Madison County Project: Collaborative Ethnography, Tradition, and Media

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ABSTRACT
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Madison County Project: Collaborative Ethnography, Tradition, and Media
(Under the direction of Dr. Glenn Hinson)

Madison County Project explores the intertwined traditions of ballad singing and documentary work in Madison County, North Carolina. These dual traditions were investigated through interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with multiple generations of singers, filmmakers, photographers, and members of the cultural community. A focus is placed on the youngest generation of ballad singers, and how their modern lives interact with their traditional art form. This project culminates in a triad of research products including this text, a documentary film, and a multimedia website. These three—taken independently and working in tandem—allow for broad conversations around key cultural and social issues, encourage widely diverse audiences in such conversations, and provide a theatre in which to explore collaborative ethnography.
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As we approached Western North Carolina, the variegated blues rolled along the skyline and emitted a calmness laced with a mellowed air of history. After passing through Burke County on I-40, the interstate grew increasingly hilly as it bent to reveal skyward humps of blues and greens tangled between the earth and sky. Gradually, the nose of our van turned upward to climb among those mountains, curving on man-made asphalt paths around, through, and on top of McDowell County, Buncombe County, and eventually, Madison County. Rob Roberts and I were headed with a small crew to Mars Hill for the 37th annual Bascom Lamar Lunsford Festival with a carload of camera gear, lights, and audio equipment. This was not our first trip to Madison County, nor would it be our last. But, this trip held a different kind of excitement. As we struggled to find parking close enough to lug all of our equipment to the festival’s center, we could hear the sounds and smell the aromas of many of North Carolina’s vernacular traditions. There were people stirring apple butter in a copper pot, potters throwing clay on a wheel, various farm animals tethered for petting, quilts stretched on frames, wool and fibers being spun, cloggers pounding on plywood stages, folks turning wood with foot pedals, and various pockets of musicians jamming on hay bales.
But we’d come for more than beauty shots of Madison County’s varied talents and traditions. A number of our consultants were going to be singing in a ballad-swap that afternoon. Looking to set up our equipment, I pulled on the large wooden door of the Montague Building, where the singers would be performing, and entered a dark foyer. About fifty chairs were set up along both sides of the room, and the walls were hung with various agricultural tools, photographs, and illustrations of local pastoral history. The performance area terminated in a large indoor scene set up to resemble a front porch; this platform led into another room complete with a stone hearth and an array of homemaking implements of decades past. We quickly learned that this building was home to Mars Hill College’s Rural Life Museum, and that the ballad swap would be held here on the edge of a recreated wooden porch, surrounded by log walls chinked with red clay, and peppered with weathered butter churns.

The scene certainly evoked a sense of place; nonetheless, Roberts and I wondered aloud about the choices in creating this museum, and—more immediately—in staging the ballad swap here. While there was a critical component to our thoughts, it remained an exciting prospect; we were about to film our consultants—young, modern, ballad singers—singing traditional, a cappella ballads alongside some of their older musical peers in an environment meant to recall the rural history of this region. Moreover, all of this was taking place at a festival honoring Lunsford, one of the early collectors and musicians to document the ballads sung in this area.

The documentary work in Madison County—work that I will argue has itself become a mountain tradition—led me to study ballad singing. Herein rests the primary focus of my inquiry: the dialogue between the county’s documentary tradition and musical tradition—
how they have co-existed, how they have influenced one another, and how they represent the perpetuation of culture through time. While the singing and documentation represent the culture in significantly different ways, their cooperation with one another has come to play a major role in the maintenance of each. But before I move into the bulk of these issues and detail the project Roberts and I took on, let me first offer background into the county and some of the people involved in these traditions.

A mere twenty minutes outside of the bustling and burgeoning growth of downtown Asheville course many of the same rutted gravel roads up into the hollers that have been used for well over two centuries. Over the last one hundred years, these roads employed horses, wagons, cars, station wagons, and mini vans, bearing documentarians into the hills to capture the life and music of the people working there. This was the tradition of which Lunsford was a part, and the one that Roberts and I have become a piece of.

Before continuing on that documentary journey, it may be helpful to rewind a bit and better understand the nature of this place. Perhaps the most obvious place to start is with geography. Madison County is 452 square miles, one quarter of which is public land managed by the United States Forest Service. The Appalachian Trail runs along the entire western border. The county lies fifteen miles northwest of Asheville, N.C., borders Tennessee to the west, and is split down the center by the French Broad River. The French Broad and its many tributaries flow as old waters through old mountains, and through millennia they have carved out steep crevices and canyons on their way (Wellman 1973, 3). With an elevation change of almost 4,000 feet, these waters and their ancient paths have made Madison County a tripping fold of rock and mounds, a series of highpoints and low that characterize the landscape of a rural Appalachian holler.
Madison County as a municipal space was delineated from its neighboring counties in 1851; its natural resources made it an obvious location for a population boom. The huge timber reserves, the fertile hills for planting tobacco, and the uniquely curative hot springs on the Tennessee border all seemed to indicate good economic prospects. The terrain, however, was unruly and difficult to traverse, and Madison County was soon out-shadowed by the escalating tourism of Asheville and Buncombe County. Despite moderately successful timber and mining industries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, by the 1920s Madison County was left with thirteen manufacturing establishments—ranging from textiles to timber—that employed a total of only 136 people (Wellman 1973, 178). During that same period, the census registered 20,083 people in just under 4,000 families; the great majority of these residents were farm owners, land tenants, or croppers (Wellman 1973, 175-179). By the 1930s, Madison County’s population was a fifth of its neighbor, Buncombe County. The Great Depression forced many residents to flee towards Asheville in hope of factory work and to search for work at the State Unemployment Office; however, as the country recovered from economic downturn, many apparently returned to farm, as Madison County’s farm population increased that decade over 16% (Wellman 1973, 188).

Through the Second World War and the decades to follow, both the population and farming slowly decreased. By the 1970s the numbers had dipped below 15,000 and farming was declared “an inadequate base for the present economy” by a local land survey. That survey “stressed ‘a tremendous potential for recreation’” as the pillar for Madison’s future economy (Wellman 1973, 200). Only with the 2000 census has Madison County regained its
population from the early 1900s and once again reached the 20,000 mark. Asheville and Buncombe County, however, never looked back and now stand over 200,000 strong.\(^1\)

Music was the primary time-passer for Madison County’s population in the early 20\(^{th}\) century. Although electricity was generated at the hydroelectric plant in Marshall, power lines initially served only businesses and public buildings (Wellman 1973, 179). Before that electricity was run out to farms—and before entertainments like television and radio were an option—music provided company in the fields, entertainment in the evening, and a way to communicate news or stories. While the banjo and fiddle were common and while the population was undoubtedly exposed to a wide array of popular music, unaccompanied ballads came to hold a special meaning, perhaps since they could be sung anywhere, hands-free, while their singers were performing any chore or work.

Or perhaps that special meaning arose simply because ballads got the attention of men like Cecil Sharp and Bascom Lamar Lunsford (Wellman 1973, 138-139). The songs were compared and traded back and forth on front porches after a day in the fields; they were learned by repetition and absorbed by the young among the old. They were also more formally presented at ballad swaps, or round robins, where singers would sit in a circle and each have a chance to sing for the others (Cohen and Gott 1964). This unaccompanied practice certainly included work songs, chanteys, English broadsides, and an array of other musical fodder. In any incarnation, singing was a regular part of daily life for many mountain dwellers. While some participated and others just listened, few folks were not exposed to song.

\(^1\) Census statistics additional to Wellman’s book are from <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nc190090.txt>, accessed Dec 23, 2005
But residents were not the only people interested in ballads. For example, some of the earliest published interest in mountain music appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore* decades before Sharp’s interest in the mountains (Whisnant 1983, 8). This early work, and other writing on Appalachian folklore in the years to come, reinforced the misguided notion that Appalachia’s distinct culture owed its existence to geographical isolation, which presumably preserved an earlier level of civilization (Shapiro 1978, 245).

For instance, James Mooney wrote in 1889:

> Before the late war few of the mountaineers had ever been out of their native mountains . . . even now many of them have never seen a brick house or a railroad . . . Illiteracy is the rule. The man who can write his own name is the exception, and the woman who can do as much is nothing but a prodigy . . . Living thus isolated, the mountaineer has little use for money and produces at home almost everything that he requires . . . (96).

At the turn of the century ballads emerged as a sought-after musical form; it was also the time that their image solidified as fragments of isolated, slow mountain culture. While folklorist Tristan P. Coffin claimed ballads to be the “greatest single art form that the oral tradition has produced,” the interest in the ballads rested primarily in a Herderian nationalism recalling folk as primitive keepers of valuable Anglo-American heritage (1957, 208). The “bible” of ballad hunting was *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, a work compiled, numbered, and indexed by Francis J. Child and published in the 1880s. If a song could be located in this tome, its authenticity was automatically “proven.” Early ballad collectors, scholars and amateurs alike, became motivated to look for ballads “surviving” in Appalachia. Many set out in search of the “Child ballad,” as they came to be called; the narrowness of their quests led them to toss aside many worksongs, instrumentals, chanteys, and local tunes. If a singer could reproduce a Child ballad or a variant, that singer became a bona fide link to a set of Western European customs frozen in time beneath the laurel trees. By the nineteen-
teens, ballad hunting was all the rage among academics and artists alike. Similar to other organizations in neighboring states, the North Carolina Folklore Society was established in 1913 with a primary aim of collecting and studying ballads (Whisnant 1983, 54).²

Throughout the 20th century, a handful of ballad hunters and enthusiasts made lasting marks on the musical community in Madison County and shaped the perception of that community held by outsiders. Among the many collectors in the early decades of the century, at least one did not focus exclusively on Child’s legacy. Olive Dame Campbell collected not only Child ballads, but also many different kinds of mountain music. In his chapter devoted to her, David Whisnant describes Campbell as “one of the more sophisticated and humane” of the “cultural workers who collected, recorded, photographed, wrote, published, and founded organizations” concerned with Appalachian culture (1983, 106). Although she was born in Massachusetts, she opened the John C. Campell folk school—modeled after Danish folk schools and nestled in the southwest mountains of North Carolina—in 1925. She spent much of her time prior to opening the school collecting ballads and other mountain-lore.

Cecil Sharp, a British gentleman primed in the traditions of English folk song and dance, arrived in America during World War I for an extended stay. His specialties were “in abeyance” due to the war, and he “found himself accordingly without any vital occupation” (Karpeles 1967, 124). Sharp admired Campbell’s early collections, and he suggested that they collaborate on his mission to find English folk songs surviving in the folds of Appalachia. The two collected material for the book *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* in 1916 and the volume was first published in 1932 in England. Although

² Note that Whisnant’s date for the founding of NCFS is off by one year, see <http://www.ecu.edu/ncfolk/index.htm>
listed as an important source and co-author of the book, Campbell did not act as a full partner in the field for Sharp’s explorations. She and her husband aided Sharp by guiding him to ballad hamlets in North Carolina and Tennessee; his assistant, and later biographer, Maud Karpeles, accompanied Sharp on the day-to-day trips into the hills for ballad collection. Like Campbell, Sharp apparently earned a reputation for his even-handedness and polite manner among the people of Appalachia. Sharp regarded their lives and dispositions as bearing “elemental wisdom, abundant knowledge and intuitive understanding which only those who live . . . face to face with reality seem able to acquire” (Whisnant 1983, 117). This high, and somewhat unorthodox, opinion of his consultants resulted in a reciprocating respect and admiration for Sharp.

Bascom Lamar Lunsford, born in Madison County in 1882, watched as the British Sharp came through to collect music in 1916. Long interested in the manifestations of his own musical culture, Lunsford quickly became one of the first insider folklorists to study Madison County. Lunsford not only traveled through the hills in 1925 collecting tunes with the Washington, D.C., folklorist, R.W. Gordon, but also sang some 350 songs for Library of Congress recordings. He started the Asheville Music Festival in 1928, and today his Mars Hill celebrates the “Minstrel of the Appalachians” yearly with a music and craft festival bearing his name (Wellman 1973, 142-143).

Sitting down to study the songs gathered by Sharp and Lunsford, any reader will quickly recognize the short list of surnames consulted by these collectors, a list that includes: Rice, Sands, Chandler, Ramsey, Wallin, Norton, Ray, and Shelton. Attending the round-robin-style ballad sing at the 2004 Bascom Lamar Lunsford festival, I listened to singers as young as their mid-twenties sitting on stage bearing these same surnames. A similar
parallelism exists in the titles of the songs performed. Ballads like “Little Matthey Groves” and “Young Hunting” resonated at the 2004 festival from the mouths of singers descended from the men and women who sang the same songs for Sharp some eighty-eight years earlier.

Admiration for Lunsford’s works endured through the decades among singers in Madison County. Sharp’s legacy lived on as well, particularly due to Karpeles’s return to the mountains in the 1950s to visit the singers and show them Sharp’s book. This effectively sparked the memories of many singers, leading them to remember Sharp’s brief breeze through the county with fondness (Karpeles 1967). When a young banjo-playing filmmaker named John Cohen arrived in the early 1960s, he noted that the people with whom he spoke were still proud to be descendants of the legacy codified by Sharp’s work. With the Folk Revival sweeping the nation, both songs performed by their traditional bearers and those performed by popular musicians fostered an atmosphere in which the music began to enjoy extraordinary commercial recognition (Cantwell 1988, 173). The revival resonated most strongly among the young, white middle class who embraced the instruments and idioms of marginalized mountain folk. Some of these well-educated young people began to travel to the hills in search of the “true” folk sound. Members of what Robert Cantwell terms the “urban left-wing folksong movement,” were “picking up the threads of a common legacy that the parent generation had either denied or forgotten, and weaving them into the present” (Cantwell 1988, 176). That common legacy included nostalgia for old ways, for the pure natural life, and for a noble peasant class. A major difference between the ballad and music seekers from the first part of the 20th century and those in the 1950s and 1960s was that this new generation traded their pen, paper, and Child’s indices for musical instruments, tape recorders, still and motion cameras, and a desire to live the music as well as to listen to it.
One early leader of this movement was John Cohen, a young man who had finished his BFA and MFA at Yale University. Cohen played a major role in reviving an old-time string-band sound through his participation in a revivalist string band, the New Lost City Ramblers. Alongside his band mates Tom Paley and Mike Seeger, he created albums that were detailed reconstructions of the commercial string music released in the 1920s and 30s. But Cohen was not only a musician; nor was he simply a revivalist. A trained artist and photographer, he busied himself capturing the urban folk scene as it unfolded. As some of those who inspired him had done, Cohen traveled south in search of the music that interested him. With a tape recorder and banjo in tow, his first trip to Kentucky brought him face to face with Roscoe Holcombe, a miner and musician in the hills of Kentucky. Cohen was impressed with Holcombe’s music and began to make sound recordings of his singing and playing. In so doing, Cohen decided that just the sound was not enough. There was more to this folk revivalist’s hunger than the sound alone, and Cohen wanted the outside world to see Holcombe’s life and the lives of the populace around Hazard, Kentucky. Cohen borrowed a 16 mm camera from some friends and made the film *The High Lonesome Sound*, released in 1963 (Davenport 2003). The film stands as an important documentary work to this day, effectively illustrating “how music and religion help Appalachians maintain their dignity and traditions in the face of change and hardship” (Cramer n.d.).

John Cohen was only one of many educated, white, middle class, northeastern college students who traveled south brandishing instruments and a willingness to displace themselves from their familiar surrounds. While John Cohen was busy “discovering” Roscoe Holcombe, a friend of his caught the bug to travel as well. Peter Gott was mesmerized after overhearing an O Bray Ramsey album in a record store listening station. Skipping exams to listen to banjo
records, Gott soon packed up his car and instruments and headed for North Carolina (Gott 2004). But Gott did not make those travels merely to tour the folksy Appalachians; he came to stay, and ended up settling in Madison County. When looking for a place to settle down, he met the Wallin family, who later sang old ballads for Gott and his wife. His intent, however, was not to collect and document the music as much as to live as a regular part of the musical community. The families developed a friendship as neighbors, and Gott frequently wrote down the words to ballads and banjo songs that intrigued him. Like others before, and some to follow, he had transplanted himself into a world of creating a life “somehow compatible with the essential message of folksong—a life of deliberation, resourcefulness, and strict economy as distinctly American as Thoreau’s Walden Pond” (Cantwell 1988, 189). Today Gott lives in Madison County as a carpenter, builder, musician, dancer, and a community member involved character in the fabric of the county’s heritage scene. But in the 1960s he was simply trying to be a neighbor, to learn as a friend, and to live intentionally. As he points out, he did not make many recordings of the singers around him because, “if I wanted to hear them, I could just go and hear them!” (Gott 2004).

