'" *Journal of the Society for American Music* 6/1 (February 2012): 83-113.

⁷ Christopher Shultis, "Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the Intentionality of Nonintention," *The Musical Quarterly* 79/2 (Summer 1995): 312-350. One recent example of Marjorie Perloff's excellent research is "Cage, The Conceptual Poet," paper presented at "Cage at UCLA: A Celebration of the 100th Anniversary of John Cage's Birth," University of California, Los Angeles, 2 December 2012.

⁸ See for example, David W. Bernstein, "The Future of Cage Research: Taking a Chance," paper presented to the Plenary Session, "Contemplating Cage At 100," of the Society for Music Theory, 3 November 2012, New Orleans.

“Not Exact, but Near Enough”: Complexity and Playfulness in Nancarrow’s Study No. 41

By Margaret Thomas, Connecticut College

Editors Note: As mentioned in our piece “Reading Cage,” 2012 marks the centenary of Cage’s birth. Some American music historians may not be aware that the year is also the 100th birthday of the more reclusive composer Conlon Nancarrow. Nancarrow is best known as a composer of pieces for player piano, an instrument where mechanical reproduction of a keyboard work is achieved by a pneumatic device and punched paper rolls. A fixture of musical life in the early decades of the 20th century, the “performer-less” aspect of the player piano, and the fact it could provide performances physically impossible for a human musician, intrigued many art music composers, including Igor Stravinsky. In the following piece, Margaret Thomas pays tribute to this fascinating (and still widely unknown) American composer with a look at one of his most complex player piano studies.

A wise teacher once advised me that an analysis is not complete without examining a piece from a distance, and she intended a literal distance: one should step several feet back from the score, squint, and take in the broad shape. It struck me as silly at the time, concerned as I was then with every notated detail of a score. But I now realize that there are many things that can lead us to miss the forest for the trees, not least of which are the mesmerizing details on the page. *The Studies for Player Piano by Conlon Nancarrow (1912-1997)* frequently utilize tempo proportions, realized by simultaneous voices; when they are enacted as tempo canons, the proportions are stated on the title page of the score. They range in complexity, and include such declared proportions as:

3:4 (*Studies Nos. 15 and 18*)
 12:15:20 (*Studies Nos. 17 and 19*)
 150:160 5/7:168 3/4:180: 187 1/2:200:210:225: 240:250:262
 1/2:281 1/4 (*Study No. 37*)
 *2:2 (*Study No. 33*)
 e:π (*Study No. 40*)

It is a provocative set of possibilities, to be sure. The question is: might the stated proportions distract us from taking in other critical features of the studies, from examining the studies from a distance?

Perhaps Nancarrow’s pinnacle of proportional complexity appears in the *Study No. 41* (composed 1969-1977), whose title page is reproduced in Example 1.



Example 1:
Title page for Conlon Nancarrow’s Study No. 41

The page presents a compelling puzzle: what do the numbers mean, and how can they be formed by a musical piece? Understanding the basic structure of the piece may help. *Study No. 41* is a three-movement work; the A, B, and C shown in Example 1 represent the movements. First, 41A (which includes two voices, y and z) is played on a single piano, after which 41B (containing voices w and x) is also played on a single piano. The third movement, 41C, features A and B played on two pianos at once, with their alignment as shown in the diagram on the title page.

Basing the work’s tempos on such complicated ratios is immediately intriguing, and raises important questions about compositional intention and accuracy. In addition, while most of Nancarrow’s studies are single movements just a few minutes in length, *Study No. 41* contains three movements, and lasts approximately twenty minutes. It thus stands out rather obviously among Nancarrow’s

“Not Exact, but Near Enough” (cont.)

works not only in proportional complexity but scope. Both features, along with the *Study*'s motivic intricacy and textural density, have made it one of the most admired of Nancarrow's works. James Tenney describes it as “surely one of the most astonishing pieces in the entire literature of 20th-century music,” praising its complexity and intensity.¹ Kyle Gann, in his notable monograph on Nancarrow's music, devotes no less than eleven pages to his detailed analysis of the *Study*, which he describes as one of Nancarrow's “magna opera.”²

For some time I believed that the starting point for an analysis of *Study No. 41* must surely be its wonderfully baffling tempo proportions, and I felt compelled to consider whether we are truly meant to perceive them, whether they have specific surface, rhythmic, or large-scale implications, or whether they are merely gimmicks. But when I revisited the piece recently after not having listened to it for several years I found that the distance I gained provided just the big picture I had missed earlier: the study is considerably more playful than I realized when I was distracted by the proportions, and it is a strikingly compelling piece of music whether or not one contemplates the proportions.

A few words about the work's structure are in order. The first and second movements (*Nos. 41A* and *41B*) are tempo canons based on different proportions (the denominator and numerator of the overall proportion shown in Example 1, respectively: the tempos of A form the proportion $1/\sqrt{\pi} : \sqrt{2}/3$ and those of B project $1/\sqrt[3]{\pi} : \sqrt[3]{13/16}$). For ease of comprehensibility, it may be useful to think of these proportions as calculated at approximately 0.691 and 0.732, or relatively close to the superparticular ratios 2:3 and 3:4. In *41C* the first two movements are played simultaneously on two pianos, completing the full proportion complex:

$$\frac{1/\sqrt[3]{\pi} : \sqrt[3]{13/16}}{1/\sqrt{\pi} : \sqrt{2}/3}$$

Although *41A* and *41B* have similar formal shapes they differ significantly in their style and temporal effect; as a result, *41C* is a dense and complicated composite. Movements A and B are designed as converging-diverging tempo-proportion canons. In other words, they both contain two canonic voices that proceed at different speeds. The slower voice (z in A, x in B) enters first, followed by the faster voice (y in A, w in B). The voices eventually converge upon the same point within the canonic line, and then diverge, so that the faster voice completes the

canonic line first, leaving the slower voice to complete the material alone.

Along with their canonic processes, each of the movements displays a compelling superimposition of surface complexity (fragmented motivic construction) upon a relatively simple large-scale arch form. The arch form is defined by the converging-diverging canonic process, with the central convergence of the voices representing the peak of the arch. The arch form is also supported by parallel increases and decreases in rhythmic activity, texture, and the density of musical events.