In 1963 Cohen paid a visit to his friend in Madison County and was impressed by the music he heard there. He suggested to Gott that they work together—Gott with his community connections and Cohen with his experience as a documentary artist—to make professional recordings of the singers around Madison. Despite his initial wariness, Gott agreed to help Cohen meet people and gather material. Cohen recalls little resistance to his recordings; most people seemed to have no problem with the proposition. He did, however, encounter some reserved skepticism, particularly from Dillard Chandler, a singer who intrigued and fascinated the young Cohen.
I liked Dillard’s singing, so for me to ask him to record was this big wall of silence, not resistance, but . . . ‘What is it? What is this for?’ I remember, I got down in front of him on the floor with a tape recorder . . . . It felt like I was there an awfully long time, trying to explain to him why he should sing for my microphone. There was just something about the music that I was just trying to say, ‘It would be so good if other people could hear it.’ (2004)

The music that John Cohen and Peter Gott recorded together was released in 1964 by Folkways Records with the title *Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina*, and it included the singing of the following residents of Madison County: Cass Wallin, Lee Wallin, Dillard Chandler, Lisha Shelton, and Berzilla Wallin. This record had moderate success for its genre and label. Just as he had wanted to show the lives of Roscoe Holcombe and the miners around Hazard, Kentucky, Cohen wanted to bring his movie camera into Madison County to document the lives of the people who sang these songs.

Cohen returned to North Carolina in the late 1960s and brought camera equipment to film footage for what would become *End of an Old Song*. The film held similarities with his earlier work. Both *The High Lonesome Sound* and *End of an Old Song* were captured on 16 mm black and white motion picture film with sound that is not mechanically synched to movement. Both contain little to no narration, with music, singing, and action taking center-stage over talking, interviews, or verbal narratives. *End of an Old Song* has been called a “Farm Security Administration photo come to life,” with its attempt to bring forth the gritty realness of living in poor Appalachia (Cohen, personal communication). Clearly influenced by the work of Walker Evans, Cohen’s film speaks with simple images of real, gritty life in the American South. Unlike the ballad hunters who had come before him, Cohen unyoked himself somewhat from presenting a mythic mountain simple-ness. While attempting to demonstrate the difficulties and hardship of mountain life, he also subtly combated the
insistence that advancement would constantly poach on the riches of heritage. He used film as a medium to fully illustrate the duality of modern life in the mountains, cutting, for instance, from an old ballad being sung on a front porch to a radio being clicked on to blare out the latest popular music. Scenes in a diner sporting a spiffy jukebox follow old mountain hands farming the in fields.

John Cohen’s work yielded many results, one of which was to encourage ongoing interest in the music and people of Madison County of both musicians inside the community and documentarians outside of the community. Cohen’s influence later sent one of his own photography students, Harvey Wang, into Madison County in the mid-1970s. Wang returned to New York with breath-taking photographs of the county, including shots of Sodom Laurel, the area in which much of Cohen’s film had been created.

Another of the documentarians to follow the worn footsteps into Madison County was Rob Amberg. Like Peter Gott, Amberg did not just come with a camera or paper as Cohen and Sharp had. Amberg came to see what he could find out, and lives there to this day. Part of documenting life in Madison County was indeed to live it, and Amberg notes that his years becoming part of Madison County have enhanced his own understanding of the photographs he makes. Beyond the improvement of his photographic skills that has occurred over the years, he feels as though his presence as a member of the community has increasingly lent meaning and importance to his artistic work (Amberg 2004). Beginning in the mid 1970s Amberg began to photograph the people and farms around the county. In so doing, he developed a relationship with many of the same people who had appeared in Cohen’s film. Most notable among these was Dellie Chandler Norton, a venerable mountain woman.
Dellie was an inviting and welcoming matron of the community who she took in countless musicians, artists, photographers, and the like over the decades. She made them meals, offered them a place to stay, and sang for them for hours into the evening. Amberg arrived as one of the many faces that Dellie graciously welcomed into her home, but unlike most, he never packed up the station wagon to drive back to whence he came. For the next twenty years, Amberg documented his relationship with the elderly Dellie, two decades flowing over tobacco seasons, front porch sings, household work, and social gatherings of all flavors. *Sodom Laurel Album*, what Dellie called “our book,” was published in 2002. It stands as a record of Amberg’s early experiences with Madison County, bolstered by his own journalistic entries, and is paired with a compact disc containing the singing of Dellie Chandler Norton, Cas Wallin, Doug Wallin, Berzilla Wallin, Evelyn Ramsey, Edison Ramsey, and Sheila Kay Adams.

All of these people—singers, photographers, collectors, filmmakers—were interested in the sounds of Madison County. Each, as an extension of their own traditions, has contributed to the performance and discourse surrounding the ballads. This history builds an important foundation for the discussion to come. It is only through glimpsing the ballads’ past that I could begin to understand a method for framing my own fieldwork in the county. And only through such consideration was I able to step into that ethnography with the interest to work with my consultants collaboratively.
Dialogic Traditions and Time’s Advancement

We return here to the heart of this research: how the documentary tradition and the musical tradition have engaged in dialogue with one another, how they have influenced one another, and how they both signify cultural maintenance through time. Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock argue that culture should not be seen as a stable object, but as an entity that is constantly reproduced and revised through the dialogic process. The dual traditions in Madison County have become so intertwined through their dialogic revisions that it would be impossible to discuss one without the other or to discuss the culture without them both.

Mannheim and Tedlock argue that, “once culture is seen as arising from a dialogical ground, then ethnography itself is revealed as an emergent cultural phenomenon, produced, reproduced, and revised in dialogues between field-workers and natives” (1995, 2). This prompts the question: at what point did these two traditions in Madison County start influencing one another? In other words, when did the singers start perceiving their ballads as being in dialog with the documentary efforts, thus weaving the ethnographic into the cultural fabric? Many have captured the music and culture of these mountains through their own frames in their own times. The unbroken nature of such a long documentary tradition, coupled with the musical tradition it came to capture, makes Madison County’s culture a truly distinctive subject for inquiry.

This inquiry must return to Cecil Sharp and look at his work in more depth, as it was his proto-ethnographic movements through the southern Appalachians that kick-started the emergence of these two traditions as increasingly symbiotic. Sharp’s work in Appalachia bloomed from a presupposition that this music arrived as a cultural stowaway in the hearts
and minds of people relocating from the British Isles. For Sharp, the music’s survival in the hollers was due to the abject poverty and isolation of the people living there; he presumed that when these communities were touched by modernity and the new industrial age, the musical traditions and the attendant antiquated ways would vanish in a puff of coal-powered smoke. Logically, the more sheltered the community, the better for Sharp. Consequently, the people living in the treacherous folds of farming land amongst the Blue Ridge Mountains provided a particularly good field for his ballad collecting. When he arrived, he found just what he was looking for, and proclaimed that in these hills were communities “in which singing was as common and almost as universal a practice as speaking” (Campbell and Sharp 1917, xviii). Sharp spent a number of weeks in Madison County, spread out over three years, and he collected over 260 songs and variants from the locals’ repertoires.

Upon her return in the 1950s, Maud Karpeles noted that the “region is no longer the folk-song collector’s paradise,” due to the radio bringing in “insidious hill-billy and other ‘pop’ songs” (Karpeles 1967, 170). She bemoaned what she considered the near death of balladry, thanks to the arrival of “civilization,” electricity, and increased economic stability. While lamenting the tradition’s demise, Karpeles simultaneously set forth a pattern that recurs again and again in the history of mountain ballads (and arguably in many forms of vernacular expression). Those who quantify the origins, authenticity, or purity of artistic expression, like Sharp and Karpeles, frequently present their own actions as shining deeds of preservation. Without their efforts, they claim these traditions would die an inevitable death, eaten up by the voracious jaws of modernity. Karpeles credits Sharp for finding the pure songs of England preserved like ants in amber among the insulated poor of the Appalachian mountains, and subsequently for delivering tradition back to the English in the form of a
book. Then, as the industrialized world began to put a chokehold on the memories and expressions of the American singers, she arrived just in time with Sharp’s tome in tow to give these songs and their singers “a new lease on life” (Karpeles 1967, 171).

Karpeles’ view on this issue, like that of many folklorists, anthropologists, ethnographers, and collectors of her time, has some validity to it: some musical traditions certainly owe their continuance to the academic’s efforts at preservation and the collector’s attention to detail. This perspective, however, remains woefully narrow in two ways. First, posing the preservationist as cultural savior fails to recognize the important role played by the singers themselves. In bringing Sharp’s book back to Appalachia in the 1950s, Karpeles makes no mention of the competence or memories of the singers she visits. Instead, she focuses on how the book sparks the revival of music that had been relegated to the back of their minds by modern radio and popular music. She claims that the mountaineers were joyfully appreciative to her for transferring back a part of their own tradition; yet she never mentions if any of the people she visited even could read Sharp’s volume or its musical notation. Likely they could not; it may have been less her appearance with this valued prize in print than her mention of a title or song once collected that ignited a full memory of tune and lyric.

This collector’s conceit consigns the mountaineer to a position of romantic ignorance and presents the outside collector as cultural savior. Karpeles illustrates this dynamic well when she recalls her interactions with Emma Hensley. When Sharp and Karpeles met Emma in 1916, she was a little girl who longed to go to school. They assisted her in that aim, yet Sharp was glad at her immediate change of mind and return home because he thought that educating Emma would “spoil” her uniqueness and turn her into an “ordinary girl,” thereby
depriving her of her “pure” and rightful culture. Upon returning to the mountains in the 1950s, Karpeles cited a grown Emma as one of the few that still kept up with the singing tradition, implying that the rejection of her education yielded the retention of her culture. At no point did Karpeles give credit to Emma herself as a complex and talented tradition bearer (Karpeles 1967, 153, 171).

This story also illustrates a second misguided notion. Sharp’s work was based on a fallacy of cultural progression; he believed that traditional expression, in this case ballads, could only exist without cultural “advancement,” and that once influenced by such advancement, traditional expressions would cease to maintain any measure of authenticity, legitimacy, or future. It was of the highest importance to Sharp that the inhabitants of Appalachia had lived in seclusion since their ancestral arrival from the British Isles, a seclusion that kept them from the “amenities of modern civilization.” Only this allowed them to hold onto “the priceless heritage of their traditional musical culture” (Karpeles 1967, 141). Interestingly enough, Sharp considered Madison County and its surroundings to be some of the best and most musically vital areas that he visited in America. He noted that the music was becoming “rapidly killed in its prime by industrialism” throughout both Kentucky and Virginia (Karpeles 1967, 165). Maintaining a stark division between a narrow definition of authenticity and the culturally poisonous currents of progress and change reflected a fabricated romanticism that thrives to this day. This perspective poses tradition and modernity as locked in a relationship of prey and predator and deflects the possibility that change and tradition can operate in a healthy dialogue, with each being informed by the other.
This project aims to explore this dialogue, examining the role many hands have played in bearing a tradition through the decades. Playing the part of the insiders are the local musicians, singers, and storytellers who are blood and marriage descendants of those who have been singing in the hollers since Sharp’s time and before. Coming from the outside are a small set of folklorists, photographers, documentarians, and collectors. And some characters in the story float between these two poles, being at one instance inside and at another outside. Avoiding the collector’s conceit requires recognition of these multiple parties, acknowledging that no one group is solely responsible for the ballads’ continuity, and that modernity should be considered an active player in this continuation rather than its death knell.

This recognition forces us to reconsider the polar construction of insiderness versus outsiderness, the relationship to cultural tradition therein, and the influence of advancement to a spectral construction that recognizes the fluidity of roles we play while interacting with our own and others’ cultures. Such fluidity, of course, is not to suggest that all interactions in Madison County dealing with the ballads have been as pretty as June wildflowers. Arguments have certainly sprung up over money, ownership, and authenticity. Yet collaboration between the singers and their recorders has continued through today. Almost ninety years since Sharp first set foot in Madison County, today’s ballad singers exist as highly modernized versions of what Sharp would have encountered in their ancestors. When Sharp’s deadly serpent of modernity crept into the Appalachian hollers, the culture did not let that serpent’s bite bring its demise. Instead, it adapted, scurrying like a pack of field mice through the tobacco rows and learning to live alongside the snake. No field has only snakes
and no mice, suggesting a coexistence of ever-evolving cultural expression and ever-influencing outside stimulus. This is the stuff of our modern cultural ecology.

Where does this leave the romantic idea of the mountaineer’s way of life? Many of the outsiders to Madison County have come there in search of a “pure” mountain time and the remains of a “simple” existence. Cecil Sharp, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Alan Lomax, John Cohen, Rob Amberg, and Harvey Wang all captured the music and culture of these mountains through their own lenses in their own eras. Some portions of these works undeniably boosted the romantic ideal of the mountains. Others, however, outwardly and covertly contradicted the expected messages. More recently, books by Sharyn McCrumb, Sheila Kay Adams, and Charles Frazier, as well as such films as *Songcatcher*, *O Brother Where Art Thou*, and *Cold Mountain* have rekindled a wider public interest in the music of Appalachia, including ballad singing. The interest spurred in the greater populace is paralleled by the interest reawakened in the descendants of the southerners represented in these books and movies. These works of fiction, alongside the non-fiction documentary works, boost the pride of Madison County’s singers. The circle of preservation continues as the upcoming generations grow to cherish these cultural traditions. Among the factors contributing to this cherishing is the realization that these traditions now carry cultural capital and can yield monetary gain. Through this complex historical equation of presentation, representation, interpretation, and reclamation, the romantic mountain life has emerged as a modern commodity. Moreover, the modern ballad singer has emerged as a skilled purveyor of that commodity adept in her own heritage maintenance.

Filling in eighty-eight years of preservation warrants a close look at the history of balladry and documentary work in Madison County. There were many influential and life-
altering changes in the southeast during the first half of the 20th century, most relevant among them being what David Whisnant refers to as the “discovery of indigenous culture by writers, collectors, popularizers,” and other outsiders visiting the rural South (1983, 6). Well-educated young adults from wealthy northern families came southbound to do mission work or form settlement schools. Whisnant notes that most of these transplants held a two-sided opinion of the people they had come to live, study, or work among. On one side was the vision of a racially pure, naturally artful, and curiously inventive American peasant class. The flip side was that these people were uncivilized savages that could be brought up gloriously to humanness through simple education and dedicated religion. This dual vision crafted a romanticized picture of mountain people.

This “discovery of indigenous culture” brought prospects to local ballad singers and musicians that would have otherwise not been possible. Audio recordings were made into albums, films were screened, books were written, and many of the musicians and storytellers that had perhaps never been farther than Asheville began to be invited to folk festivals and performances all over the map (Amberg 2004). With these opportunities came occasions for both traditions to shape, affect, reject, or accept aspects of a romanticized mountain culture. The exposure Madison County has experienced as a center for mountain singing engendered definite prestige for local artists and resulted in a number of lasting outcomes.

Ownership and Portrayal

One outcome of Madison County’s widespread musical exposure has been a foregrounded concern for rights, money, ownership, and credit. Not all of the documentary
work done in Madison County has left residents with a sense of proper reciprocation. In the
days of Sharp, and later in Cohen’s era, “contracts” were usually sealed with a handshake, a
verbal agreement, or no discussion at all. Questions of permission or possible publication did
not often arise at the time of the fieldwork, creating rich opportunities for future
misunderstandings or misdeeds.

Much of folklore falls into a zone of questionable boundaries when the rights or
ownership of a collected piece are challenged. Most of this music is part of a long-standing
oral tradition. Legally, such tradition remains part of the public domain. Folklore has
frequently fallen through the legal cracks, as it has been considered intangible cultural
property, but cannot be considered intellectual property due to its lack-of or multiplicitous
authorship. This leaves much folklore outside of the purview of traditional copyright law.
Even if an individual manages to copyright part of a community’s folklore, as long as the
artifact lives as part of a living tradition, the copyright remains worth little more than the
paper is it printed on; copyright is simply an inadequate protection for a complex living art
form (Berryman 1994, 325). Yet when a filmmaker, folklorist, ballad collector, or
photographer manages to freeze that living form in a moment of time, he or she complicates
the legal formulae. While international cultural organizations, such as UNESCO, have in the
past decades begun to recognize the importance of preservation for the well-being of
folklore, it is in these moments of preservation that the intangible cultural property can be
said to, or at least imagined to, become tactile (Berryman 1994, 327-328).