So where do, or should, the proportions figure into our hearing of the *Study*? Nancarrow's discussion of the proportions is quite suggestive:

At that time [of the composition of *Study No. 41*], I was looking for some irrational relationships. I had this book of engineering, and I looked up some relations that were roughly what I wanted. I didn't want something that was so separated they didn't even relate, or too close that you couldn't hear it. I found that those particular numbers, transferred into simple numbers, gave the proportion more or less that I wanted. Not exact, but near enough. This was before I had written a note.³

This is startling. Despite their implied specificity, it seems the precise ratios were not so important to Nancarrow as their function in forming tempos unreconcilable to a simple proportion. Indeed, Nancarrow described the appeal irrational proportions had for him as follows: “There's no common denominator for an irrational number like the square root of two (in combination with a rational number) [like that] possible within rational numbers.”⁴ Nancarrow's use of the proportion reflects the wonderfully paradoxical combination of complexity and simplicity that is so characteristic of his music overall: an intricate proportion is transformed into “simple numbers.” Of course, by their very definition, irrational numbers cannot be specified; in order to have produced the *Study* Nancarrow had to approximate the proportions. Why not, then, simply use the rational equivalents? Part of the attraction must have been the gorgeous complexity of the original proportional structure. For a lover of numbers like Nancarrow, the proportion is a thing of beauty. And, of course, π means something even to a lay person: it is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter. Nancarrow gives no indication, however, that he had any-

“Not Exact, but Near Enough” (cont.)

thing grander in mind than simply finding “some relations that were roughly what I wanted.”

In fact, there is something playful about the idea of choosing thorny proportions such as these but then approximating them in their implementation. “Playful” is perhaps too gentle a descriptor; “teasing” might be more appropriate, since the idea of tempo proportions is elusive in a piece that does not project time signatures or tempos clearly. The score is written in proportional, non-metric notation (see Example 2).

Example 2: Nancarrow, Study No. 41A, annotated score excerpt, page A14, system 2

Under this notational system, conventional rhythmic durations do not carry their normative associations; instead, the distance between noteheads reflects the time separating their articulations, with eighth notes representing staccato articulations, and quarter notes followed by horizontal lines depicting sustained notes whose sounding duration is reflected by the length of the horizontal line. Quick flourishes are represented by “exploded drawing,” whereby the notes are written legibly outside of the staff to which they belong, with lines connected to that staff showing the time span in which the notes occur. Some gestures do suggest conventional rhythmic relationships, with noteheads spaced at distances that form simple multiples, implying something like durational eighth notes and quarter notes. For the most part, however, the idea of tempo simply does not apply to the way the *Study* sounds.

And yet Nancarrow provides those proportions in the score. Now that I have achieved a figurative distance from the study, I can hear that this contradiction between seriousness (the stated, complicated proportion) and play-

fulness (its seemingly frivolous application) is projected by—and may, in fact, be one of the most salient points of—the piece. The first movement, *41A*, achieves a jazzy, improvisatory feel by virtue of its irregularly-spaced gestures, many of which mimic jazz gestures. Once both the canonic voices are in motion the effect is something like free jazz; each voice is compound, frequently suggesting three or more simultaneous component parts (set apart registrally) that cycle through a limited set of gestures. The canon, combined with the recurring gestures, produces the effect of up to six parts that respond to one another, something like sensitive players in a jazz combo. Consider the brief score excerpt shown in Example 2. The short legato figures that conclude with a staccato note (boxed in the example), and which feature major seconds and minor thirds, could derive from a jazz standard (consider: “I Got Rhythm”). Meanwhile, there are jagged bass lines (enclosed in ovals) and glissandi-like flourishes. This comparison to a jazz combo may be unexpected, but given the stylistic evocation of jazz by the various gestures, and the sense of dialog (follow the arrows on the example), it is apt. Indeed, Gann mentions Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk in his discussion of the study; I would add Earl Hines and Louis Armstrong, two of Nancarrow’s favorite jazz musicians. Nancarrow praised Hines and Armstrong for their use of “collective improvisation,” in which “the kind of counterpoint achieved in their type of playing violates almost every academic canon except that of individuality of line and unity of feeling. Ignoring accepted precepts . . . they have built up their own system of unorthodox counterpoint . . . a counterpoint of phrase against phrase.”⁵ Mapping this description onto *Study No. 41A* is remarkably effective.⁶

On the heels of *41A* comes *41B*, which presents a serious counterpart to the playful first movement. The jazzy motives are replaced by a pulsation that incrementally accelerates to the central canonic convergence point, and then decelerates to the end, along with sustained notes and other figures. With its use of recurring and varied musical gestures, *41B* has some of the fragmented quality of *41A*, but overall it has a much greater sense of continuity. This is due in large measure to the pulsations. Even though the rate of pulsation changes, its near-constant presence serves as an underpinning for the movement, compensating in part for the disjointed other appearances of the gestures. See Example 3, which shows the w layer’s repeating Bb2 and the x layer’s repeating B0 (indicated by arrows).

“Not Exact, but Near Enough” (cont.)

Both movements have a clear arch form created not only by the canonic process but also the increases and decreases in the activity rate, texture, and dynamics. The form of *4IB*, however, achieves an even greater sense of direction as a result of the processes of acceleration and deceleration the pulsations undergo. Indeed, the weightiness of the pulsations generate *4IB*'s more serious character, hinting as they do at an elusive, ever-changing sense of tempo.

When movements *A* and *B* are combined to form movement *C*, the result is astonishing, and, at times, overwhelming in the sheer amount of music that sounds at the same time. The playful movement *A* opens the finale with its free and improvisatory character; because it proceeds by itself for about a minute and a half,⁷ the initial impression is that the *Study* is overall a ternary piece, with the third movement constituting the return of *A*. But then the more serious movement *B* joins in, and *A* and *B* together pursue an increase in texture and activity, driving toward an approximately coordinated climax and relaxation. The resulting composite displays a magnification of the interaction characteristic of much of Nancarrow's music, between local, or surface, temporal dissonance and large-scale formal and processive coordination. As a whole, the *Study* presents a fascinating combination of specificity (the intricate yet unattainable proportions) and approximation (a human margin of error), in that Nancarrow ultimately had to estimate durations in order to position the holes on the player-piano rolls, which he punched by hand. This interaction seems to embody the essence of *Study No. 41*, a work that teases us with moments that nearly achieve coordination, and with tempo and rhythmic relationships we can almost discern but that change before we are able to figure them out. In the end the *Study* meaningfully reflects Nancarrow's rich statement presented earlier, a statement that may initially have seemed disingenuous. It bears repeating. Regarding the proportions he said, “I didn't want something that was so separated they didn't even relate, or too close that you couldn't hear it. I found that those particular numbers, transferred into simple numbers, gave the proportion more or less that I wanted. Not exact, but near enough.” To focus in on the proportions—which are provocative but can never be precisely determined—is tempting, but causes us to miss the forest of this delightful and challenging music. To squint, that is, to acknowledge the faster and slower movement of the canonic voices but not worry about specifying them, allows us to take in the broad strokes of the *Study* and recognize its playfulness.

So the question remains: why did Nancarrow turn to this set of irrational proportions and include them on the title page of a score that is not, in fact, even necessary, since Nancarrow realized the piece by punching the piano rolls himself? By embracing and publicizing complex proportions while at the same time relinquishing their precise enactment, it may well be that Nancarrow has invited us to share in his fascination with what Edward Rothstein describes as the mathematical and musical sublime:

The search for the sublime links music and mathematics. Both arts seek something which combined with the beautiful provokes both contemplation and restlessness, awe and comprehension, certainty and doubt. The sublime in mathematics and music sets the mind in motion, causes it to reflect upon itself. We become aware first, in humility, of the immensity of the tasks of understanding before us and the inabilities of human imagination to encompass them. The sublime inspires an almost infinite desire, a yearning for completion which is always beyond our reach. But we are then comforted by the achievements of reason in having brought us so close to comprehending a mystery fated to remain unsolved.⁸

Notes:

¹ James Tenney, “Studies for Player Piano, Vol. I,” liner notes to *Conlon Nancarrow: Studies for Player Piano, Vol. I and II* (Wergo: compact discs WER 6168-2, 1991), 8.

² Kyle Gann, *The Music of Conlon Nancarrow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 207-218.

³ Nancarrow, as quoted in Gann, 208.

⁴ Nancarrow, as quoted in Roger Reynolds, “Inexorable Continuities . . . : A Commentary on the Music of Conlon Nancarrow,” in *Conlon Nancarrow: Selected Studies for Player Piano, Sounding Book 4* (Spring-Summer 1977), 34.

⁵ Conlon Nancarrow, “Over the Air: Swing, Jazz, Boogie-Woogie.” *Modern Music* 17/4 (1940): 263-265.

⁶ For a fuller discussion of elements of collective improvisation in Nancarrow's music see Margaret Thomas, “Conlon Nancarrow, ‘Hot’ Jazz, and the Principle of Collective Improvisation,” in *Online Symposium: Conlon Nancarrow, Life and Music* (October 2012), <http://conlonnancarrow.org/symposium/papers/thomas/thomas.htm>.

⁷ In the Wergo recording, *Complete Studies for Player Piano, Vols. 1 and 2* (Wergo WER 60166/67-50, 1991).

⁸ Edward Rothstein, *Emblems of Mind* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 189.

Guthrie Centennial Scholarship: Ruminating on Woody at 100

By Ray Allen

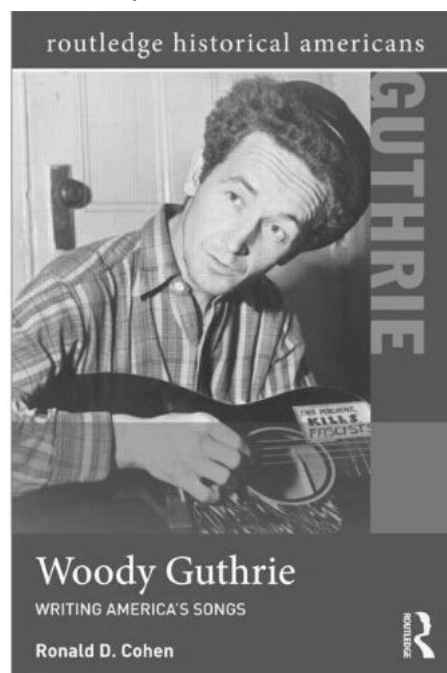
There is certainly no dearth of information on America's most heralded folk singer, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie. Serious students of folk music are familiar with the wealth of published materials devoted to his life and music that have appeared over the past two decades. Ed Cray's superb biography, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (W.W. Norton, 2004) provides an essential road map. Mark Allan Jackson's *Prophet Singer; The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (University of Mississippi Press, 2007) moves deeper into the songs, while Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson's edited volume, *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie* (Wesleyan University Press, 1999), explores his myriad contributions as a song writer, journalist, and political activist.

Guthrie's recordings abound. His seminal *Dust Bowl Ballads* collection, originally recorded in April of 1940 for RCA Victor, has been reissued numerous times, most recently in 2000 by Buddha Records. Rounder Records' *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings*, featuring highlights from the hours of singing and storytelling Guthrie recorded for Alan Lomax in March of 1940, was released in 1992. Smithsonian Folkways has produced over a dozen Guthrie compilations, most notably *Woody Guthrie: The Asch Recordings, Volumes 1-4*, a four CD set which brings together the best of his mid-1940s work with Moe Asch. Guthrie's legendary 1944 performances with Cisco Houston and Sonny Terry have been re-mastered and released in 2009 on Rounder Records four CD collection, *Woody Guthrie: My Dusty Road*. Beginning in the late 1990s the Guthrie Archives opened its doors to a select group of contemporary singer/songwriters/activists who set his unpublished lyrics to new music—Billy Bragg's 1998 acclaimed *Mermaid Avenue* and the Klezmatics' 2006 Grammy winning *Wonder Wheel* are two of the best works to emerge from this ongoing project.

With all this one wonders if anything remains to be said about the man. The sponsors of the 2012 Guthrie Centennial Celebration seemed to think so. In addition to organizing a series of Guthrie conferences and con-

certs around the country, they encouraged a new surge of Guthrie research and publication. As author Ronald Cohen unashamedly admits in his introduction, *Woody Guthrie: Writing America's Songs* was timed to coincide with the festivities. The work is a pocket biography, packing Guthrie's life story into three concise chapters. For readers who do not have time to wade through Cray's lengthier tome Cohen delivers the essentials in clear, engaging prose. The most significant contribution is the final chapter, "Woody's Legacy," which traces the construction of the Guthrie mythos by critics, scholars, and fellow musicians over the past forty years. His influence on Bob Dylan, Pete Seeger, and Bruce Springsteen is

well known, but rockers Billy Bragg, Tom Morello, and the Dropkick Murphys' adulation for Guthrie demonstrates how his songs continue to resonate with new generations of singers. The work is further enhanced by the inclusion of several choice primary documents, most importantly Pete Seeger's insightful 1963 reminiscence, "Remembering Woody," and Guthrie's introduction to the 1967 volume *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard Hit People*. The latter is a marvelous collection of Depression-era topical folk songs that Guthrie, at the behest of Alan Lomax and with the help of Pete Seeger, began compiling and annotating in the 1940s. *Hard Hitting Songs* has been brought back into print by Bison Books (2012), just in time for the centennial.