In such a culture-made-tactile, questions of authenticity, ownership, and reciprocity
frequently magnify. When old ballads begin to have values that reach above and beyond
simple entertainment, spreading news, or assuaging the tedium of hard mountain life, they
enter into new areas of territorialism, fame, and potential ill-will. In Madison County, these currents certainly run through the cultural landscape. For instance, jealousies sometimes arose when some artists were invited to far-away festivals and others were overlooked. There have also been accusations that filmmakers and ballad collectors were profiting from the talents of the mountaineers without returning any of these riches. Dellie Chandler Norton, for example, claimed that Alan Lomax did not pay her the money he promised when she sang for him (Amberg 2004). But Dellie was not the type of lady to go bringing lawsuits or making threats on Lomax’s well-being.

John Cohen, on the other hand, did not always enjoy such benefit from those who believed they had been slighted. For example, an incident that has now entered the realm of Madison County legend began when Cohen returned to the region to do some recordings after the release of Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina. The album was, understandably, a small success in Western North Carolina, and it spun frequently on the record players and jukeboxes of Marshall, Mars Hill, and Madison County’s hot spots. It seemed, to the singers on the record, that this “hit” was everywhere; if it was so abundant here in Madison, they presumed it was surely successful all over the country by now, and John Cohen must have been making a pretty penny off these local folks. When Cohen attempted to explain that the album had not sold many copies, and had certainly not done so nationwide, his words fell flat on the ears of his consultants. When the Wallin family told him that he could not record any more, Cohen would not relent. By some accounts this led Doug Wallin to slug Cohen off of the family porch. According to others, the violence was just a threat. Either way, the incident made a lasting impression on many in
the ballad community of Madison County. On a public level, the incident threatened to close off the community from further study, but in the following decade both Amberg and Wang returned softly and begin the work again.

The last outcome of Madison’s continued documentary exposure is the simple fact that these old songs continue being sung at all. Despite the music being removed from the cultural settings in which it once functioned, a new generation has picked up the proverbial baton and started off running. Certainly these young singers in their twenties and thirties do not sing these songs at the end of a day tending tobacco or because they lack of other forms of entertainment. Trailer homes fully equipped with satellite TV, internet, video games, and stereo systems have replaced the ramshackle farmsteads of decades past. Mini-vans and pickup trucks wind the mountain roads, many of which are paved, beneath the crisscross of power lines carrying electricity to the furthest corners of the county. There remains nothing particularly sheltered or romantically pastoral about 21st century life in Madison County. Asheville looms closer than ever, thanks to the new interstate connection running from the city’s edge through Madison County and to the Tennessee border. The ballads once served a function for the people of this county in the labor and leisure of their day-to-day living. But the social and physical environment that nurtured the ballad tradition is gone; the music is “completely out of the context with the culture now,” the ballad singer Sheila Kay Adams notes, and her community is left with a “singing tradition that’s not really part of anything. It’s just a thing people do and they’re not sure why they do it other than it’s dying out” (2004). While past relationships between documentarians and the communities with whom they collaborate have not always been melodious, the exposure itself has led to a certain

3 The incident has entered into the local lore. Discussions include Adams 2005, interview; Cohen 2004, interview; McMillon 2004, interview; Gott 2004, interview; Davenport 2002
degree of increased notoriety and monetary reward. Singers, such as Dellie Norton, were invited to perform on an array of festival bills, participated in various sound or film recordings, and entertained hundreds of visitors to Madison County. But most of all, this exposure has helped to maintain a local interest in the cultural wealth of the singing tradition.

Are the ballads still sung purely for the sake of preservation? Are the singers still singing them as of way to somehow cling to a “simple” romanticized past? Are they singing perhaps to remind themselves of the past toil and triumphs of their rugged ancestors? Or are they still sung because they—like so much of mountain culture—have been commodified? Certainly, the answer is embedded in all of these questions; together they speak to a central issue. In my experience, the youngest generation of singers is consistently and entirely female, and the modern ballad singer in Madison County embraces and adopts her musical heritage as a way to set herself apart from the perceived mediocrity around her while at the same time engaging in dialogue with the documentary tradition.

Another concern when documenting others is how to produce a perceptive and finely tuned portrayal. A filmmaker, in her capacity as both director and as editor, garners a great deal of power over the representation of the group that she documents. While consultants donate their time and talents to the camera, the filmmaker then carries that material away to shape it and mold it through her own frame of reference. The story that emerges reflects how the filmmaker conceives it both overtly and subconsciously. This product often shows little or no evidence of collaboration with the portrayed consultants, particularly in regards to how they are characterized. This complex relationship often goes unscrutinized—specifically in regards to film. This project attempts to address this issue directly. One goal of this investigation was to create some basic experimental structure for collaborative film
that would attack at the heart of such discrepancies. In doing so, we wanted to use new technology as a tool to help us meet that goal.

To explore these dynamics, Rob Roberts, a graduate student at UNC’s School of Journalism, and I chose to become part of these traditions’ interdependent cycles. Working collaboratively, we co-produced and co-directed a 30-minute documentary video project. Film presentation allows ethnography to spark public conversations around key cultural and social issues. For instance, by showing the lives and stories of real people living in the North Carolina mountains, documentary video can challenge stereotypes of Appalachian people, culture, and life. Our attempts to show how the ballad tradition had changed over time and adapted to new contexts of modernity were challenged by our consultants’ complex dynamic of heritage seeking, public perception of Appalachian culture, general commodification of mountain-ness, and documentary consequences that we encountered in our collaborative efforts resulting from these issues. Even mentioning this complexity can itself prove challenging particularly when trying to do so in partnership with those being portrayed.

Rob and I are both creating text assessments of our inquiry as companions to the video: mine takes the form of this text-based thesis, while Rob’s takes the form of a multi-media web site. These three explorations—the video and our respective texts—attempt to understand the interdependence of Madison County’s ballad and documentary traditions as mutual influences, as well as to explore ethnography as “a form of culture making like any other” (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995, 14).

In discussing such “culture-making ethnography,” Mannheim and Tedlock present it as inherently more shallow than traditionally conceived cultural expression, arguing that it
does not contain similar historical foundations and does not “pass through as dense a thicket of interactions as other cultural forms” (Mannheim and Tedlock 1995, 14). This may hold true when ethnography enters a specific field for the first time. But does it not overlook the instance of historically compounded ethnographic exposure? This project challenges Mannheim and Tedlock’s assertion by holding two traditions—musical and documentary—that have co-existed over many generations up to the same analytical light.

And there a kind of circle has been made. In Cecil Sharp’s biography, Maud Karpeles notes that on their visits to Western North Carolina, she and Sharp would stay at the Grove Park Inn, a most welcoming and certainly upper class “haven of rest” from the rigors of field collecting among the natives (Karpeles 1967, 168). In a letter written from the Inn, Sharp noted, “I am satisfied with what I have done, and the rest can be left to others” (Sharp in Karpeles 1967, 168). I am quite sure that he could not have imagined that eighty-seven years later, almost to the day, two young filmmakers would be in that very place to accept the Audience Choice Award on behalf of the Asheville Film Festival for their film on ballad singing in Madison County.
SECTION II: Tradition and Heritage

Two Traditions in Tandem

In one form or another, Madison County has been a location of continuous ballad study for at least 90 years. Cecil Sharp, Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Alan Lomax, John Cohen, Rob Amberg, Harvey Wang, and others captured the music and culture of these mountains through their own frames in their own times. The unbroken nature of this documentary tradition makes Madison County’s ballads a truly distinctive subject for inquiry and offers us a unique opportunity to study the ties between ballad singers and documentary makers. More directly, it allows us to explore the steady effect each of these traditions has on the other. Families who still practice unaccompanied singing provide the folklorist with a rare opportunity to discuss both the shadows and lights that documentation can cast over the movement of culture through time.

On the one hand are the singers, tradition bearers, and local families who endure in the practice of singing these old ballads. On the other hand are the academics, collectors, folklorists, and enthusiasts interested in this artistic tradition. Those two hands do not exist independently of one another. Surely they have grown from the same body. But how has one affected the other? It takes two hands to tend a plot of farm; it takes two hands to play the banjo; it takes two hands to tie the shoes of a child. But does it take two hands to pass down a singing tradition?
The term tradition is used to describe both the practice of singing solo, unaccompanied ballads as well as the practice of documenting those musical acts and the culture that has embraced them. The traditionality of unaccompanied ballad singing, passed down through generations in informal community settings, poses no challenge for most readers. This is not the case when defining the continued documentation of this singing as “tradition.” The presumed “tradition-bearers”—in this case Sharp and Karpeles, Gott and Cohen, Amberg, Wang, myself, and my collaborator, Rob Roberts—are not connected by kinship, geography, or any of the other factors that usually cue the bounds of tradition. Instead, we are all joined by interest in, entrance into, and capturing of the cultural and musical environment in Madison County. Yet if we accept Henry Glassie’s definition of tradition as a “volitional, temporal action” that serves to derive “the future from the past” (2003, 192), then certainly the documentary work in Madison County fits the bill just as the singing does. The works produced by all of the people listed above exercise their creators’ volition in distinct ways, and evidence the particular time of their creation, framed by the available technology, theoretical understandings, and artistic bounds of the day. The advantage here exists in the compound story we are provided through successive generations recording this community. This documentary story stretches across generations and provides us a sturdy guide for exploring our own experiences.

Cross-generational history allows us to speak of deriving “the future from the past,” though the simple fact of continuity alone does not necessarily justify calling this cycle a “tradition.” This justification also depends on the influence that each of these documentary pieces had on its successors. For example, Sharp laid the groundwork, authenticating Madison County as a place where these songs survived. This effectively set the stage for
Gott, and subsequently Cohen, to enter the county on a search for a place where the music was still being sung. Roberts and I, as students of Cohen, returned under the influence of our teacher. As each generation of singers in Madison County encountered photographers, collectors, folklorists, and the like, they began to absorb the sharing of their music with outsiders as part of their tradition. This exposure allowed influential dialogue to arise across generations and between traditions.

Despite their differences in style, form, technology, and product, these outsiders approached the musical tradition with a common goal: to carry the voices of the singers across the county line and out into a larger national and international venue. All differences aside, the collections, recordings, photographs, books, and films create the text that binds the documentary tradition in Madison County both to itself and to the musicians’ tradition. These two traditions correlate well with Glassie’s assertion that “tradition is characterized diversely as a result of scholarly interest and . . . as a result of differences among cultures” (2003, 176, 192). Glassie stresses both the scholarly or artistic attentions of documentary work as well as the cultural uniqueness that serves as a motivator for the tradition bearers within the singing community. The singing tradition has sustained not only because of the cultural differences between itself and its audience, but also, and perhaps even more so, because of the cultural differences between itself and its representers. As recorders come in to capture the music, the musicians reply by singing and sharing their talents, and those musicians recognize distinct benefits for doing so. As those talents are disseminated in documentary products, the voices reverberate beyond the Appalachian Mountains, and this draws newer documenters into the hills to capture the sounds. The cycle continues, creating a symbiosis held together by an interest across cultural boundaries.
The balladry of Madison County would not be what it is today without both the tradition bearers and the artists documenting that tradition. Echoed across interviews on both sides of this classificatory line, this point was made most strongly by those who fell between these camps, those who were both tradition bearers and documentarians in their own right. These dual-function heritage transmitters follow the path begun by Bascom Lamar Lunsford; while some sing and others record, these people choose to do both. Among the consultants involved in this project, these dual-function heritage transmitters fall into two categories: the native and the outsider. Sheila Kay Adams and Bobby McMillon are both native to the Appalachian ballad tradition. McMillon has worked for years as a collector of ballads and collaborator with folklorists (see, for instance, his work with Dr. Daniel Patterson, *A Tree Accurst: Bobby McMillon and Stories of Frankie Silver*). Not only has he been responsible for teaching many younger singers the mountain ballads, but his avid preservation of tunes and lyrics has provided a wealth of balladry to be passed on. Similarly, Adams propagates and promotes the music and culture of Madison County from almost every angle. An accomplished singer herself, she is also an skillful writer and storyteller, having authored multiple audio recordings and books of historical fiction, including her widely praised 2005 novel, *My Old True Love*. Adams tours the state and region constantly promoting singing and storytelling among every generation. She has served as a consultant on multiple projects ranging from the ethnographic to the fictional, including working as the vocal coach for the movie *Songcatcher*. Adams has also been an inspiration to the youngest generation of singers in Madison’s music community through her mentorship, example, and steady encouragement that they take up ballad singing (Buckner et al. 2004).

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4 See <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0210299/fullcredits> for cast, crew, and other details of *Songcatcher.*
Similarly, Rob Amberg and Peter Gott straddle the line between outsiders investigating an unfamiliar culture and insiders perpetuating it. Both came to Madison County from elsewhere, both documented local traditions, and both have remained in the county, continuing to live in, participate in, and document the culture around them. Gott in particular became part of the musical community through his performances and involvement in the local dancing community. Gott has also lived in Madison County for the vast majority of his adult life, raised his family there, worked the land, and become a part of the community. What, then, makes him as an outsider to Madison’s musical community? Is it merely the zip code in which one is born that shapes the nature of one’s insiderness? Is it the locale where one was reared, the place where one was educated, the spot where one took on the responsibilities of adulthood? To determine precise lines of insiderness and outsiderness remains a frustrating and vague pursuit.

These designations manage to place the assorted individuals concerned with Madison County’s ballads into the following categories: indigenous community members and performers; outsider documentations and ethnographers; insiders who both perform and do ethnography; and outsiders who both perform and do ethnography. These categories are certainly complex and arguably superfluous. Why do we even need to consider these categories of tradition bearers in Madison County? They are interesting if only to bolster the assertion that a tradition may not so easily pass though the rigors of history if carried only on the backs of one interested party. They also serve as an entry point for considering the concept of heritage.
Heritage Maintenance

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that in the “distinction between those who are licensed to do and those who are licensed to watch,” the sheer statistical success of a tradition’s descendancy can be put into jeopardy (1991, 431). Madison’s musical community has coped with and combated this type of jeopardy in multiple ways. I identify three such acts of heritage maintenance among the ballad tradition.

The first is the literal broadening of the scope and definition of family and bloodlines. In Madison County, the singing tradition has been passed down through multiple families, a small array of familiar surnames. Studying the movement of music, art, or performance passing among a community in this way lies at the heart of a folklorist’s charge. However, many in Madison’s community identify strongly with the idea that valid familial relationships, as opposed to simply communal relationships, grant a singer a higher level of cultural legitimacy when performing ballads. Despite the obvious communal participation in this tradition, many place a higher value on what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett terms “decent over consent” (1988, qtd. in 1991, 431). To manage such a situation, few singers refer to one another as community; instead they strongly and repeatedly emphasize the links between one another through a widely discussed and openly propagated history of intermarriage and complex family ties. As Shelia Kay Adams points out, the ballad tradition was not limited to a single family name as it may have been in some other Appalachian counties; it was instead passed down through a small community. However, she quickly qualifies that the members of this community, while technically not belonging to one family in conservative terms, were all related “either by marriage . . . by blood, or both” (2004). This act of heritage maintenance
resonates most with the youngest generation of singers as they attempt to separate themselves as musicians with ancestral ties to the songs from any outsider who may come in and pick up ballad singing.

The partial acceptance of what may be termed the insider-outsider-middle-ground serves as the second act of heritage maintenance performed by the ballad community. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that those who have learned the vernacular art of a community into which they were not born are usually placed into the role of revivalist, a position that often blurs of the lines of who may be considered legitimate practitioners (1991, 431). Peter Gott surely personifies this classification on the heritage map of Madison County. Although some may point out that Gott does not originally come from this area, it would be difficult to find anyone who would describe him as an inauthentic member of Madison County’s cultural bearers. Virtually all of the consultants interviewed for this project fully respect Gott as a member of the artistic community. But he is not spoken of in the revered language reserved for the “true” ballad-singing elders.