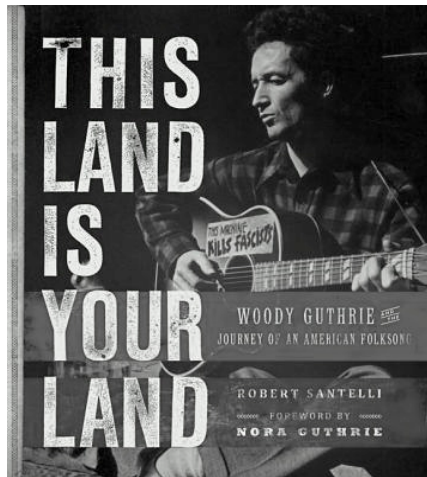


Ronald Cohen, *Woody Guthrie: Writing America's Songs* (Routledge Press, 2012)

Robert Santelli of the Grammy Museum and Nora Guthrie of the Guthrie Archives, the two primary organizers of the Guthrie Centennial, have each authored notable works. Santelli's *This Land is Your Land: Woody Guthrie and the Journey of an American Folk Song* (Running Press, 2012) melds Guthrie's biography with the story of his most famous song. Written in February of 1940, shortly after he had arrived in New York City, "This Land" was allegedly Guthrie's response to Kate Smith's zealously patriotic and astoundingly popular rendition of Irving Berlin's "God Bless America." But the song remained buried in Guthrie's notebook for four years until he recorded it for Moe Asch, who did not release it until 1951 as part of a compilation of children's songs for his new Folkways label. This short version, the

Guthrie Centennial Scholarship (cont.)

one that extolled the wonders of the American landscape but omitted controversial verses condemning private



Robert Santelli, *This Land is Your Land: Woody Guthrie and the Journey of an American Folk Song* (Running Press, 2012)

property and empathizing with the hungry victims of corrupt capitalism, was taught to millions of American school kids in the 1950s and 1960s. Santelli recounts the various iterations of the song on record and in print, culminating with the full version, protest verses and all, sung by Pete Seeger and Bruce Springsteen

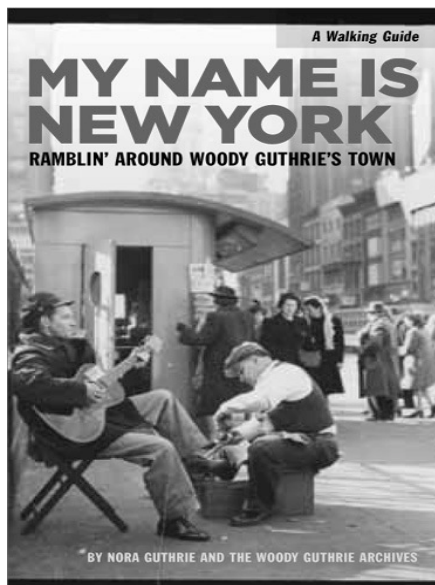
on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial for the 2009 Obama Inauguration. Along the way Santelli introduces us not only to Guthrie and his important associates—Lomax, Seeger, Asch, etc—but also to Kate Smith and Irving Berlin in order to provide meaningful context to the song’s origins. The final two chapters trace “This Land” and Guthrie’s legacy through the folk music revival of the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond via Dylan and Springsteen. Some scholars will undoubtedly be disappointed by the absence of footnotes, but the Acknowledgments section of the book reveals that Santelli did his homework, basing his account on extensive research in the Guthrie and Asch/Smithsonian Archives and interviews with key family members and musicians. Most importantly, Santelli tells a good story—this is as engaging a read as you will find in any of the serious literature devoted to American folk music.

Nora Guthrie’s *My Name is New York: Ramblin’ Around Woody Guthrie’s Town* (powerHouse Books, 2012)

offers a guided walking tour of nineteen sites where Guthrie resided during his twenty-seven years in New York City. The tour begins at activist/actor Will Geer’s

former posh 5th Avenue Apartment where Guthrie crashed when he first arrived in New York in February of 1940. Other highlights include the midtown boarding house where he wrote “This Land Is Your Land,” the three Greenwich Village Almanac (Singers) houses, and the various Coney Island apartments where he and his second wife, modern dancer Marjorie Mazia, raised their family. These latter sites remind us of Guthrie’s unlikely connections to the New York modern arts scene and to Brooklyn’s progressive Jewish community via Marjorie and her mother, the renowned Yiddish playwright Aliza Greenblatt. A Coney Island jetty where Guthrie’s ashes were sprinkled into the Atlantic Ocean in October of 1967 brings closure to the tour. The work is replete with splendid historical photographs, original song lyrics from the Guthrie Archives, and striking reproductions of Guthrie’s drawings. The guide chronicles Guthrie’s career as a song writer and activist during the second half of his life, portraying him as one of the few Okie migrants who came to call New York, rather than California, his new home.

While these popular works and biographies lay out the Guthrie grand narrative in ample detail, there is certainly plenty of room for more rigorous analysis. A series of essays, edited by British historian John S. Partington, begins to fill this void. *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie: A Critical Appraisal* (Ashgate, 2011) brings together an international cast of researchers who examine Guthrie’s work from a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives. Familiar faces Ed Cray and Ronald Cohen blend history and politics in assessing the influences of folklorist Alan Lomax and activist Will Geer respectively on Guthrie’s career. Richard Nate and Will Kaufman explore the effects of New Deal politics and Culture Front Art on Guthrie’s philosophy and activism, while Martin Butler traces the emergence of the artist’s anti-fascist consciousness. Close reads

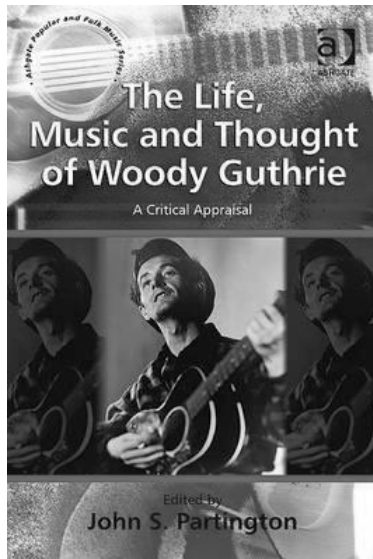


Nora Guthrie, *My Name is New York: Ramblin’ Around Woody Guthrie’s Town* (powerHouse Books, 2012)

of Guthrie’s hobo songs by Butler and the folk outlaw ballads by D.A. Pointer, along with insightful analyses of contemporary performances of “This Land” by Frank

Guthrie Centennial Scholarship (cont.)

Erik Pointer, bring fresh insight to the construction of Guthrie's iconic and at times contested legacy. Another highlight is Mark Alan Jackson's probing study of Guthrie's modern urban working man, "Jackhammer John," who is deftly positioned within the pantheon of legendary American folk heroes.



John Partington, *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie: A Critical Appraisal* (Ashgate, 2011)

they all are men) exhibit a tremendous command of the primary and secondary literature, and their interpretations dig deep. The only drawback to the volume is the exorbitant \$100 price tag which puts it beyond reach for most. Readers can only hope that their local or university library will purchase the book, or that the publishers of Ashgate will eventually come out with a more reasonably priced paper edition of this valuable work.