The third act of heritage maintenance is accepting and permitting documentation of their tradition. Allowing documentation to occur can prove individually beneficial, bringing local fame and national recognition to some singers. Even more interesting, however, is the community’s understanding that preservation benefits the singing tradition itself, an understanding that recognizes the circular relationship between acts of performance and acts of preservation. We can trace this perception back to the beginning of the documentary tradition. There is no way to know with any certainty how Madison County singers felt about Cecil Sharp’s request that they sing for him. One can imagine that they thought it downright odd for a well-dressed Englishman and his female assistant to wander onto farms
just to listen to old songs. Bobby McMillon is among the consultants who remark on the ease some of these Appalachian singers must have felt with Sharp. The local oral record suggests that the Englishness that could have made Sharp seem alien may have actually endeared him to groups of people who saw him as somehow kin due to their own English, Scottish, or Irish ancestry (McMillon 2004). No primary sources, however, explain if these singers thought they might benefit from such a venture, or even if they thought of their music as a “tradition” at all. Whatever local ideas on the songs’ status as tradition, Sharp’s arrival and documenting them as vestiges of English folk art planted the seed for canonizing the songs as valuable heritage. Sharp’s work began to turn what was an everyday event in the fields, kitchens, and porches of those Appalachian hollers into a legacy. Further, his assertion that this singing represented a rare holdout from the diminished vitality of native English and Scottish balladry underscored this legacy as being at risk. Sharp’s work elevated the mountain ballads from their everyday practice and then elevated them even further by stressing the practice of singing as a tradition in danger of evaporation.

David Lowenthal notes that “legacies at risk are cherished for their very fragility”; the heritage of rural folklife and performances are exalted because they are considered to be globally at risk (1996, 6). In this model, documentation becomes a way not only of recognizing that risk but also of “saving” the endangered tradition. As documentation transforms performance and tradition into heritage, the tradition bearers often become more invested in their own artistic output. Ethnographers, photographers, filmmakers, and folklorists, in turn, perpetuate this cycle by further focusing on those traditions and returning to provide every generation in the local community with its booster shot of preservation, conservation, and presentation. This relationship is primarily, in the case of Madison
County, a positive one for both tendrils of intertwining tradition. The possible deleterious effects, however, are well worth discussing. Such a relationship is not without its drawbacks.

**The Collector’s Conceit**

As discussed earlier, although Sharp and his party played an integral role in preservation, they seemed to neglect recognition of the singers themselves, regarding them as little more than musical vessels carrying the blood of traditional song into the present day. The assumption that continued folk performance is the singularly touted prize of the preservationist is an unfortunate pretense that has left an indelible mark on the minds of tradition bearers in Madison County. While Sharp’s book provided an invaluable record of Appalachian musical practice, it also co-opted local tradition without any evidenced concern, collaboration, or reciprocation. The collection was originally executed for the benefit of others; the songs were primarily gathered for the gain of people outside of Madison County. More specifically, Sharp’s work was researched and penned for his own self advancement (arguably, most all academic works certainly contain at least a grain of this impetus). Moreover, Sharp’s major motivation for collecting in Appalachia was his determination that these mountain singers were exemplary hold-outs of true English culture—English culture that had been all but wiped out by industrialism and war. “With . . . praise I should say that they are just exactly what the English peasant was one hundred or more years ago,” he argued (1916, qtd. in Karpeles 1967, 146). After his fieldwork in America, Sharp returned to a post-war England and spent the rest of his professional days teaching and sharing about performances he had witnessed in Appalachia for the benefit of young English pupils. He
had found the holy grail of English balladry down the rutted roads of places like Madison County, and returned with those spoils to re-acculturate the English in the way of their own traditions.

Sharp’s visit to Madison County was a fleeting incident during the lives of the local people. The collector had swept in, “discovered” a wealth of fascinating cultural activity, and left with a product that would mainly be enjoyed by the upper, elite classes. Like the products of many folklorists and collectors, the conversion of tradition to heritage was immediately aligned with the privileged class; the folk may have produced it, but once captured, the elite would “own” heritage. This was not an uncommon pattern at the time; nor is it all that uncommon today. “Populism notwithstanding, heritage normally goes with privilege: elites usually own it, control access to it, and ordain its public image” (Lowenthal 1996, 90). Neither Sharp himself nor Karpeles upon her return over thirty years later recognized the singers of Appalachia in a public forum, invited them to perform in open concerts, or worked with them in any way aside from appearing by name in a book.

This is not to suggest that Sharp did not respect or admire these performers. Indeed, he was so captivated by their peasant simplicity and self-supportedness that he considered them superior to American city-dwellers because they had not succumbed to what he saw as the base degeneration of modern life (Karpeles 1967, 146). Their value was in the fact that they had not been touched by modernity. Sharp’s work would remain both the mason jar for preserving the ballads as well as the exposure that would serve to destroy what Sharp would have considered a pure cultural tradition by exposing it to outside listeners, collectors, and enthusiasts. Indeed, it was Sharp who put this area on the map as a natural ballad habitat; that claim helped to draw in the attention and worldliness—the absence of which he so
valued in his consultants.

The shadows of the collector’s conceit lingered. What had been laid down by Sharp was later the groundwork for troubles faced by John Cohen when he ventured to the mountains to record the next generation of ballad singers. Unlike Sharp, Cohen was never welcomed with the sense of kinship presumably enjoyed by the English Sharp. Cohen’s hailing from New England marked him in the community as altogether different and wholly an outsider to mountain ways. The release of Cohen and Gott’s recording, *Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina* on the Folkways label offered Madison County’s ballad singers a new form of regional and national exposure. As suggested earlier, his work there opened Cohen up for stringent critique among the people he recorded. Gott’s retelling of the incident highlights Cohen’s relentless use of recording equipment even after his consultants had politely declined. This ended in the oft repeated tale of Cohen being punched off of the Wallin’s porch. Gott notes that Doug “took a swing at him” (2004). What actually happened between Wallin and Cohen is hard to determine. Versions of this story differ in the details, but all illustrate the air of discontent between our two symbiotic traditions. What changed between Sharp’s publication of an internationally heralded volume and Cohen’s release of a slightly successful album?

Part of this answer may rest in the sketchiness of the oral record. Perhaps Sharp’s consultants were equally angered by his co-opting their music for his own and history’s gain while leaving no gain for themselves. As mentioned earlier, we know very little about how Madison County singers and residents of Appalachia felt about Sharp. Due to its more recent date, however, the incident with Cohen and his subsequent dealings with the singers in Madison County still survive the oral record.
John Cohen notes that he had no idea there was a feeling of uneasiness or anger among some members of the ballad community until Doug Wallin, the son of singer Cas Wallin, confronted Cohen with the claim that he was “keeping our money” (Cohen 2005). According to Cohen’s account of the confrontation, Wallin’s concern was prompted by the apparent ubiquity of the recording. Cohen remembers Wallin’s words to him: “That’s all over the place. Everybody I know has copies and I saw one in Marshall; it’s probably all over the country on jukeboxes everywhere” (Cohen 2005). These comments came as a shock to Cohen, who knew that the record was by no means a big-seller. Sheila Kay Adams echoes this understanding. “Everywhere they’d go, somebody would inevitable come up to them and say, ‘I heard you on this record that John Cohen put out.’ Well, to them it started to sound like there were millions of these records out there” (Adams 2005). Although it is not clear from our interviews whether John Cohen ever promised any kind of monetary compensation to the people who appear on *Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina*, Wallin’s feelings about his father’s recording may have been misplaced. Although few contemporary records exist, Harvey Wang’s 1977 thesis quotes Cas Wallin as saying “Cohen fellow made the record. It wasn’t long after that we received an envelope with $30. I thought that was fair. It gives a man a pretty good honor to sing for [a record]” (Wang 1977, 41).

When reflecting on his experiences in Madison County, Cohen returned to what I believe the most salient point about this entire saga. Despite any altercation, discontent, or confrontation, Cohen remains positive about what he sees as the ultimate function of the record:

I feel good that the record did something . . . it got the word out that these were a good bunch of singers, and that other people heard them and came in and did more
with it. And they did more and more, and that made the local people more interested in what they already had. It also made them proud. And they started getting invitations to go to festivals, and sing here, and do something with the state, and do something with the National Endowment, and get these rewards and awards, and get a reputation . . . I don’t think that would have happened if Peter [Gott] and myself hadn’t done what we did (Cohen 2005).

Bobby McMillon echoes this sentiment, calling the recording a major contribution to the ballad singing community. McMillon then takes this point a step further by suggesting that without Cohen’s work, “these people’s lives would have been played out and no one would ever have known” (2004). We return to the image of dual traditions acting in concert with one another. The seed of legacy and heritage planted by Sharp was encouraged to grow outward through the audio and visual recordings of John Cohen and Peter Gott. The damage done to that growth by Cohen’s non-collaborative approach, while not unimportant or inconsequential, is overshadowed by the lasting influence his work had on future generations of singers and ethnographers.

So what do these tales of discontent offer us, the subsequent generations, as a lesson? That lesson is two-fold. First, relationships between singers and ethnographers often begin with a cautious look at the past. Rob Amberg and Harvey Wang both say that their access to Madison County’s traditions was eased by the fact that their documentary mode was visual rather than aural. The lack of musical recording offered them an easier entree into the cultural milieu of Madison County because it posed little threat of exploitation. By the time Roberts and I entered Madison County, we were a good three generations of singers removed from Cohen’s visit. Despite the oft-told tale of Doug Wallin’s anger, the singers we talked to (both young and old) were entirely welcoming when we appeared with recording equipment in tow. They were, however, filled with questions about our intentions for the recordings.
We, in turn, entered the field with a cautiousness wholly grounded in our limited understanding of what had happened with Cohen in Madison County. This brings me directly to a second lesson that blooms from past disagreements. In creating those new relationships with an eye toward the past, both the ethnographer and the consultant should approach their relationship as ethnographic collaborators. More than an atonement of past documentary sins, this approach emerges from both hindsight and current theoretical conversations concerning the interaction of recorder and recorded.

The Documentary Effect

What really happens to cultural performances when we, the gatherers, document the expressions of others? This is a key question. Aside from preserving a performance for the eyes and ears of the future, is the object or expression itself—and by extension the culture from which it comes—indelibly changed? While these questions are not entirely new, the unaccompanied ballad tradition in Madison County offers a rare opportunity to explore these issues. Many circumstantial factors can determine the effect of a particular documentary effort on a particular artistic tradition, but in Madison County some factors have remained relatively consistent over the century that these singers have been documented. These include the following: a geographically stable community; people passing a musical tradition though time; and focus on a narrow musical style encompassing a relatively small canon. This canon and its practitioners have been documented in some form or another for multiple successive generations. Given these places of consistency, we find ourselves turning to two additional issues: the effects of different ethnographic approaches and the effects of time’s
passing. I’d like to begin with the ethnographic tactics, a matter that foregrounds the experiences of those who studied in the county before us and, by extension, our own experiences there. I must begin by recognizing that our predecessors did not enter Madison County with the goal of practicing ethnography. Ethnographic method is utilized here as a way of better understanding the relationships between the documenter and the documented.

Work published in the 1990s by Elaine Lawless concerning what she terms “reciprocal ethnography” serves as a most explicit theoretical base for the type of collaboration I am referencing. She defines ethnography as a description of other’s lives in context that is then analyzed and reflected on by the ethnographer (Lawless 1991, 37-56). Those reflections should take the form of a dialogue carried “past the scholar’s interpretations, back to the people involved, and into the published work” (Lawless 1992, 306). More recently, Luke Eric Lassiter’s discussion and outlining of methodological steps toward explicit and intentional collaboration between ethnographers and consultants provides a most pertinent set of reflections. Lassiter’s thoughts on collaboration offer a structure for interpreting the past documentary efforts in the region.

My earlier discussion of the collector’s conceit—in which the documenter places herself at the center of her own fieldwork—introduces the first part of this equation. In ethnographic practice, the ethnographer consciously attempts to bring her consultants into the center with her so that they may analyze the culture together; Lassiter describes this move as a shift away from “reading over the shoulders of natives” to one of “reading alongside natives” (2005, 3-14). He then outlines a four-part rubric for a truly collaborative practice: “ethical and moral responsibility to consultants; honesty about the fieldwork process; accessible and dialogic writing; and collaborative reading, writing, and co-interpretation of
ethnographic texts with consultants” (2005, 77). The initial and primary action of any such practice is intent; without this, an ethnographer cannot take the first step towards realizing Lassiter’s objective. That pre-collaborative intent serves as a good basis for analyzing Madison County’s documentary tradition.

Let us, once again, begin with Sharp. Despite his admiration for the singers, Sharp saw them as a means to his own ends without acknowledging the individual ownership of their traditions or reciprocating the time he consumed. As mentioned earlier, Karpeles’s account of their time in the mountains suggests that Sharp was motivated by a desire to return the music to its “home” in England. Put simply, no part of this practice was collaborative; it remained a simple gathering and taking-away of songs as ethnographic artifacts. What effect did this lack of collaboration have on the community? From what we can gather, the immediate result seems largely inconsequential, to the point of being utterly forgotten. Despite this utter absence of collaborative alliance with his consultants, the community did not treat Sharp’s work with dislike or disdain. To this day, they perceive his book as the most authentic ballad authority, and many treat it as the ultimate text by which many of the ballads are preserved.

Just as Sharp entered the community with his own intentions, so did Cohen. He sought to express himself artistically through his documentary products. This is not to say that he had no care for those he was documenting. Quite to the contrary, Cohen’s second motivator was his desire for people outside of Madison County to hear this incredible music. In our conversations, Cohen stressed his interest in sharing what he saw as a fascinating cultural expression with a wider audience (2005). What he shared, in turn, was shaped by his own artistic sensibility. Artistically and contextually, Cohen’s work exists as a masterpiece
of cultural representation, as well as a fascinating point of temporal preservation. The images that he captured in Madison County speak to his own artistry, his commitment to conserving Appalachian culture, and the representational framing his own generation—the wave of folk revivalists searching for the exoticism of a folk-infused land where time stands still.

Ethnographically, the reverberations of Cohen’s work left much to be desired. As opposed to Sharp’s representation of Madison County’s music in situ, Cohen wanted to portray performance in context (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 17-78). While this can be considered a step toward a more dialogic study, Cohen’s efforts (unlike Sharp’s) yielded outright disapproval on the part of some of his consultants. These negative reactions have spoken louder through the passage of time than their more approving counterparts. As a result, when Roberts and I began our work in Madison County, we recognized some of Cohen’s choices as collaborative error, and took this into account as we crafted our own relationships in the community.

Rob Amberg’s work represents another shift in collaborative approach. Amberg did not come to Madison County to document the area’s musicians; unlike Sharp and Cohen, he did not capture local culture and then turn his wheels around to carry it away for his own editorial free will. Amberg’s experiences are more difficult to analyze when addressing intent because his published work unfolded more slowly and organically than that of his documentary predecessors. His entrée into the lives of Dellie Norton, her family, and her friends was not prefaced by a plan to record a certain number of musicians or capture particular images. Soon after arriving in Madison County, Amberg relates, it became more and more clear that his photography would benefit from becoming part of the community.
around him. Instead of simply shooting families planting the season’s tobacco, he offered a hand in that process; his experiences working and living alongside residents of the area resulted in what he considers better photographs. As he developed the ideas for his book, *Sodom Laurel Album*, his conversations and relationships with area residents bore a level of collaboration that Madison County had not seen in previous documentary efforts. A great deal of that book focuses on Dellie Norton and the people with whom she surrounded herself. Amberg points out that Dellie began to refer to the emergent work as “our book” (2004).

These examples illustrate how intent shapes dynamics between documented and documenter. In our own work in Madison County, Roberts and I first established our intentions by discussing our ethnographic and collaborative objectives between the two of us and then with our possible collaborators. Before I describe our own experiences as members of the documentary tradition, however, I’d like to digress for a moment and address the other shifting variable in these two traditions: the effects of time itself. All of this talk about tradition moving through the decades raises the question of what happens to tradition as it makes its generational journey. Tradition reflects, echoes, and absorbs the lives of its bearers and, therefore, of the contemporary cultural environment. This dynamic relationship with the contemporary is particularly interesting when considering the role of technology. In Madison County, technology affects the ballad tradition in two ways: in how the ballads are exchanged and reproduced; and in the ways that the exposure wrought by ongoing documentation transforms the tradition.

The oldest forms of learning the ballads were both direct and indirect. Many songs were picked up or transmitted from one generation to the next indirectly: children would listen to their elders singing in the fields, the kitchen, or around the house. These youngsters
would progressively memorize their favorite songs as they grew older. Many families encouraged their young to sing by allowing them to attend singing parties or ballad swaps. Some family members would sit down with a child or young adult and sing with them “knee to knee,” with the teacher singing a verse and the student repeating it. The teacher would then sing the second verse and the student would repeat both the first and second, until the entire text was mastered (Adams 2004). All of these styles of learning encouraged an array of textual and musical changes to the songs.

Ballad scholars have long addressed variation as a central feature of the oral tradition; many would agree with T.R. Coffin’s 1950 assertion that “variation itself is not a simple subject . . . there are a great many types of ballad alteration” (4). Learning by memory encouraged slight lyrical and melodic deviation from one generation to the next. For example, when a singer did not know, remember, or understand a line, he or she would simply fill in that line with something that rhymed or made sense in context. Likewise, learning by listening resulted in constant melodic variations. D. K. Wilgus highlights the ever-varying nature of ballads by referring to them as “organisms” that constantly evolve through individual changes accepted or rejected by other individuals in the community. He quotes Sharp in noting that oral transmission is the “process by which [song] grows and by which it is created” (Wilgus 1959, 61).

The advent of recordings and radio altered the transmission of ballads from one generation to the next. The first and most obvious result of radio was exposure to a wider, more varied set of musical influences. The community’s music persisted, but it was joined with influences carried on the airwaves and available on record. In 1969, ballad scholar Bertrand Harris Bronson argued that the “exploitation of tape, disc, and radio” may “stultify
individual variation” (273). Recent technological advances have further transformed the situation that Bronson addressed, creating an entirely new set of conditions by which young singers learn the canon. The youngest generation of singers in Madison County, for instance, continue to learn songs from the musical predecessors in their own community. At the same time, however, they listen to recordings of family members past and present as a way of learning ballads. Some of these recordings, like John Cohen’s album, are direct products of the documentary tradition. Others are produced (either at home or professionally) by the singers themselves. Their musical tradition is being shaped by an age where recording technology has become inexpensive and accessible. For example, the youngest generation of ballad singers may learn songs directly from Sheila Kay Adams’s compact disc recordings. While an emphasis on learning from one’s family may still trump the influence of radio, familial instruction can now be done more quickly and efficiently by using available recording technology.

This shift in learning styles has resulted in a shift in performance styles that perhaps underscore Bronson’s feared stultification. His fear fails to consider the possibilities for variation that would accompany a musician’s exposure to varied types or genres of music on the radio, but his suggestion that repetitive learning from a static source holds some validity. While I am not prepared to offer a musicological analysis of ornamentation, lyrical, and melodic variation, I am willing to hypothesize that standardization comes with this new style of ballad passage. First, because the younger singers are listening to a fixed text. No matter how many times they listen to a recorded song, they are always receiving the exact same version containing the same ornamentation, lyrics, modulations, and style. Second, because the younger singers are listening to a text that they can rewind, repeat, pause, and replay at
will. Unlike the limitations involved in passing a song directly from person to person, the younger singers are granted limitless contact with any given song. These two factors may result in standardization of the ballad tradition that encourages younger singers to memorize a direct copy of the song as opposed to the necessity of slight changes or alterations that accompany hearing a song a restricted number of times. Textually, a similar dynamic is at play. Not only do singers continue to collect the words to their songs as their ancestors have, but some of the singers with whom we worked with printed lyrics off of the Internet. They use an incredibly modern global resource to access and recreate the elements of their own local traditions.

As suggested earlier, the documentary tradition itself increased exposure to modern technology. Just as Sharp’s book shifted the focus from song practice to publicly valued heritage, each successive documenter utilized media that added new layers to both traditions’ interactions with technology. None of these collectors, filmmakers, photographers, or folklorists used media forms that were so new that they might be considered foreign or exotic; they were, however, using them as a new way to interact with the musical tradition. For instance, motion picture was not a mysterious concept in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Madison County, but Cohen’s use of film prompted an entirely different exposure to modern media. The same can be said for the vinyl release of *Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina*. Similarly, there was nothing shockingly new about Rob Amberg’s use of 35mm film to document the cultural fabric of Sodom Laurel. But the publication of those photos in a glossy book form—and the narrative collaboration that gave rise to much of the book’s text—pushed the community into new forms of engagement with modern representation. Our own documentary work repeats this pattern. Our consultants
find neither digital video or filmic representation as unfamiliar or unavailable. However, mediating that representation with an online weblog and presenting the documentary product via streaming video pushes the musical tradition to a new representational space and a wider modernity. In being identified by and subsequently identifying with increasingly progressive forms of representational media, the musical tradition has been consistently exposed to the discourse of change for well over eighty years.

The effects of different ethnographic approaches and the effects of time’s passing on the dialogue between these dual traditions shaped our entrance into the field, bringing me back to discussing our intentions when beginning our own documentary foray into the mountains. Roberts and I choose to film and edit a documentary video about these two entwined traditions. The act of entering Madison County and making the video taught us more about these dynamics as we became part of the documentary tradition. It also revealed that the relationships between tradition, modernity, and heritage maintenance were far more complicated than we had anticipated. That revelation, however, could not have occurred if not for our utilization of collaborative ethnography.
SECTION III: Ethnography

Collaborative Design

Dell Hymes suggests that stepping into the understandings of the consultant community is the key intrinsic action that separates ethnography from other cultural investigations. He posits that intact traditions are a matter of re-creation from one generation to the next with an implicit creativity found “in all our living,” and he reminds us that ethnography must spring from the community’s definitions of meaning (Hymes 1975, 355, 350). Earlier, I utilized Lassiter’s rubric for skillful ethnographic practice as a structure for exploring the nature of Madison County’s documentary tradition in the past. Next, I’d like to employ those same steps to discuss our own fieldwork, representing the newest generation in this tradition’s cycle.

Lassiter’s first directive entails entering a community with “an ethical and moral responsibility to consultants” (2005, 77). Approaching Madison County did not present us with immediate ethical dilemmas on the scale that Lassiter discusses in his book (such as those regarding racial inequity, religious representation, or issues of anonymity of research consultants). It did, however, present us with an immediate opportunity to set and agree upon ethical guidelines with our consultants. Given that community members’ conflict with earlier ethnographers focused on the issue of profit and financial compensation, we felt it was
particularly important to learn from earlier ethnographers’ mistakes or omissions and set clear guidelines regarding any future monetary profits that the project might generate. Lassiter notes that ethnography is “built upon moral co-commitments” and that such ethical guidelines frequently “emerge, formally or informally, within very particular relationships and contexts” (2005, 97). Despite the organic nature of this project’s development, Roberts and I approached our experiences in the field with a clear understanding that we would not profit monetarily from this undertaking. Further, we prefaced our interviews by stating this understanding on camera in order to create a solid record of ethnographer-consultant communication about the issue of compensation. We had no way to assess whether our product would or would not produce financial gain; perhaps as a reaction to past misunderstandings, perhaps as a reflection of our newness as ethnographers, we promised that film would be used solely for educational purposes.

In response to this obligation we have developed a two-fold distribution plan for our documentary film, *Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound*. The first part of this plan has been realized in the movie’s worldwide availability as a streaming feature on the website Folkstreams.net. This educational and artistic resource remains free for anyone who can obtain high quality Internet access. Our film can be viewed online at any hour of the day on any computer terminal on the globe with no cost to the viewer. Likewise, we are planning to make hard copies of the video available to libraries, schools, public television, and other non-profit, educational venues.

The second part of our distribution plan speaks not only to our ethical commitment, but also to the act of ethnographic reciprocation (a term used here to reference the
ethnographer’s giving back to her consultant some portion of the return on the ethnographic investment). We are currently awaiting grant money to create a run of DVD copies of the film that we will give back to our musical consultants. These include bonus interviews, cut footage, and full-length performances. The singers featured in the film will be free to distribute these copies at their public performances and reap full profit from any sales. In addition, we are using our multimedia website as a place where these artists can gain a greater presence on the worldwide Web and perhaps benefit from its expanding use as an arena of commerce (King and Roberts 2005).

The second step outlined by Lassiter enjoins the ethnographer to be honest and accommodating when discussing the essentially subjective bases of ethnographic representation. He emphasizes that embracing our own experiences in the field, our subjectivities, and our backgrounds renders the ethnographer vulnerable by “stripping us of the control and power often assumed in classic ethnographic writing” (2005, 115-117). Due to the complex history of Madison’s dual traditions, as well to as our presentation of ourselves as student researchers, we did not feel as we entered the field that we could wield power or authority over our ethnographic product. Our position as the next in a long line of interested parties became a constant force and stripped us of any illusions we might have otherwise held about ethnographic authority.

An interesting component of this equation rests in our own interdisciplinarity. Roberts and I were graduate students hailing from different departments—Roberts from the School of Journalism and myself from the Curriculum in Folklore. Our disciplinary backgrounds could easily have brought about paralyzing methodological differences in the
field, particularly given that our respective disciplines’ have radically different investigative approaches. But, we had met in Glenn Hinson’s “Art of Ethnography” class, and experiences there gave us a shared understanding of ethnography’s unique challenges. In the field we served as a check on one another, this relationship forged by way of Hinson’s assertion that “objectivity, after all, is but a chimera; the best we can achieve is a subjective fabrication thereof” (2004). This bond strongly, and I believe positively, affected our interactions in the field, both with one another and with our consultants.

Lassiter’s third step toward effective collaboration addresses the expressive choices used by the ethnographer in creating the ethnographic text. He stresses that the ethnographer should write clearly, well, and accessibly in order to engender an “open dialogue about interpretation and representation” among ourselves, with our collaborators, and among our academic peers (2005, 132). This call for accessible writing speaks to Jeff Todd Titon’s suggestion that any ethnographic production be treated critically in the same way that we treat texts, as all such productions are objects of interpretation. Just as “any written text arising from a communicative event that we recognize as folklore is clearly a transformation and a reduction,” so too are ethnographic productions inherently reductive (Titon 2003, 70-81). Such reductionism is an inevitable response to the complexities we find in cultural practice and performance, but we should strive to not confuse these terms—accessibility and reduction—and we should search for methods for structuring our texts in a manner that will recognize our own need for or tendency toward reduction while embracing clear and manageable texts. Lassiter notes that one way of approaching accessibility is experimentation; “experimentation has indeed created new ways to elucidate meaning”
In developing a textual plan for our work in Madison County, Roberts and I hashed out multiple ideas. We recognized—particularly as our field tapes began to multiply exponentially—the need for editorial reduction, yet we were hesitant to sacrifice an interesting and complex storyline. At the same time, we recognized the potential for multiple audiences, and we acknowledged the possible conflicts among accessibility and interests of such varied viewers. In the end we decided to divide our product into representative parts that would each occupy a different textual realm. We developed a triumvirate of ethnographic texts: the words-on-paper text you are currently reading; the documentary film; and a multimedia web experience. This expansion broadens the accessibility to our audiences through multimedia design. The results provide us with the opportunity to utilize a middle ground between necessary reduction and the expansion of polymedic production.

A varied set of texts—created by two ethnographers working together in the field—provides diverse entrances for diverse audiences. Our interpretation of Lassiter’s directive resulted not in one adjusted text, but in three; the creation of these avenues increases the accessibility of the project three-fold. Whereas one listener, viewer, reader, collaborator, academic, or enthusiast may find an entrance to this work via one of these forms, another may cross the threshold through a different textual, visual, or aural manifestation.

The first of these three manifestations engages you at this moment. A text in the most conventional sense, this piece strives to address Titon’s vision of a “knowing text” that conceives of itself as “rhetorical, literary, and self-reflexive” while remaining “concerned with issues of representation and authority” (2003, 83). I agree with James Clifford’s assertion that ethnographic writing cannot avoid reduction, but that it can, at a minimum,
resist abstract portrayals of consultant experience (1983, 119). Such conscientious resistance appears here in two forms: my admission that this ethnographically produced text is unfailingly subjective, and my attempt to couch my own discussion and conclusions in the larger historical and ethnographic contexts of which they are a part.

The second of our ethnographic representations lives in a virtual exchange on a global scale. The multimedia website, madisoncountyproject.org, interacts with its audience through hypertextuality. In his discussion of hypertext, Titon hypothesizes a day where video and audio may be at the fingertips of web audiences. Only a few years after his article was published, that time has come (without the necessity of disc or DVD, as he suggested). The site, designed in Macromedia Flash, features photography, profiles of project consultants, sidebar stories, cut material, full ballad performances, a basic ballad timeline, audio clips, and video not found in the film. All video and audio material streams directly over Internet connections, enabling audiences to experience our fieldwork in an entirely new form. (Note that online streaming allows the viewer to see and hear the material without being able to legally save that material to his or her computer.) The online resources also invite them to move from one part of our ethnographic set to another; for example, a viewer who hears the few verses of “Down in the Willow Garden” performed by Denise Norton O’Sullivan in the movie can go to the website to view and hear the complete performance. Other audience members may choose to experience the hypertext in relation to other influences outside of our project; for example, a visitor curious about movement of ballads through varied musical traditions can listen to Donna Ray Norton, one of our consultants, singing “Pretty Peggy-O” and then immediately listen to Bob Dylan’s version of the same
song. By navigating their own way through the hypertext, readers can interact dynamically with the ethnographic object.

Titon notes that hypertext may also allow the audience to participate as authors (2003, 95). The precursor and partner to our multimedia site is the production weblog we maintained throughout the fieldwork and editing processes. While I discuss the collaborative implications of this venture in more detail below, I mention it here to demonstrate how we invited the online audience to engage in the film’s creation. On our production weblog we attempted to communicate our thoughts and actions throughout the process of fieldwork and to share our work as it progressed. In addition to discussing what we were currently working on, we also posted rough edits, interview clips, and other footage and encouraged feedback from anyone who was logging on. Our goal was to achieve a measure of documentary transparency while engaging our consultants in collaborative editing.

This brings me directly to the third in our set of texts. The video, *Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound*, acts as both the anchor for the other two products and a full and accessible expression in its own right. This video falls into what Sharon Sherman calls “folklore postvérité”; the film exists both as a performance and as a document about performance and expressive behavior (1998, 264). It also falls into her portrayal of folklore films as existing in the intersections of filmic genres: some scenes are strictly performative; others are covertly reflexive; and still others are observational.

The genre mixing should come as no surprise in a film that serves as a performative text about performative texts. *Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound* tries both to convey an historic timeline, and to represent past and present musical performances, past
documentary efforts, and the contemporary cultural performances that tie all of these parts together into an accessible narrative. As editors, we choose not to employ voiceovers, narrators, or omniscient voices to tell the story. Our challenge was instead to find the story among the words, actions, and music of our consultants that we had captured on film. This tactic immediately placed us into a different kind of dialogue with documentary filmic conventions. Ours was certainly not what Sherman calls a purely performative film, one that often contains no voiceover, lacks “historical referents,” and avoids the burden of narrative (Sherman 1998, 265). Our production was instead a text attempting to tell the story of the intersection of other texts (i.e., the text of John Cohen’s film speaking to the text of a Chandler family ballad sung thirty years later). In creating the film, we strove to meet Titon’s directive, “to understand persons in performance generating texts and giving and finding meaning in their lives” (2003, 79). This statement, of course, begs the question: who are the “we” and the “they”? To be honest we must first recognize that we are all at once the we and the they. The consultant is a person in performance generating text. So is the ethnographer. The ethnographic text—film, audio, written word, photograph, web-based media, etc.—is a creative work springing from the cultural performances of others just as a ballad is created out of that ballad’s performative history. Actions of the singer and of the ethnographer serve to give and find meaning in the lives of the other. The three representational products Roberts and I have created exist as linked partners as well as wholly independent entities. Some audience members may attend to only one, while others may only find completion in the trio. But any one of them, and the whole of them combined, aim to speak at meaning in the performances of both the ethnographer and the ballad singer.
The fourth area Lassiter outlines, and one that I emphasize the most, calls the ethnographer to participate in “collaborative reading, writing, and co-interpretation” (2005, 133). It was this effort that complicated our initial attempt to illustrate the coexistence of traditionality and modernity in Madison County, revealing that the relationships between these streams and the community’s heritage maintenance are far more guarded and complex than we expected. It was not long before Roberts and I realized the “difficult engagement” that arises when collaborative intent meets “differing visions, agendas, and expectations” (Lassiter 2005, 137). When a work is opened up to the hands of the collaborators, the ethnographer must be willing to let go of her desire to shape the outcome of the process. Where some viewers may see a short documentary about singers and photographers in Madison County, I see a complex assemblage of what was included in or excised from the work as a result of the collaborative progression. This written text allows me to unpack and explore those collaborative moments in an accessible way; I hope that it will yield lessons pertinent to the wider discussion of collaboration. Documenting the successes, failures, challenges and questions resulting from ethnographic responsibility speaks directly to the impact that we, as ethnographers, have on the dynamics of history and memory.