In December of 1967, two months after Guthrie's death, *Sing Out!* editor Erwin Silber reminded his readers that Woody was "in the most fundamental sense a totally-committed, 24-hour revolutionary determined to turn this whole world upside down." Silber's words were prompted by worries that Guthrie had been deradicalized during the red-baiting years of the McCarthy era that coincided with the surging popularity of the short and politically neutralized version of "This Land." Moreover, while Guthrie had initially been an inspirational anti-establishment figure for protest singers of the early 1960s, Silber fretted that Dylan and other young singers had come to embrace a more abstract and introspective style of songwriting that belied Guthrie's revolutionary mission. These concerns

The Partington collection is not for the uninitiated, as it does not provide an overview of Guthrie's life and achievements, nor is there a single theme that connects the essays. Rather, knowledgeable readers are presented with a series of in-depth case studies from which to pick and choose depending on their interests. Serious students of Guthrie and American folk music will want this book—the contributors to a man (yes,

were revisited forty years later by folk singer and professor of American literature Will Kaufman, who turned to the Guthrie Archives and the Library of Congress holdings for answers. The result, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), is unquestionably the most significant scholarly work to emerge around the Centennial. Surveying his activities, songs, and writings, Kaufman traces the evolution of Guthrie's radical political consciousness from his initial encounters with activists Will Geer and Ed Robbins in California through his association with Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers, and other progressive artists and intellectuals he encountered in New York.

A regular contributor to the communist publication *People's World*, Guthrie's disgust with capitalism was obvious in songs like "Jesus Christ" that moved beyond the simple description of hardship to a call to arms: "When the patience of the workers gives away/Twould be better for you rich if you'd never been born." His support of left-leaning unions was unwavering, but his attitudes went beyond the call for solidarity echoed in the rousing chorus of his familiar song "Union Maid." As evidence Kaufman presents an unpublished alternative version of the song titled "Union Maid #1," in which Guthrie recounts the brutal sexual assault and beating of African American sharecropper-turned-activist Annie Mae Meriweather that includes the damning chorus:

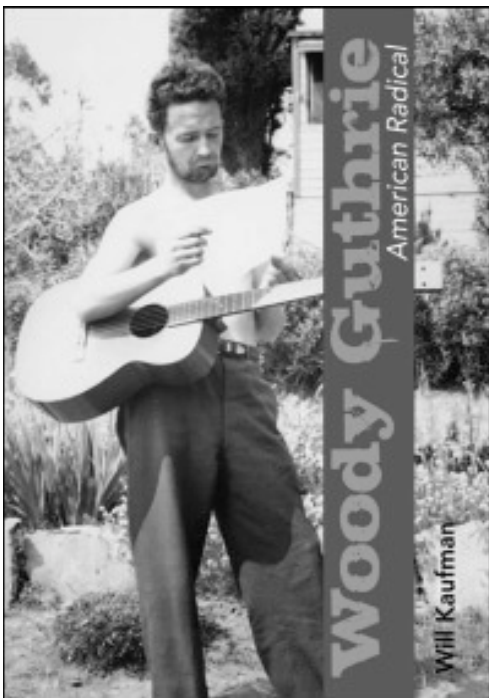
You have robbed my family and my people,
My Holy Bible says we are equal,
Your money is the root of all our evil,
I know a poor man will win the world.

Guthrie's ire with economic exploitation would eventually parallel his condemnation of racism, a subject to which Kaufman devotes an entire chapter. Contact with activists and African American musicians Lead Belly, Sonny Terry, and Josh White in New York opened up Guthrie's racial consciousness and enabled him to connect the struggles of poor dust bowl Okies to the travails of African American sharecroppers. Kaufman examines a number of Guthrie's lesser-known but powerful anti-lynching and anti-Jim Crow songs, including "The Ballad of Rosa Lee Ingram" and "Don't Kill my Baby and My Son," the former recounting the horrors of a lynching in Guthrie's home town of Okemah, Oklahoma, the year before he was born.

Guthrie Centennial Scholarship (cont.)

Kaufman is quick to remind readers that despite his scathing critique of American class and racial injustice, Guthrie saw himself as nothing short of a loyal patriot. He was an enthusiastic supporter of World War II, rallying Americans to the cause with his homage to a torpedoed US convoy escort ship titled “The Sinking of the Reuben James,” and brazenly condemning fascism with ditties like “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave.” Guthrie saw no contradiction between being a true-blooded American and a committed socialist; he was a complex and at times paradoxical figure, capable of heart-felt adulation for his country and its working people, but quick to condemn the greed of unfettered capitalism and the corruption of authoritarian big government.

The work concludes with a reflection on the efforts Pete Seeger and others have made to “reassert Guthrie’s radical challenge” since his passing in 1967. From established icons like Bruce Springsteen, Bono, and Emmylou Harris to more recent upstarts Tom Morello, Billy Bragg, and the Indigo Girls, scores of artists on both sides of the Atlantic have taken up the call to sing Guthrie’s words and channel his spirit in hopes of upsetting an intransigent system that continues to favor the privileged few over the disempowered many.



Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (University of Illinois Press, 2011)

Some of the terrain Kaufman travels has already been covered by Jackson in the aforementioned work *Prophet Singer*. But while Jackson’s primary focus is the songs themselves, Kaufman offers a broader analysis of Guthrie’s politics based on his lyrics (complete songs and unpublished verse), pub-

lished prose, and unpublished archival writings. Lucidly written and scrupulously sourced, *American Radical* forces readers to re-imagine Guthrie as both folk poet and revolutionary artist.

Although Guthrie appeared at hundreds of rallies and benefit concerts, recordings of him singing for a live audience are rare. But in 2001 two spools of wire recordings surfaced in a Florida storage closet and were donated to the Guthrie Archives. From these wires sprang the sounds of a 1949 performance Guthrie made in a small auditorium of the Jewish Community Center in Newark, NJ. Highlights of the performance were edited and released by the Guthrie Foundation on a CD entitled *The Live Wire*, which won a 2008 Grammy for Best Historical Recording. Now the recording, complete with notes by Nora Guthrie and archivist Jorge Arévalo Mateus, has been made more widely available by Rounder Records (2011).

The concert opens with a brief explanation of folk music by Marjorie Mazia who serves as on-stage commentator and interviewer. Guthrie responds to her initial questions by narrating a meandering tale of his childhood in Oklahoma; ten minutes later he gets around to his first song of the evening, a ballad his mother sang to him, “Black Diamond.” At Marjorie’s prompting he talks about the Texas dust storms and sings “The Great Dust Storm,” “Talking Dust Bowl Blues,” and “Tom Joad.” And so the evening proceeds, with Marjorie introducing various topics and Guthrie responding with rambling stories and songs. The musical performances are loose with Guthrie singing in his signature flat, slightly nasal delivery that plods along, privileging the content of the lyrics over the beauty of the voice. The guitar accompaniment is simple, occasionally slipping out of tune and time. Indeed it is Guthrie the narrator rather than Guthrie the singer or musician who shines on these recordings—wit and wisdom inform his passionate desire to educate his audience about the plight of America’s rural poor and working folk who inspired his songs. Previously unheard is Marjorie’s delightfully informative voice, striving to channel her husband’s songs and narrations into a coherent stage performance.