The Ethnographic Object

“The study of folksong is becoming no longer a comparison of ballad texts, but a study of what people sing in their daily lives.” D.K. Wilgus published these words in 1959 alongside his admonition that ballad study should first address issues of catalogue and type
before it moved on to a study of function (242-244). The ballad tradition in Madison County has stretched such functionality past Wilgus’s conception of how song “functions as part of a social group” and the nature of such music in the “daily lives” of its singers (1959, 336). Madison County’s balladry has, in part, moved well beyond its own margins of daily life, and the internal reproduction of the tradition has been indelibly altered as a result. The documentary study of the ballads’ existence in context has fueled (if not created) this movement, while simultaneously attempting to preserve the ballad tradition.

In Madison County, the music has moved out of its cultural contexts toward a life as what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the “ethnographic object.” Initially, the ethnographic object manifested itself by way of the documenter; it was made up of the ethnographer’s representation of the singers, the songs, and the community. But that same object soon cycled back and became incorporated by the community it represented. As the culture that embraced the ballads experienced change, the documentary work became integrated as part of the ballad legacy. Sheila Kay Adams notes that “the tradition of singing the love songs is completely out of context with the culture now, because the culture . . . that it came out of and that fostered it . . . and sort of nurtured it, that culture is now gone” (2004). Instead of acting as a central form of entertainment, leisure activity, or way of passing the work hours, ballads have taken their place as an established form of heritage laced with the importance of familial legacy. The social meaning of the music’s reproduction has clearly changed. This is not to suggest that such movement should be considered a negative development. The living generations’ use of the ballads has shifted on all fronts. In addition to the aforementioned changes in the ways songs are learned, the ballads’ use and function
have also shifted in their own community. Such a shift in social significance paints many current ballad performances in Madison County as good examples of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s suggestion that the folk presentation of performative objects brings both the music and the singers into a more accepted “hierarchy of artistic expression while establishing” such performances as heritage (1991, 420-421).

This shift from inward to outward—from a daily operating function to a function that culturally binds the community together—serves to preserve the tradition while expanding Madison County’s mark on the cultural map. The perceived fragility of the singing tradition helps feed this expansion, as does the tradition’s ties to its own documentation. In his work on the modern global “heritage crusade,” Lowenthal argues that in many contemporary instances, “the past feels more accessible, more controversial, and more vulnerable than ever before . . . . Awareness of its fragility endears what we inherit, but our very embrace dooms it; we kill what we love” (1996, 30). In Madison County, this is clearly not the case. This could only be true if performers and communities were most concerned with the explicit expression of this music as it was in the past. In accepting that the tradition (and the culture of the mountains in general) has changed and has always been changing, we can appreciate Madison County’s ballads as beautifully modern manifestations of a complex heritage that is important to those who practice it as well as those who witness it. We should not label only song produced in the manner of an idealized past as authentic, real, valuable, or worthy of continuation. It should not matter whether a singer learned a song from a compact disc, or the radio, or at her grandma’s knee. If such passage were the only mark of true authenticity, then we would have to concede that even the “real” singers toiling in the tobacco fields in the
late 19th and early 20th centuries were equally “inauthentic” if they had come to the music by way of old broadsides. Sheila Kay Adams makes precisely this point when discussing the ongoing function of ballad singing:

If you can take it and actually make it a part of you, and a part of your everyday life—you know, whether Denise sings to her little boy . . . driving back and forth to soccer practice like I used to do with mine, or whether she’s sitting up on the porch at Granny’s house—I mean what difference does it make as long as this next generation grabs hold of it? (2004).

Nonetheless, the notion of cultural fragility and the ballads’ relation to their past are complicating factors in our own representation of ballad singing in modern Madison County. It is this shift from the cultural object to the ethnographic object that has altered the youngest generation’s projection of what it means to be a ballad singer. The youngest generation of ballad singers has distilled from the past cycles of ballad/documentation intertwining a model of what the Madison County ballad singer should now encompass. In so doing, they are responding to the cultural success of the documentary tradition by crafting and maintaining what they perceive to be the characteristics that will sustain that tradition, promote financial profitability, and boost personal recognition among their community.

Earlier, I identified three acts of heritage maintenance among the ballad singers; here I’d like to expand that discussion to show how the youngest generation of ballad singers use these acts to craft a space of perceived authenticity. First, this generation constantly—both in public performance and in interviews—emphasizes their legitimacy as ballad singers via their complex familial relationships to one another. They clearly treat singing as a birthright. In so doing, these women participate in broadening the scope and definition of family and bloodlines, a move that might invoke unfortunate mountaineer stereotyping in many
readers’s minds. By publicly highlighting this set of relationships, the youngest generation of ballad singers echoes Adams’s statement that the ballad singing community, while technically not all one family in conventional terms, was related “either by marriage . . . by blood, or both” (2004). They stress the importance of family as legitimizing; in so doing they simultaneously recognize a large community as familial.

The second act of heritage maintenance is the acceptance of the insider-outsider-middle-ground. To expand on the earlier example, the youngest generation joins in on community convention by readily accepting Gott as a member of the artistic community. They include him when listing the folks who used to “come up to Granny Dell’s,” and reference him as a member of their tradition’s fore-parentage. However, they draw the line at speaking of him in the venerated language reserved for the rightful ballad-singing elders; such language includes tagging a name with that singer’s position in ballad succession. For example, Granny Dell is referred to as a “sixth generation ballad singer” (Buckner et al. 2004). The youngest generation enacts the third act of heritage maintenance by becoming the most recent to accept and permit the documentation of their tradition; they effectively continue the cycle of (their) musical tradition’s intertwining with (our) documentary tradition. Participating in the cycle allows these ladies to join in these traditions’ dialogues about preservation, authenticity, cultural profitability, and financial gain. They are the latest sprouts from the seeds planted by Sharp’s effort to canonize the singing tradition as valuable heritage. If Sharp’s work began to transform what was most likely an everyday event in the fields, kitchens, and porches of these Appalachian hollers into a legacy, this generation of singers is both the product and beneficiary of this legacy.
Attempting to Find a Modern Appalachia

The romanticized stereotype of mountain life portrays back-holler living in wooden clapboard shacks, a banjo tune ringing from somewhere beyond a grove of pine trees, an unaccompanied ballad floating out from a front porch swing just as the sun sinks below the Blue Ridge. To many, the mountains are simple places that have been forgotten by time and progress. When we began this project, we wanted to understand the roles played by modernity and technology in an Appalachian singing community that often seems—from the outside—to embody this stereotype.

The stereotype is certainly pervasive, and is everywhere evident in popular representations of Appalachian culture. Whether in Hollywood portrayals or the souvenirs sold in gift shops along the Blue Ridge Parkway, the images focus on a mythic mountain folkness, transforming mountaineers into what folklorist Joyce Joins Newman calls “commodities within the new discourse of cultural tourism” (2005, 63). Rather than resisting this portrayal, many mountaineers—including the youngest group of ballad singers from Madison County—have attempted to harness this wave and follow it through as far into the future as it will take them. The contrast here rests in what many scholars aim to portray, that Appalachia is not and should not be imaged as a stereotype, and in what these young women have chosen to embrace, a type of acceptance of these stereotypes in order to exert power over them. For the singers, this means doing what their forbearers would have done—using the resources in their control and at their discretion to craft a successful space for themselves.
Consequently, if outsiders are willing to pay to experience what they perceive as authentic mountain musical performances, then this is exactly what these singers are going to give them.

This is not at all to suggest that the ballads are solely a commodity, or that they no longer play an important role in these women’s lives. Nor is it to suggest that their singing has, or perhaps ever will, make them wealthy. None of the youngest generation of singers survives solely on her singing, they all hold jobs both inside and outside the home, some work in clerical or retail fields, and Denise, Dee Dee, and Donna are all raising children. Their family lineage as singers and their pride in their heritage as a musical community remain strong among the reasons that they sing at all. However, they adeptly shape and extend this heritage in a way that will ensure its success as a commodity. Their intelligence and experience tell them that such external success, despite any negative side effects, almost always buttresses tradition’s longevity. Claiming that the current singers are participating both implicitly and explicitly in the continuance of a built heritage creates this question: how does this dynamic affect the modern ethnography?

As is the case with many ethnographic endeavors, when Roberts and I entered the field with video and audio equipment in tow we had not developed a storyboarding layout or a pre-designed film treatment of any kind. Our initial forays to Madison County consisted of interviews with a small number of ballad singers, a few current and former documentary artists, and some local residents. Our central line of inquiry emerged from our initial discoveries: this singing tradition had been documented continuously for almost a century, offering a rich history that could be explored in conversations with participants on both sides
of the documenting divide. Though stepping into a long history of insider and outsider interactions, we were doing so in the *now*, engaging in many respects what was an entirely different community with what we hoped would be an entirely different set of approaches. We were performing this exploration by effectively joining in on those dynamics and adding a new stratum atop the tradition of documentation.

From the beginning, we hoped to avoid romanticizing the lives of our consultants, and to conduct our inquiry collaboratively. We always intended to work jointly with our consultants to create a place for the singers’ thoughts about their own community to be explored and publicized. Instead of collecting interviews, cutting a film, creating a multimedia site, writing a thesis, and *then* carrying those finished works back to the community for praise or disapproval, we attempted to involve our consultants in shaping the messages that would eventually be set before the greater public.

In discussing “collaborative reading, writing, and co-interpretation,” Lassiter outlines six possible methods for tackling this challenge: using principle consultants as readers and primary editors; using focus groups; working with an appointed board or coalition of representative community members; integrating small ethnographer-consultant teams in large projects; convening community forums; and creating co-written texts (2005, 133, 139-146). While using some of these approaches in the creation of our ethnographic film, we also employed new technology as a collaborative tool, yielding three additional strategies.

The first entailed creating our production weblog where we posted rough edits and general progress reports. Anyone with Internet access could get online and see cuts of interviews, the pieces that were left in or excised, and the emergent story about Madison
County’s dual traditions. We spread the word about the weblog among the singers and documentarians as well as to academics and ballad enthusiasts via word of mouth and messages posted to various listservs. Viewers could freely join the creative conversation by posting comments on the site, or contacting us directly by email or phone. Responses on the weblog came more infrequently than we hoped. Instead, most of the questions, corrections, discussions, and encouragements came via personal email after their authors had viewed the web site. This lack of response to the comment feature of the weblog led us to worry that the singers could not or would not access the streaming videos. Hence, as a second vehicle for collaboration, we mailed many consultants a DVD of rough edits about half-way through the editing process, and encouraged them to respond with negative or positive feedback. Finally, we publicly screened the documentary video as a work in progress, hoping to prompt further collaborative feedback. These screenings gave both consultants and the public and scholarly communities an opportunity to give feedback. Presented at three different stages of the film and in three different North Carolina cities, each forum featured a more finished piece.

Much of the feedback that we received came from the collaborators in the documentary tradition, as well as from outside folklorists and academics. Among those providing feedback, the most frequent contributor was John Cohen. The first public screening of the video as a work in progress was held at Appalachian State University’s Winter Folk Festival Residency with John Cohen in February of 2005. Cohen was in North Carolina for this event, and Cecilia Conway of Appalachian State University’s Appalachian Studies Program asked us to screen the work for him and an audience of students and the general public. Cohen was to remain in contact with us throughout the remainder of the
editing process. The next most frequent respondent was Denise Norton O’Sullivan, one of the youngest generation of Madison County singers and a great-granddaughter of Dellie Norton. Denise frequently positioned herself as the mother hen among her sisters, and in that role she regularly responded to our questions.

Despite our three invitations at collaborative feedback during the editorial process, most of the messages we received about our ethnographic interpretations came straight from experiences in the field. We received answers to our interpretive questions both through reviewing our extant footage and through returning to talk with our consultants further about editorial issues. If those messages could be boiled down into one major theme, it would be this: our representation of the singers should be crafted in a way that confirmed and extended their carefully honed image of their crafted heritage. This theme soon began to feel contradictory to our desire to represent the modernity of Madison’s current balladry, quickly making it evident that the two approaches would not necessarily compliment one another. Though cuts were made and edits were altered, the rest of our time in the field was changed and the major themes that would be captured on film and edited into the video were influenced by this conflict.

We initially felt that these changes could seen as concessions to collaboration. But can we really call them concessions if we are being true to the ethnographic spirit? The situation in which we found ourselves as ethnographers brought us to a crossroads and left us in what might be best illustrated as a double bind. We could not edit the film that we were hoping to create, with the themes and representations that we had planned to present, without upsetting the collaborative balance. At the same time, yielding to the representational desires
of some of our consultants pointed us in a direction that we hadn’t planned on taking, while at the same time drawing us down an entirely different one.

**The Ethnographic Double Bind**

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson defines a double bind as a “situation in which no matter what a person does, he ‘can’t win’” (2000, 201). This concept—a lose-lose circumstance that could be likened to the cliché of being “stuck between a rock and a hard place,”—fits well the representational dilemma we faced as fieldworkers attempting collaboration. When an ethnographer consciously involves her consultants in analysis and representation, how will she react to the potential double bind created by the consultants’ wishes and her own? When ethnographers choose to employ their work as a collaborative effort along with their consultant communities, they may well be met with a situation arising from the disparity between the goals or interpretive intent of that ethnographer and the goals or representational wishes of the consultant.

Roberts and I began shooting footage for our documentary film with little plan about our thematic endpoint; we did, however, fully intend to create a work that was both collaborative and transparent. Only in hindsight do I realize that we both wanted to present our consultants as modern manifestations of an old tradition, as singers who operated in a progressive, technological world while maintaining their musical heritage. We hoped to contrast this younger generation of singers with their great-grandparents, who had been captured on film by Cohen. While the agrarian nature of Madison County had virtually
disappeared, these women were still singing these old ballads, even though the songs were now serving a different social function. These emergent concepts were exciting for us as filmmakers and ethnographers; we hoped to show that the reason these traditions were continuing was *not* that backwards mountain people were blindly clinging to their traditions. We were interested in illustrating the nature of modernity in these mountains, showing how old forms of expressive culture were finding new lives in very modern contexts. Again, what difference does it make if Denise Norton O’Sullivan is singing these songs while driving around town in a minivan or while sitting on her great-granny’s porch like they did in the old days? What interested us was that these young singers were bringing this music into their day-to-day—and markedly modern—lives.

Yet as time passed and we logged more video, we noticed reluctance on the part of our consultants about the kind of modern portrayal of their lives that Rob and I wished to depict. We did not take too much notice the first time the singers requested that we not film them reading the words to their songs from lyric sheets in their laps. The shot, they maintained, should not reveal that they had not yet committed the words to memory or that they may not sing the songs frequently enough to have mastered every verse. More and more, we began to notice that they singers wanted to portray themselves in a traditional light. They were clearly aware of the image they were *supposed* to project. This projection was manifested both in their desire to look “authentic” and in their conviction that this familiar image would prove valuable for them in the long run. Just as Rob Amberg had noted about their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, they had come to understand the value that not only their music—but also their culture as a whole—held in the public imagination (Amberg
Hence, “exposing” them publicly and overtly as glaringly “modern” held little or no interest to them.

It is easiest to demonstrate this retreat from the modern by contrasting a video sequence that I would have included in the film (but eventually excised) contrasted with one I would have excised (but which we ended up including). The final edit includes a sequence about the misunderstandings between Cohen and his collaborators, one that counterpoises interview footage from Rob Amberg, Peter Gott, Sheila Kay Adams, John Cohen, and Bobby McMillon. This sequence ends with Cohen expressing contentment in knowing that his LP recording “did something in Madison County” by giving these singers opportunities to share their culture with a wider audience (2004). Bobby McMillon confirms this sentiment, and emphasizes the cyclical momentum projected by the documentary tradition, in noting that “if it hadn’t of been for [Cohen and Gott] these people’s lives would have been played out and nobody would ever have known” (2004). A montage of Cohen’s footage follows this segment, depicting the everyday lives of the singers Cohen encountered. As Dillard Chandler sings “A Solid Traveling from the North,” the audience views black and white footage of a man plowing with a mule, a family putting in tobacco seedlings, Dellie Chandler Norton hanging laundry out on the line, an old woman adding water to a baking pan, and Dillard singing on a porch with other folks sitting around listening.

We hoped to juxtapose this montage with a parallel sequence depicting contemporary scenes of everyday activity among the current singers. The piece would have unfolded with the same song sung by a younger singer, and showed color footage of Amanda at her job in the checkout lines at the local supermarket, Dee-Dee cooking dinner in her home with a
microwave and electric stovetop, Denise driving in her car listening to county music or
popping one of Sheila Kay Adams’ albums into the CD player in her mini-van, Donna
searching for ballad lyrics on the Internet, and all of them sitting in a formally organized
Ballad Swap at the Bascom Lamar Luntsford Festival on the campus of Mars Hill College,
complete with stage lights and our camera crew right there filming.

But this contrasting montage does not appear in the finished edit. At the least it may
portray them as too ordinary, too everyday to warrant special attention as members of a long-
standing mountain tradition. At the most it might convey a picture of inauthenticity to their
audiences. Donna Ray Norton points out that while she is not ashamed of her modernity or
anything she does, she still feels as though she wants her audience to understand that she and
her sisters do “sit around and learn ballads and garden” (Norton, 2006). So we left the
sequence out, replacing it instead with footage that shows Donna—along with two other
young singers, Melanie Rice and Amanda Southerland—examining Cohen and Gott’s album
and talking about how they are related to the woman, Berzilla Wallin, pictured on the black
and white album cover. This discussion leads Amanda and Donna to realize that they are
related in two ways: as cousins on one side of Amanda’s family tree and as niece/aunt on the
other. As the three girls laugh about this situation as being “classic Madison County,” Donna
emphasizes the import of such rhetoric on their audience by breaking the fourth wall and
stating directly to the audience, with a nod of the head, “There you go” (Norton, 2004). Our
open window for making what we felt would be the most interesting statements about the
modernity of these young women had closed with the inclusion of a stereotype-confirming
sequence.
Roberts and I were dismayed with this section of our film. We were watching a major theme of our project slip away via small editorial requests during filming and even more substantive changes during editing. It became clearer and clearer to us that if we were to work collaboratively with the singers, we could not overtly illustrate the modernity in these women’s lives. Acting collaboratively meant that we had to think very carefully about the message that we now realized we had come to capture: that Madison County’s youngest singers could have their ballads and their cell phones too. We also feared that the aunt/cousin/niece footage would perpetuate the very stereotypes we’d hoped to avoid. The last thing either of us wanted to do was to jaunt into the mountains and make a film about how wonderfully isolated, traditionally minded, and bucolically stable these romantic mountain people are. We aimed to step away from the collector’s past and face the existence of folklore in modern society openly while equally openly rebuking the legitimacy of Tristam Coffin’s 1950’s “insolvable questions” of folklore: “what are the methods by which successions of ignorant and semi-ignorant people produce art . . .?” (Coffin, 1950, xiii). We wanted to highlight that our consultants were not exotic due to their ability to create art in the face of some ethnographer-imposed sense of superiority. We wanted to emphasize how our consultants drive mini-vans, surf the web, eat take-out pizza, and listen to all types of music, just like so many other Americans. We wanted to do that at the expense of portraying them in as “traditional” ballad singers. We wanted to show that these parts of their lives did not kill their desire to be a part of their family’s musical past, and that technology—and particularly the technological consequences of the complementing documentary tradition—had in fact helped these singers to continue singing.
But this is what we wanted, and such desires brought Roberts and me to an editorial crossroads. I remember very clearly sitting across from Roberts, coffee cup in hand, discussing the merits of ditching collaboration altogether. What if we were to edit in only the clips of our consultants that frame them as modern people living in a modern world? What if we were to edit in the B roll of them asking not to be shot reading words off of a paper with a URL printed at the top? One thing is for certain, we concluded—we would be abusing our positions as members of Madison County’s documentary tradition by poaching off of the complimentary tradition that sustains us. This approach would reveal nothing more than our adherence to a form of fieldwork that revolves completely around the ethnographer while demoting collaborators to the lesser role of human subjects. Like Sharp, we would be telling this story on our terms, for our ends, and ignoring our consultants’ existence as individuals with a claim to their own portrayal.

If we as ethnographers attempt to conduct fieldwork with a spirit of transparency and collaboration, we must be ready to accept that we may not able to tell the story we thought we wanted to tell. This is the double bind of collaboration. On one hand, we may encounter information that we deem more interesting and most important for understanding current cultural expressions. On the other hand, we must give up our claim to interpretive authority over the analytic product. In agreeing to collaborative work, ethnographers invite the potential for the double bind. Perhaps we can return to Bateson for an attempt at answering this quandary.

In a discussion of play, Bateson points out that human communication operates at many contrasting levels of abstraction, and that in a bind situation the meta-communicative
message establishes a paradoxical frame for the recipient of that message, thereby creating a breakdown in successful communication (Bateson 2000, 177-184). He puts forward that the paradox should not be solved or worked away, but that it constitutes a certain necessity and “without these paradoxes the evolution of communication would be at the end” (2000, 193). This relationship can be seen as analogous to the collaborative double bind. In ideal collaboration, the meta-message suggests equity between the consultant and ethnographer as they engage in cultural interpretation. Paradox (or bind) arises in disparity between the ethnographer and the consultant’s representational wishes. Herein lies the clarification to our question. In accepting the bind as present, in embracing the paradox of abstraction as necessary, we can more fully understand the representational issues that always cloud the ethnographic relationship. Rather than mediating this paradox, perhaps our mere recognition of it can teach us valuable lessons about the way ethnographers interact with, represent, and profoundly affect the communities they study.

When faced with a seemingly contradictory situation, or one where either fork in the road compromises the opportunities of the other, the ethnographer is obliged to choose a path. This choice may yield a momentary paralysis, as it did when Roberts and I considered abandoning collaboration altogether. Or it may instead invite appreciation of the issues at hand, turning the bind into an opportunity for deeper understanding. Although Roberts and I arrived in Madison County fully ready to engage in collaborative discussions, utilize tools of reciprocation, and explore new cooperative forms of media, we failed to recognize the depth of our own assumptions, and the challenge that collaboration would pose to our “right” to tell the final story. Recognizing, even embracing, the ethnographic double bind then becomes a
responsibility of the ethnographer as she shapes her understanding of a consultant community.

In that recognition we fully understand that collaboration in the ethnographic venture remains just plain difficult. It is not always an easy task to endure, it entails much more of a challenge than ethnographer-centered analyses, and it requires much more attention (Lassiter 2005, 8). Yet, when collaboration transpires, a greater wealth of cultural understanding becomes possible. Despite our frustrations, we emerged from the field with a much stronger story to tell. Instead of shaping our consultants’ experiences to the story we wanted to tell, we came away understanding something much more remarkable about the group we’d gone to study and the heritage they sought to preserve. Roberts and I both feel that the final edit of the video does a good job of melding our experiences in the field with the voices of our consultants. Further, our application of three different textual styles—the movie, this written work, and the website—allowed us to illustrate and explore those issues of heritage-making more fully than one text alone.

In *Appalachia on Our Mind*, Henry Shapiro discusses the early 20th century shift when outsiders started to view Appalachia as a distinct cultural region of America instead of simply an isolated holdout of pre-industrial society. This area became “. . . a mountain culture which was not so much inferior to as different than the patterns of culture which prevailed in the nation at large. . . Appalachia could be both primitive and legitimately discrete, distinct from American culture and quintessentially American, a symptom and a symbol” (Shapiro 1978, 246). This paradigmatic shift came with the entrance of the outsider, and even more with the outsider’s reports to the “outside” world. In Madison County, Cecil
Sharp first played that role. As suggested earlier, Sharp’s interest shifted the ballad tradition from an inwardly expressed commonplace to an outwardly marked realm sanctified by outsiders as the defining expression of an entire community. Indeed, Shapiro notes this type of dynamic:

At the heart of the concept of community lay the concept of culture—a set of habits, traditions, technologies, patterns of speech, customs, a mythology, a sense of shared experience, a history. Culture was the common possession of members of the community, by which they defined themselves to themselves as different from outsiders, and by which they might in turn themselves be defined by outsiders, including social scientists. (Shapiro 1978, 216)

To the outsiders, the cultural elite, collectors, and social scientists, all people living in the mountains were assumed to have and desire the cultural capacities to “participate in the usages of their culture.” For the outsider looking in, the core of a mountaineer’s heritage, legacy, and even persona rested in cultural expression. “It was only by this participating actively in their own culture, thought the outsiders, that the mountain people might become themselves” (Shapiro 1978, 243).

Shapiro suggests that the “folksong-singing rural types of Sharp’s vision,” unlike immigrant cultural groups studied by social scientists, came to be widely recognized as “the conservators of the essential culture of America.” These people and their cultural expressions provided a “benchmark against which to measure how far the nation had come from its essential self,” and their austere persistence in the face of modernity created a hope of “the possibility of returning to the nation’s roots, of starting over, not in the past but in a simpler present” (1978, 260-261). These concepts complement Lowenthal’s more recent assertions on the relationship between heritage and modernity. He claims that the
contemporary heralding, valorization, and celebration of heritage and legacy are fostered by a common technophobia. As members of the elite classes are “dismayed by technology, they hark back to a simpler past whose virtues they inflate and whose vices they ignore. We show chronic affection for anything apart from the present, clutching at the outward and the obsolete” (Lowenthal 1996, 10).

This “affection,” in turn, offers us insights into the documentary tradition in Madison County. Not only did Sharp’s advent in the community cue the image of mountaineers as idealized vestiges of America’s fore-parentage, but the later documentary studies perpetuated and sustained the mirage of modernity’s heritage poaching. Even Cohen’s subversive attempts to show his consultants interacting with modernity present them only in relation to or in contrast with their balladry. The cycle of valuing a culture because it presumably embodies an idealized past, and valuing a heritage because of its presumably imminent demise, created a model within which today’s young singers could be considered “culturally successful.” In Shapiro’s terms, accepting these patterns gives these young women no choice but to participate in their own culture because dismissing that participation would bar them from full membership in their social environments.

However, this treatment ignores these women as individuals. Just like Sharp’s handling of Appalachian singers as an organic whole, this reading renders the youngest singers as victims of the symbiotic dual traditions in Madison County instead of recognizing their power. Debora Kodish argues that we must “reconstruct models attentive to women’s experiences” as a way of stepping out from underneath the intrinsic patriarchal history in scholarship and fieldwork (1993, 44). Instead of framing these younger singers as unable to
shape their own roles relative to their perceived legacies, I suggest that they skillfully craft their own places within that legacy as a reaction to decades of exposure to such fieldwork. They are fully aware of the continued strength in the older rhythms between collector and collected; they are fully aware that the general public, the people buying music along the Blue Ridge Parkway or traveling to the mountains for music festivals, are still beholden to these common representations of tradition. In their efforts at heritage maintenance, these singers hew their public images to a number of specifications that easily speak the language of 20th century cultural study—a language that academics easily understand, but more importantly one that the general public both inside and outside of Madison County is quite used to conversing in. In this sense, it is not the tradition itself that provides these singers with a basis for self-definition and social-definition, as Shapiro suggests; rather, it is the voice they are provided through that tradition that gives them social visibility. Robert Cantwell notes that this type of voice encapsulates “the ability to exteriorize consciousness and win the attention of others to it, that secures our reality as social beings . . . . Society is, after all, a field of conscious awareness differentiated by cultural codes that provide for the articulations of individual personality” (1992, 276). As the youngest generation of ballad singers create, shape, and exert their cultural voices, they enact a powerful control over their own collective and individual representations.

The move of Madison County balladry outward toward public presentation does not mean that the singers do not continue to sing at home or in settings reserved just for the community. The symbiosis of the two traditions, however, has caused much ballad performance to become a public affair. And this has transformed the ways that the singers
talk about the tradition. I’ve already addressed some of these shifts when discussing heritage maintenance. Another would be the singers’ constant statement of their legitimacy as blood descendants of the Madison County singing tradition, often voiced in interviews or stage banter that points to their heritage as “eighth and ninth generation ballad singers” (Buckner, et al. 2004). Similar to the phrases used to tag the “true” ballad elders, such a generational map, not surprisingly, starts in the early 20th century, around the time of Sharp’s work in Appalachia. These claims to legitimacy often get slipped into the introduction to a song performance. Unlike the singers in Cohen’s movie or Sharp’s book, the youngest generation unfailingly ascribes their songs to the individual (in their family) who formerly sang the song or taught it to them. As the tradition turned outward, the insiders have increasingly re-ascribed themselves as legitimate in order to gain the consequent cultural—and perhaps financial—benefit.

Maintaining the appearance of conventional learning styles is another way that the youngest generation of singers reinforces their public legitimacy. The public expects these performers to sing a well-memorized song, learned knee-to-knee, that reside effortlessly in the heart and mind of the singer. It is, after all, their birthright to know these songs—so certainly they are born with the notes in their heads. In reality, however, these women have learned their music in a multitude of new and old forms. Some songs may have been passed roughly knee-to-knee; others were learned from recordings; still others were picked up one bit at a time from hearing friends and family sing. The singers are just as likely, however, to have learned the tunes and the endless verses from listening to recordings, referring to documentary works, or cross-referencing them in the Internet. In crafting their
performances these singers will rely on printouts of lyrics off-camera or offstage, but will rarely break that illusion in front of an audience of outsiders.

In her discussion of Bessie Eldreth, Patricia Sawin notes that Ms. Eldreth “is doing what every person does, enacting a self. She can indeed provide information about the experiences of a particular gender-class-region-constellation. . . . However, we should recognize that our analysis runs counter to Eldreth’s desire to stress her own uniqueness” (2004, 2). Each of the youngest generation of singers in Madison County enacts a self both as an individual and as a member of a cohesive group. In her comparisons of Eldreth and Jean Reid, Sawin shows us that the often-recorded Madison County singers are not the only performers dealing with these issues (2004). But unlike Eldreth, the public presentation of these selves often serves to bind the singers to one another, to the wider understanding of their own heritage, to the ballad tradition, and to an often celebrated (if not romanticized) Appalachia. Rather than following Eldreth’s resistance of presenters’ and folklorists’ “attempts to frame her musical performance as a cultural example,” these singers use public performance and interaction with the documentary tradition as overt venues for just such framing (Sawin 2004, 27).

None of these descriptions are intended to suggest that Denise, Donna, DeeDee, Melanie, or Amanda should not promote the image typically accepted as characteristic of their heritage. Far more interesting than evaluating the appropriateness of this approach is noting the performative choices the singers make as an acquisition of power over their own heritage maintenance. The ethnographer-centric school may well interpret these actions as simply conforming to accepted structures and powerlessly falling in line as new cogs in the
traditional ballad continuum. Yet this perspective fails to consider the performative choices that these singers are making as a way of gaining control over their representation and their relation to heritage. Bringing the singers to the center of those questions, we can view their acts in much the same way that Kodish presents the singer Almeda Riddle. Just like Riddle, these Madison County singers offer performances that are “calculated and self-conscious” and that allow these singers to “maintain several identities at once (mother, homemaker, performer)” by separating their performative personae from their lives as women operating in modern society (Kodish 1993, 45,48).

Folklorist David Whisnant advises that the everyday lives of our consultants should be revealed in our products about them. “That a . . . ballad singer . . . is in her daily life a bus driver or beautician or insurance agent or furniture plant worker is . . . a key to possibilities of cultural analysis too infrequently encountered” (Whisnant 1988, 236). He advises filmmakers and public folklorists to resist “sanitizing, romanticizing tendencies,” arguing that we do a “disservice to both the represented cultures and to our audiences” by not exposing the “dark side of traditional culture” (1988, 237). This view, although seemingly progressive and consultant-friendly, suffers from the same ethnographer-at-center affliction as many of the works Whisnant aims to criticize. We do a larger disservice to the represented cultures—and more importantly to the represented individuals—by not meeting them on a fair playing field in the spirit of collaboration. The temptation to wield one’s power as ethnographer to reveal the “dark side of traditional culture” (quite possibly against the will of our consultants) speaks volumes to Kodish’s assertion that folklore analysis has been “constrained by powerful and patriarchal subtexts” (1993, 48). As a filmmaker and
ethnographer, I must recognize that I am simply extending the public performance space inhabited by my consultants. Our co-creation of ethnographic representations should not subvert their assertions of power over their own heritage.

This discussion of ethnography illustrates some of the beneficial, as well as problematic, outcomes of collaborative fieldwork. The problematic possibilities of the representative relationship between a filmmaker and her consultants have long been fodder for academics and artists alike. Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound tells the story using the words and the songs of musicians, photographers, and documentary filmmakers; all the while, the movie keeps a keen eye locked on the question of audience. This project forced us to face a host of fascinating issues regarding ethnographic representation and the dilemmas of collaboration, issues that were foregrounded by our decision to explore the ballad tradition through the vehicle of a film intended for a wide public audience. The nature of our project forced a kind of accountability—one that proved ultimately revealing and rewarding—not typically experienced by those who do not labor with the expectations of their consultants reading, viewing, critiquing, and being a part of the finished work.
SECTION IV: Reception

Audience and Media

The broad issues raised by studying the interaction of traditional performance and its documentation reverberate beyond the narrow scope of this study. When beginning this project, Roberts and I knew that confronting an intertwined musical and documentary tradition required more than a straightforward historical approach. Understanding and interpreting these questions in a way that would effectively invoke broader issues of tradition, heritage, ethnography, modernity, and documentation demanded a deliberate step of a different order. Our entry into Madison County with video equipment in hand, allowed Roberts and I to add another chapter to a long history of cultural interaction. We considered this the most effective way to understand the area’s unique procession of musical heritage and documentary practice.