The most important recordings released to coincide with the centennial are found on the collection appropriately titled *Woody at 100: The Woody Guthrie Centennial Collection*. Produced and annotated by Robert Santelli and Jeff Place for Smithsonian Folkways (2012), the box

Guthrie Centennial Scholarship (cont.)

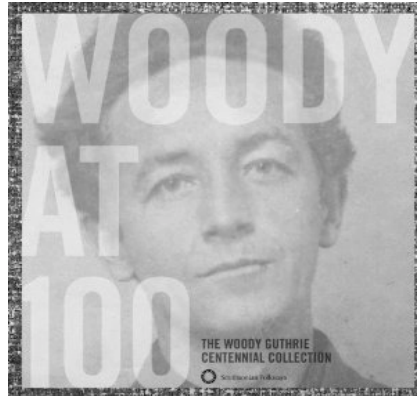
set includes a 150 page booklet and fifty-seven tracks on three CDs. The packaging is exquisite, indeed perhaps a tad overly extravagant given Guthrie's proletariat persona. The coffee table, twelve-by-twelve inch format allows ample room for reproductions of historical photographs, album covers, and Guthrie's pen-and-ink, brush-and-ink, and watercolor art. Informative essays by Santelli and Place reflect on Guthrie's career and prowess as a song writer. A valuable piece by Peter Lachapelle recounts the unearthing of four songs from Guthrie's Los Angeles days as a radio singer—apparently the earliest and only recordings of Guthrie made prior to his trip east in 1940. An extensive biblio-discography compiled by Pace and Guy Logsdon lists the details of every Guthrie studio and radio recording session, stretching from his initial Los Angeles recordings through his final 1954 session for Moe Asch.

Not all the music here is new, in keeping with Smithsonian Folkways practice of repackaging material that they have previously released, and in this case, even re-released. Of the forty-five titles on CD 1 and CD 2 of the new *Woody at 100* collection, all but six are found on the 1999 reissue compilation, *Woody Guthrie: The Asch Recordings, Volumes 1-4*, and four of those remaining six appear on other Smithsonian Folkways releases. The new material, the real gems, is found on CD 3, beginning with the four cuts made in Los Angeles in 1937 or 1939. Here Guthrie sings in a youthful, exuberant voice, accompanying himself with strong guitar runs and exceptional harmonica fills. Included are two previously unreleased pieces, "Them Big City Ways" and "Skid Row Serenade," both inspired by Guthrie's experiences in Los Angeles. Radio broadcasts of WNEW's *The Ballad Gazette* (1945), the BBC's *Children's Hour* (1944), and WNYC's *Folk Songs of America* capture Guthrie at the height of his musical proficiency, demonstrating his mastery of the radio medium. Another standout is a nine minute snippet of a live People's Songs Hootenanny with Guthrie, Lee Hays, Pete Seeger, Bess Lomax Hawes, and Cisco Houston that was recorded by Moe Asch sometime in the mid-1940s. The singing is spontaneous and playful,

and the hilarious Guthrie/Hays mock debate captures the spirit of these early hootenannies. The CD ends with a touching lullaby for little Cathy, led by Guthrie with Marjorie harmonizing on the chorus, recorded a year before the tragic death of their four-year-old daughter in a fire.

So if you already have the four Guthrie/Asch volumes that contain most of the songs on CDs 1 and 2, is this new package really worth it? Well, if you are one of those Guthrie aficionados who must have it all, and if you've got that do-re-mi, the answer is unequivocally yes. The Los Angeles songs, the radio performances, and live Hootenanny track fill serious voids in the Guthrie recording legacy and together lead to a deeper appreciation of his artistry and activism.

As the Centennial comes to an end and we sift our way through this most recent crop of Guthrie books and recordings we might ask if the historical picture is finally complete. Are we ready to collectively chorus to Woody, wherever he currently rambles, "So Long it's Been Good to Know Ya"? Given his iconic stature in the world of American folk music, the breadth of his output, and the fact that his songs continue to inform and inspire new generations of musicians, the answer is probably no. The Guthrie Archive will continue to be mined from its new home in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where it will be housed in the multi-million dollar Guthrie Center. Rounder Records hopes to release an expanded collection of Guthrie's 1940 Library of Congress recordings next year, while University of Southern California historians William Deverell and Darryl Holter plan to edit a collection of the best Guthrie presentations from the centennial conferences. Stand by Guthrie fans; more is yet to come.



Woody at 100: The Woody Guthrie Centennial Collection.
(Smithsonian Folkways, 2012)

Fresh Insights into Boone and Handy

By Edward A. Berlin

John William Boone (1864–1927), known as “Blind Boone,” was a prodigiously talented African American pianist and composer. As an infant he developed what was known as “brain fever”; a Union army surgeon treated him with the then-standard procedure of removing his eyes. Boone went on to have an illustrious career and a life of fulfillment. As a fifteen-year-old, he entered into what was to be a lifelong professional and personal alliance with John Lange, Jr. (1840–1916). Lange had been born a slave but developed into a shrewd business man who nourished Boone’s talent and helped him develop his artistic talents. Boone married Lange’s youngest sister in 1889.

Boone was originally promoted as a competitor to and successor of Thomas “Blind Tom” Wiggins (1849–1908), an African American pianist-composer who was frequently portrayed as a miraculous freak, but who was probably an autistic savant of limited abilities outside of music. Boone and Lange, choosing not to exploit his blindness, adopted the motto “Merit, Not Sympathy, Wins.” Boone went on to have a prosperous career, even becoming known in his native Missouri as a local philanthropist. His concerts—an announced 7,200 by 1913—featured standard repertory by Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, and Gottschalk, along with his own virtuoso piano pieces and songs based on African American folk melodies. His reputation survives to the present day because of his published compositions and piano rolls. He is celebrated annually in Columbia, Missouri, with a Blind Boone Ragtime and Early Jazz Festival.

In 1915, Lange commissioned Melissa Fuell, a vocalist with the Blind Boone Concert Company, to write Boone’s biography. The first edition of the book was issued the same year with the title *Blind Boone: His Early Life and His Achievements*. The second edition, reviewed here, was published in 1918, after Lange’s death (and after Fuell had married, changing her name to Fuell-Cuther). The book’s overly worshipful tone toward Boone and Lange can be difficult to take at times, but as Fuell had complete access to the principals it forms and remains a major source

of information about Boone and the musical and cultural scene in which he lived. The book is appended with lyrics and music of several of Boone’s songs and two of his elaborate piano scores—*Old Folks at Home: Grand Fantasia* and *Grand Valse de Concert*—works that place him well within the virtuoso tradition of 19th-century America.



John William Boone (“Blind Boone”) Courtesy of blind-boonehome.com

In the current reprint, *Merit, Not Sympathy, Wins: The Life and Times of Blind Boone* (Truman State University Press, 2012), editors Mary Collins Barile and Christine Montgomery enhance the value of the original text immensely with meticulous annotation in page-bottom footnotes. Using historical newspapers, public records and other sources they elucidate the text with identifications and discussions of the various individuals and institutions mentioned and clarify historical events. Added to these annotations are a group of excellent essays. Mike Shaw and Christine Montgomery round out the biography with a summary of Boone’s story after Fuell-Cuther’s 2nd edition; Max Morath provides a foreword that compares Boone’s life and career with that of Scott Joplin

(ca. 1867–1917); pianist John Davis, who has recorded Boone’s works, examines the music; Greg Olson and Gary R. Kremer discuss Missouri during Boone’s and Lange’s years; and Marilyn Hillsman and Mary Barile write of Melissa Fuell-Cuther and her connections with Boone. This is a model, exemplary reprint.

Whereas copies of Boone’s biography had become difficult to find prior to the current reprint, W. C. Handy’s *Blues, An Anthology* (1926) has been available in various editions issued in 1949 (renamed *Treasury of the Blues*), 1972 (reverting to the original title), 1985, and 1990. Consequently, one is justified in wondering about the need for yet another edition. Elliott S. Hurwitt, compiler of the new, expanded edition of W. C. Handy’s *Blues, An Anthology. Complete Words and Music of 70 Great Songs and Instrumentals* (Dover Publications, 2012) makes a compelling case.

The first edition grew out of a friendship between

Fresh Insights into Boone and Handy (cont.)

Handy and music-loving Wall Street lawyer Abbe Niles. As Handy responded to Niles's questions about the blues, the book gradually emerged, with Handy providing the music and Niles writing an outstanding, pioneering introduction on the blues, along with notes about the individual selections. Miguel Covarrubias was brought aboard to provide vivid, idiosyncratic pictorial illustrations.

In the original edition, the musical contents begin with thirteen folk blues, notated and arranged by Handy.

These are followed by thirty composed blues, thirteen by Handy, with the balance including songs by such composers as Spencer Williams and Will Nash. Missing are a number of key pieces by Handy, including "Memphis Blues," "Yellow Dog Blues," "Beale Street Blues," "Shoebot's Serenade," and "Ole Miss." Handy had been deceived into selling his copyright for "Memphis Blues," and had sold the others when in financial need. The volume also has material that might be considered outside the proper realm of blues, introduced to show the influence of the genre. These include such popular songs as Jerome Kern's "Left All Alone Again Blues," Irving Berlin's "The Schoolhouse Blues," Gershwin's "The Half of It, Dearie, Blues," and piano reduction excerpts of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F* and John Alden Carpenter's ballet *Krazy Kat*. Despite the absence of major Handy pieces, the original edition of fifty selections received glowing reviews and became an influence on the writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

By the time of the 1949 edition, now titled *A Treasury of the Blues, Complete Words and Music of 67 Great Songs from Memphis Blues to the Present Day*, Handy had recovered his copyrights and included his previously omitted blues compositions. He deleted the Gershwin, Kern, Berlin, and Carpenter works, but added other then-popular, blues-influenced songs like "Willow Weep for Me" and an excerpt from Ellington's "Mood Indigo." The

Covarrubias drawings were retained and Niles updated his essay and selection notes accordingly.

The 1972 edition reverted to the original title, deleted the pop songs that had been added in 1949, reduced the musical content to fifty-three selections, and Jerry Silverman added guitar chords to most pieces. The 1985 and 1990 editions are both reprints of the 1972 edition, the 1990 having a new introduction by William Ferris (retained in the 2012 edition).



W.C. Handy composing at the piano
Courtesy of themusicisover.com

For the current, 2012 edition, Hurwitt restores important blues that appeared only in the 1949 edition, including "Baby Seals Blues" (1912), "Dallas Blues" (1912), "Long Lost Blues" (1914), and "Rice Hotel Blues" (1915). He adds other early, significant pieces that relate to Handy's and Niles's own selections: "The Blues (But I'm Too Blamed Mean to Cry)" (1912), "New York Tango Blues" (1914), "A Bunch of Blues" (1915), and several others, bringing the new total to seventy pieces.

Hurwitt's nine-page introduction presents a brief history of the blues and its evolution through the decades, including references that pre-date the beginning of blues publishing in 1912. He relates Handy's story and his role in the history of the blues, how the 1926 publication came about and how it changed in its various editions, Niles's essential part in the publication, and the importance of his essay analyzing the history and structure of the blues. Hurwitt's introduction, and his musical restorations and additions, increase immeasurably the usefulness of W. C. Handy's historic volume.

Brass Band Music of the Civil War

By Raoul Camus

In the 1960s, the centennial of the Civil War inspired a renewed interest in the music of that period, especially performances in military ceremonies, camp duties, and social occasions by the regimental bands and field music. Around this time Frederick Fennell and the Eastman Wind Ensemble brought out two beautifully illustrated and thoroughly documented LPs, one for the Union side, the other for the Confederacy. It was a five-year labor of love. Released on CD in the 1990s, these recordings remain the standard in historically-informed performances of Civil War music.

The sesquicentennial has prompted additional Civil War brass bands. We now have the 1st Brigade Wisconsin Band, the 11th North Carolina Regiment Band, the 26th North Carolina Regimental Band, the Federal City Brass Band, the Great Western Band of St. Paul, the 4th Cavalry Regiment Band, and the Dodworth Saxhorn Band, among others. A new group, the Coates Brass Band, has just issued a CD entitled *Quickstep: Brass Band Music of the American Civil War*. It features the music of Thomas Coates, leader of the 47th Pennsylvania Infantry Regimental Band. Curiously, the enigmatic Coates tried to hide everything about his personal life, including his birthdate and place. Michael O'Connor has done a fine job in tracking down this elusive bandmaster/composer, and has made performance editions of many of Coates's compositions, based on creative historical research.

Military regulations at the time, while limiting regular army bands to two principal musicians and twenty-four musicians for the band, did not regulate the instrumentation of the volunteer bands. Gilmore, for example, had twenty drummers, twelve buglers, and a thirty-six piece mixed wind band in his 24th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Band. On 14 August 1861 Thomas Coates and twenty-three musicians enlisted as the band for the 47th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers. Less than a year later, however, General Order 91 directed that all volunteer regimental bands be mustered out of service. While the musicians were offered the opportunity of transferring to the newly authorized brigade bands, none did. Three became company musicians and the other twenty-one presumably returned home to Easton, having served only one year while the regiment continued to serve until January 1866.

The reconstituted Coates Brass Band consists of a director/conductor and fifteen musicians performing on period instruments. The instrumentation is typical for a

brass band of the period: three Eb cornets, two Bb cornets, three Eb horns, two Bb tenor horns, one baritone horn, two basses, snare and bass drum. There was no conductor as such, as the leader normally played the solo Eb cornet part. The instruments are a mixture of over-the-shoulder, bell front and bell upward. Considering the cost of these instruments in today's market, mainly caused by the renewed interest in this period, this mixture is not surprising, although Dodworth (1853) admonished, "care should be taken to have all the bells one way." The recording session must have been a challenge for the sound technicians. The playing is excellent—quite an achievement by musicians working on unfamiliar instruments. Since they go to so much trouble for authenticity, however, it would have been preferable if the conductor, Douglas Hedwig, an accomplished trumpet player, played one of the cornet parts instead of waving a baton, as indicated in the photo.