Throughout our conversations about collaborative technique, representational ethics, and editorial choices, consideration of our intended audience remained a central theme. The key question—and one that has long defined the divide between public and academic Folklore—is simple: for whom are we, as ethnographers, creating our ethnographic product? Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argued over a decade ago that, “the time has come for
folklorists . . . to reexamine the split between the academic and applied traditions, and to close it” (1992, 45). That examination must begin with recognition of for whom we, as ethnographers, create the ethnographic object as well as for whom our consultants, as artists, create their performances. The folk act, a performance, an ethnographic endeavor, or the collaboration between them always unfolds with the intrinsic understanding and necessity of a listener. We can only approach our division as public and/or academic by first approaching for whom we are doing this, and why.

Many ethnographers face the contradictions of creating analyses for the academy or signaling work for a popular audience. Although most ethnographers hope their work will instigate more work in the future, this is particularly true for ethnographers working within the academy. In addition to furthering the academic conversations, adding to the body of knowledge, and creating new theoretical understanding, academic production carries its own cachet among one’s fellow academics; writing within the frame of a particular academic discourse undeniably invites opportunities for publication, disciplinary advancement, and scholarly prestige. Such writing, of course, may also alienate; a heavily weighted academic product may remain wholly inaccessible to audiences outside of a given discourse community. Creation for broader audiences demands a very different kind of accessibility. It also yields very different outcomes, not the least of which is the potential for affecting social systems, advocating for social change, and fostering a stronger collaboration with the community studied.

The difference in these outcomes implies that academic and public Folklore stand somehow at odds, as if pursuing one path necessarily excludes the other. This need not be the case, however, if we treat the options as falling along a continuum. To produce for more
than a single body of readers, viewers, or listeners, we must find a middle path. Useful consideration of audience required placing the product of research somewhere on a spectrum between academic and public accessibility instead of feeling caught in an impasse between the two or plainly aligning ethnographic products on only one side or the other. As ethnographers communicating with collaborators, we must be satisfied that our products provide entrance for a sundry array of audiences, and it should be recognized that such writing would still yield many of the positive goals listed above. Rising up to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s call requires a distinct dissatisfaction with production aimed at only one body of readers, viewers, or listeners; we should strive to cross the bounded groups that comprise our possible audiences. Achieving such moderation may warrant the use of any number of methods, one of which we’ve explored here: the path toward a multiplicity of audiences for this project entailed the creation of various analyses. Roberts and I choose to create three representational products based on the same research: the documentary video, a multimedia website, and this text-based analysis. The breadth of these three forms allows the complex issues of tradition and documentation to be addressed with a proper attempt at fullness; each piece speaks to a different audience, and each invites crossover with one another.

We decided to focus the film portion toward a wider public audience and to make it suitable for public television; in so doing, we explicitly defined our intended audience and made collaborative as well as editorial choices as a result. Video provided the medium for us to interact with various segments of the singing and documentary traditions in Madison County. Analogous to any mode of recording or communication, video possesses benefits, limitations, challenges, and a unique set of ethnographic issues. It allows the public audience to engage in two-dimensional depictions of settings they could not otherwise encounter; it
also provides the consultant community a reflection of themselves. The consultants, as collaborators, shape these depictions, thereby transforming them into an extension of their own performative spaces. This understanding of public representation invokes Sharon Sherman’s discussion of the ways that filmic response hinges on the degree to which viewers see themselves reflected in the documentary product. She argues, for instance, that a film that overtly conveys theoretical or scholarly themes will garner a more vocal response from academics while one that does not dwell so heavily in erudite interchange will appeal to a more generalized audience. Sherman cites the widespread public reaction to Tom Davenport’s *A Singing Stream*, and suggests that academics did not identify with or express strong interest in the film because they could not see themselves reflected in it. “On multiple levels and in numerous ways, film can act as a means of the filmmaker, the subjects, and the audience seeing themselves . . . the filmmaker is creating for an audience and anticipating its reactions” (Sherman 1998, 185). Our efforts to speak to a wide public thus forced us to consider that audience’s ability to see themselves reflected in our work.

I saw this dynamic at work in the various screenings of the film post-completion—particularly those at the 2005 meeting of the American Folklore Society as contrasted with the screenings at the 2005 Asheville Film Festival. These two screenings took place a mere two weeks apart; and the two both involved an identical edit of the film, but each hosted a very different audience, the first distinctly academic and the second more broadly public. Asheville’s audience included three of the singers featured in the film and many residents from the region featured in the project. Our efforts to reflect and engage this group proved particularly successful. Attended by over 200 people, the film was awarded the Audience Choice Award in its category, and it was named one of the festival’s “buzz films,” earning it
an additional screening at the close of the festival weekend. During the question and answer session, the themes of community tradition and the importance of continued heritage garnered many remarks. Audience comments indicated a general recognition of the film’s themes as regional, personal, and nostalgic. Specifically, the scene emphasizing the singers’ crossed blood and marriage relationships (which Roberts and I had not originally selected for inclusion) generated much laughter during the showing and prompted many remarks afterwards, pointing to its accurate illustration of “true” and “local” mountain people as contrasted with new people moving in from outside the area.

The screening at the American Folklore Society meeting was an altogether different experience. Less than twenty people attended, and the audience consisted of academic folklorists and graduate students in Folklore or related fields. Although their response was unequivocally positive, they struggled more with the film’s topics, saying that it was weak in explicitly addressing matters of insider and outsider legitimacy. The audience’s questions not surprisingly reflected their own experiences; most of the discussion centered on questions about my entrance into the community in light of John Cohen’s difficulties there. There was very little discussion about collaborators other than Cohen, the dual singing and documentary traditions, or the ballad tradition in modern Appalachia. The scene emphasizing the singers’ crossed blood and marriage relationships received not a peep during the screening, although many scholars challenged it during the discussion period as an irresponsible perpetuation of mountain stereotypes. This led to an interesting discussion about many of the collaborative issues covered here; nonetheless, the audience continued to express concern for future viewers who might not benefit from such an explanation. Indeed, it seemed as though the ultimate reaction to our film—and by extension, for that matter, any ethnographic object—
was in direct proportionality to the audience’s ability to identify with the film’s subject matter.

Just as a folklorist tears down, moves, and then rebuilds the folk performance on the festival stage, filmmakers and ethnographic writers do much of the same as we convert our words and images into new documents for implied audiences. In one of his many discussions on folk festivals, Robert Cantwell details the re-contextualization that takes place in festival performance:

A folk festival . . . resituates, reconstrues, and recontextualizes, by means of public reenactment, displaced and decontextualized folk cultural performance . . . . All folk festivals are themselves contexts, of course, in which particular cultural performances are redefined and interpreted in relation to the other performances . . . (Cantwell 1992, 295).

This construction of the festival’s re-contextualization can be extended to almost any ethnographic work. Like Cantwell’s festivals, our ethnographic products become their own contexts that will be constantly interpreted by their audiences in relation to one another.

Having chosen to gear Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound toward the general public, I’ve attempted to address the other end of the public/academic spectrum by remolding my fieldwork through this text. As these pieces relate to one another, my hope is that they will re-contextualize the subject matter in a way that invites the largest possible audience into dialogue. While academics may not find themselves reflected on film, this written text attempts to engage that audience using the same research, while being wholly mindful of the ethnographer’s hand in this multimedia production. This emerges as a salient and loud example of the ethnographer’s hand in her own work—our perceptions of the field, our audiences, our obligations, and the possible outcomes constantly bend and shape the ethnographic object we create.
This academic text, admittedly a product of this ethnographer’s voice, unfolds as a discussion of collaboration. The video, in turn, is itself a product of collaboration (although video and film, like any documentary format, always reflect the authorship of the editorial eye). Between the two is a space in which we attempted to address these two forms’ inherent shortcomings while simultaneously inviting an even wider audience. If the film exists at the public end of the public/academic spectrum and this text at the other, we searched for a manifestation of our research that would occupy the spaces in-between. The weblog and multimedia site are our attempt both to combat the exclusion of consultant voices in the editing process and to engage a wider audience. These formats respond loudly to folklore’s opportunity to interact with 21st century technology. They also illustrate our efforts to bridge, or perhaps straddle, the public-academic gap in our field; our lives in a time of technological advancement and modern accessibility to new digital tools offer all ethnographers an opportunity to bridge this divide.

The weblog began as an attempt to open up the documentary process for the singers in Madison County, other collaborators, academics, public folklorists, ballad enthusiasts, and the general public. Blogging invites conversation between author and audience by allowing readers to publicly publish comments directly on the page and by fostering an ongoing open discussion. The first part of that interactivity did not get utilized as heavily as we had hoped it would. Despite the unexpected low usage of the blog commenting forum, the development and maintenance of the site did not represent a loss by any means. It served and serves as an interesting record of our editing process, similar perhaps to a field notebook yet open and accessible to the consultants or to any party interested in our research. It also stands as a prototype for future types of collaboration. This may well be the first production blog for a
collaborative ethnographic project, but I fully expect that it will not be the last and that the model will do nothing but improve. Now that the film portion of this project is finished, the weblog has been archived and a more permanent multi-media website has been posted. This serves as a place to learn both about the film and about Madison County’s singing tradition, but also as a forum for showcasing some of the interviews and footage that did not end up in the film. It serves another practical function as well, giving the singers a presence on the web and thus allowing them to connect with their fans, the general public, and the next generations of fieldworkers. Roberts explains the site’s purpose as follows:

[On the] multimedia site, ballads can play in their entirety, users can study the photographs of John Cohen and Rob Amberg in greater detail . . . . Multimedia provides a non-linear avenue of exploration where users can control their experience. Additionally, multimedia provides the project with access to a potentially global audience (2005, personal communication).

Although a filmmaker may spend weeks, months, or years with her consultants, when editing a film she necessarily imposes her own frame of reference and shades the story in her own way. Once those clips land on the cutting room floor, they are rarely seen again, and are thus effectively erased from the representational record of a culture. In conventional documentary work, the filmmaker pares down the document; the consultants do not get to see the film until it is finished, and they certainly do not get to participate in the production en route to the film’s final manifestation. Modern ethnography can reconcile this gap through the tools at our disposal. Film and multimedia are conduits through which ethnography can engender a broader public conversation around key cultural and social issues; in so doing, they also facilitate scholarly conversations.

In addition to using the web, we employed a number of public presentations of our work in progress to generate commentary from other audiences. After each screening, we
opened up the floor for feedback on the direction the film was headed. It takes a great deal of pride-swallowing for a filmmaker to show a choppy cut with blackouts, poor transitions, unmixed audio, and unbalanced color to an audience ready to critique your work. Yet we did precisely this at the North Carolina Folklore Society’s annual meeting (April 2005); at the Winter Folk Festival at Appalachian State University (February 2005); in public forums such as the Northwest Folklife Documentary Film Festival (May 2005); and at forums that contained a strong sense of both the public and the academic, such as the Fresh Docs program at the Center For Documentary Studies in Durham, N.C. (September 2005). Audience input from all of these experiences helped shape the film. The finished film has become a streaming feature on the website Folkstreams.net, thereby making it available to a wide public and academic audience. These links between the discourse communities, the consultants studied, and the broader public are increasingly vital parts of ethnography, demonstrating how the new frontier of multi-media presentation can build bridges both within and beyond the academy.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Investigating the dual traditions of Madison County’s ballads and documentaries allows us to explore how these two groups have influenced and reflected each other over the past century. Our role in this process, in turn, allowed us to step directly into the contexts of this dynamic, and to explore a new dimension of the complex relationship that exists between ethnographers, consultants, and audiences. In his article on text, Jeff Todd Titon notes the
importance of context, particularly the context as it is understood by the tradition bearers, to the practice of Folklore:

The old questions involving origins, pattern, diffusion, and transmission of folklore never were answered satisfactorily and possibly never will be; whereas questions having to do with the uses of tradition, with tradition bearers’ own ideas about folklore as it is experienced in human consciousness are the more interesting questions of today (2003, 81).

This project attempts to meet Titon’s expectation for modern ethnographic study. Although what originally brought us to the area was the clear co-existence of traditionality and modernity in the singing tradition, our collaborative experiences revealed an unexpected world of detail and delicacy in our consultants’ relationships with heritage maintenance. What we discovered, in essence, was what Handler and Linnekin call the “false dichotomy between tradition and modernity as fixed and exclusive states” (1984, 273). More particularly, we discovered how this dichotomy could become a tool for crafting the appearance of authenticity.

What struck us as remarkable was the singers’—particularly those of the youngest generation—careful public presentation of their heritage as part of this dichotomy. Our film project, by extension, offered a new stage for their public performance, and as such was subject to these same rules of authenticity-crafting. Our desire to show the ballad tradition’s adaptation to modernity got challenged by the intricate dynamics of heritage seeking, public perception, collaborative representation, and efforts at transparent filmmaking.

It is hard to say if this legacy posturing occurs because of the cycling documentary tradition or in spite of it. Certainly, ballads as cultural objects do not operate by the same rules that they did a century ago. One could argue that the singing tradition would have all but completely disappeared had Sharp, Cohen, Amberg, and their documenting peers not
passed through Madison County over the decades. In contrast, one could contend that the singing tradition is too rooted in the community to face extinction and that the documentary efforts have done little to lengthen that legacy. Shelia Kay Adams, for instance, asserted that whatever the time period, once the ballad tradition starts to “die out” or decline in popularity, something comes along and sparks the next generation (2004). That “something” might be a collector, a documentary filmmaker, or a photographer. It could just as easily be a Hollywood film, a Grammy-winning album, a national folk festival, or a curious graduate student. Moreover, it could also be directed from inside the community: a local school project, an inquisitive journalist, someone researching family genealogy, or Madison County musicians from other genres searching for inspiring material. In any case, the fire sparks anew and keeps burning long enough for the next generations to tend it. Dell Hymes tells us that “the traditional begins with the personal. Its distribution in history, in a community, is important, but secondary . . . . Something partakes of the nature of the traditional already when the effort to traditionalize has brought it into being” (Hymes 1975, 354).

The individualism suggested by Hymes highlights the importance we place on the expressive choices of our collaborators and ourselves. Madison County Project: Documenting the Sound tells a story through the words and the songs of the musicians, photographers, and documentary filmmakers who have been involved in Madison County; at the same time, it presents the public face of each of these individuals. Ballad scholars of yesterday feared that the ballads’ repetition in recorded media would kill the tradition because “a surfeit . . . [of] regional idiom tends to become universalized and no longer distinctive” (Bronson; 1969, 274). The ballad singers of today’s Madison County, however, use the ballads as a way of reinforcing their regional distinctiveness by crafting spaces as
singers among the many demands of their modern lives, and by smartly engaging the waves of commodification coursing through the Blue Ridge. Bronson missed the real point: the issue is not a lack of distinction in texts, but rather the creation of distinction in the singer’s broader identity.

We would have come to none of these conclusions without collaborative ethnography. At the close of his book on collaboration, Lassiter concludes that to achieve true and effective partnership “means embracing collaborative action as an extension of collaborative research, as a necessary condition of practicing the craft” (2005, 154). Film, multimedia, and written text—taken together and working in tandem as a polymedic whole—allowed us to generate broad conversations around key cultural and social issues and to include widely diverse audiences in these conversations, all while providing a full theatre in which to act collaboratively. In her work on the phonograph, Erika Brady ends her discussion of the relationship of technology and ethnography with a thought that is exceptionally appropriate here:

But as we riddle our way through these new technologies, we may be sure that the dynamics of the basic human encounter will remain the complex cross-cultural give-and-take in which individuals from different worlds negotiate roles and fulfill objectives in an atmosphere of exhilaration and tension. The issues faced by the ethnographers of the cylinder era are still our own: the challenge to reconcile role-playing with reality, courtesy with mission. (1999, 124-125)

At the close of this piece, all we can do is wait for our consultants’ responses, for only through their words and the dialogue they open up can we learn about their lives as well as our own.
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