Quickstep: Brass Band Music of the American Civil War

The music is typical of what a Civil War band would be expected to perform. The company fifers and drummers would provide the camp duties, and it was up to the band to perform at regimental ceremonies and social occasions. Therefore, their band books would include quick and common step marches, funeral marches, hymns, dances, and concert pieces. O'Connor has made an informed selection, typical of what a bandsman's daily requirements would be. Of the nineteen selections, six are quicksteps, three are patriotic songs, two each of funeral marches, hymns, minstrelsy and concert works, one waltz, one two-step, and

Brass Band Music of the Civil War

(cont.)

one unidentified work, perhaps intended as a quick step. O'Connor might have included a common step march and perhaps more concert works, though that is a minor quibble. More important it would have been very helpful if more information were given about each of the pieces, including sources, other than simply giving titles. For example, since the two-step is normally associated with John Philip Sousa's "Washington Post" and the dance craze that swept Europe and America in the 1890s, how does one explain the inclusion of "Cottage by the Sea Two-Step" in a Civil War band book? Similarly, what do "Turk" and "Phantom" signify?

Military regulations at the time stipulated 110 steps per minute for the quickstep. It was therefore very disappointing to find that none of the selections marked "quickstep" were at that tempo. The closest was the "Cottage by the Sea Two-Step," the others ranging from ninety-two to 106. "Temperance," at ninety-two, is closer to the common step or grand march, which regulations stipulate at ninety. Even the waltz was too slow for that period; a proper tempo would have added a spirited change of pace to the selections.

Despite these criticisms, these musical performances are strong and the research sound. Hopefully the band will continue to bring this important repertoire of 19th century American music to the public through concerts and future recordings.

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Institute News

by Jeffrey Taylor

With this issue *American Music Review* makes the plunge into cyberspace. It is an exciting time for both the Institute and our now forty-one-year-old publication. Naturally, kinks remain to be worked out, but the possibilities are remarkable: links to musical examples, embedded videos, various means of response by our readers, and much more. We aim to maintain a lively journal that joins scholarly weight with a style accessible to musicologists and enthusiasts alike, while taking full advantage of the century's almost daily advances in technology. And we remain committed to all our readers, whether iPad carriers or fans of pen and ink, and have made printout easy for those who prefer hard copy. We also welcome feedback at any time, whether posted on our Facebook page or sent through the USPS. Finally, we will maintain a small number of printed copies that, for a fee, we will be happy to send via snail-mail.

In addition to moving *AMR* online, we have continued to sponsor events here at Brooklyn College that fulfill our mission of promoting music-making in New York and the U.S. at large. Most important, we co-sponsored, with the Grammy Museum and the Woody Guthrie Archives, a centenary celebration of Guthrie's legacy and potent influence on American music. With **Will Kaufman's** 20 September performance-lecture on Guthrie's freedom songs as a preview, **A Woody Guthrie Centennial Celebration** on 22 September proved an unqualified hit. An enthusiastic standing-room only crowd took part in our day-long conference on Guthrie's life and music, with offerings by a variety of Guthrie scholars (including Sean Wilentz, whose keynote talk is included in this issue) and musicians-activists Judy Collins, Lorin Sklamberg and Billy Bragg. The music of the evening's "This Land Is Your Land" concert, sponsored by the Grammy Museum, ranged from old-time country music to blues to klezmer, with a ninety-three-year-old Pete Seeger leading the near-capacity crowd in spirited renditions of some of Guthrie's best-known songs.

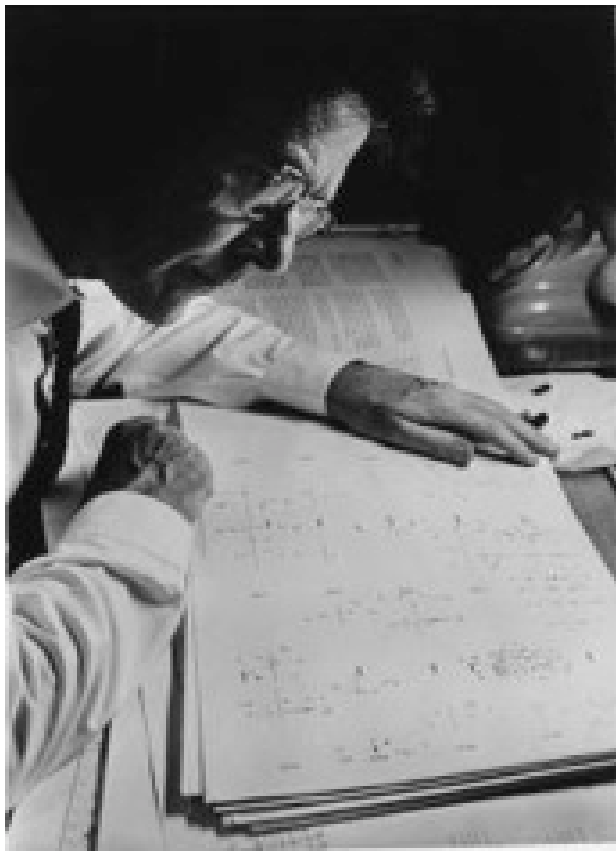
Our Music in Polycultural America fall speaker series began on 9 October with a presentation by jazz scholar **Francesco Martinelli** who spoke of guitar genius Django Reinhardt, demonstrating how his musicianship inspired much of the European jazz scene in the 1930s and 40s. On 13 November, a concert by Brooklyn College's own **Conservatory Singers**, conducted by **James Bowyer**, presented spiritual and folk-song arrangements by a variety of American composers; both Bowyer and HISAM Director **Jeffrey Taylor** offered commentary on the works. On 19 November Brooklyn College faculty member **David Grubbs** discussed his interdisciplinary collaborations with visual artists Anthony McCall and Angela Bullock, focusing on recent installations that also double as single start-to-finish presentations. Look for video clips of some of our talks on our website, hopefully by the end of spring!

Finally, we welcome **Whitney George** as the Institute's new Graduate Assistant. An emerging composer and conductor, Whitney is pursuing a doctorate at the CUNY Graduate Center while quickly making a name for herself on New York's new music scene. We are fortunate to have found a talented artist and American music enthusiast who is also computer-savvy, and are delighted she will help guide us through the technological challenges of HISAM's next chapter.

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*John Cage, studying the score
of Atlas Eclipticalis (1961)
Photographer: Unknown
Courtesy of the John Cage Trust*

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