

CHRIS THILE, THE PUNCH BROTHERS, AND THE NEGOTIATION OF GENRE

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ABSTRACT

Stephen Stacks: Chris Thile, The Punch Brothers, and the Negotiation of Genre
(Under the direction of Jocelyn R. Neal)

Chris Thile and his five-piece supergroup the Punch Brothers have a complicated relationship with the genre of bluegrass. Their rhetoric has grown increasingly resistant to the idea that the concept of genre is a useful framework for interpreting their music. However, the band's output complicates this narrative by consistently referencing bluegrass even while the band members deny engaging with it. Fans of the band value this precariously balanced relationship to bluegrass, giving each perceived transgression of the genre's boundaries value as "progressive." This thesis analyzes the Punch Brothers' engagement with genre through their public rhetoric, the sound of their music, and their gendered representations of self through performance. It first summarizes the band, its output, and its use of narratives and genre-resistant rhetoric. It then interrogates how they have carefully crafted a bluegrass lineage in their presentation of identity, derived their sound from a bluegrass-oriented foundation even while disguising it with interpolations from the avant garde and other genres, and constructed a performance of gender that taps in to non-musical means of claiming cultural authority. Through this analysis of a band and its output, this thesis seeks to illustrate the cultural power of conflicting identities, when representations of self appear to be at odds with musical performance.

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Introduction

Chris Thile's rhetoric surrounding the music of his progressive bluegrass supergroup, The Punch Brothers, works overtime to eschew genre labels. Thile's comment from a 2010 interview typifies this rhetoric: "People would say things like, 'cool so it's bluegrass rock! Some kind of bluegrass/classical music monster!' But that seems to be changing. Now people are starting to talk about the music in more liquid terms. I think that we'll see the concept of 'genre' continue to die a slow and painful death."¹ Two years later, Thile's frustration with people's attempts to use the terminology of genre to categorize the Punch Brothers' music was still apparent:

Even though I grew up around bluegrass, I was never obsessed with it to the exclusion of anything else. I've always loved it and it's always been in the fabric of my life, but I'm just not super-creatively invested in it. All the roles were so well defined by Bill Monroe, and the paradigm he created has been followed for almost 70 years now without changing much. Being in a band that calls itself a bluegrass band is just not interesting to me, because the *modus operandi* is to not be so creative that you could be called something other than a bluegrass band. You're beholden to an aesthetic so limiting that it can be defined, and that's just anathema to me. It feels like curating a museum, and if Bill Monroe had been beholden to the music that came before him, think how deprived we'd be. That's what really riles me up. At this point, we've turned off all the bluegrass purists, so we don't even have to think about it. But it still surprises me when people hear us and say, "One thing's for sure, it's not bluegrass." Well of course it's not. Damn it, if it was, we wouldn't be doing our job.²

It is clear from these quotes that while Thile may verbally resist genre as an appropriate interpretive tool for his music, he is thinking a great deal about genre and how his musical projects like the Punch Brothers interact with and transgress genre frameworks. In fact, the band has much to gain from being able to deny clear-cut affiliations with genre labels and much to lose if Thile's "slow and painful death" of genre actually occurs. If they cease to be identified

¹ Toole Rachel, "Punch Brothers." *Interview* (2010) 88.

² Kenny Berkowitz, "Punch Brothers." *Acoustic Guitar* 23/2 (August 2012), 37.

against a framework of bluegrass, then they lose both the connection to American roots and the progressive edge that they and their fans so value. In order to maintain this delicate balance, their sound, verbal commentary, visual presentation, and performance create a complicated position that both references traditional bluegrass and attempts to transcend it, all the while resisting the interpretive relevance of genre in the first place.

While the band's stated approach to genre has evolved, fans, critics, and commentators continue to receive and understand the Punch Brothers as a departure *from* bluegrass. Because bluegrass is articulated and perceived as the band's starting point, fans interpret their constant transgressions of traditional bluegrass's tightly circumscribed generic boundaries as "progressive." Enabled by their pedigree, gender, and virtuosity, this reception places them in a position of power, freeing them to color inside and outside of the lines as they wish and still be received as original and worthy of 'art' status. This thesis analyzes the Punch Brothers' engagement with genre through their public rhetoric, the sound of their music, and their gendered representations of self through performance. It first summarizes the band, its output, and its use of narratives and genre-resistant rhetoric. It then interrogates how they have carefully crafted a bluegrass lineage in their presentation of identity, derived their sound from a bluegrass-oriented foundation even while disguising it with interpolations from the avant garde and other genres, and constructed a performance of gender that taps in to non-musical means of claiming cultural authority. Through this analysis of a band and its output, this thesis seeks to illustrate the cultural power of conflicting identities, when representations of self appear to be at odds with musical performance.

The Slow and Painful Death of Genre?

The band member with the longest and most successful history before the Punch Brothers is Chris Thile, who was born in Oceanside, California in 1981. He recorded two solo albums in his teens with Sugar Hill Records, *Leading Off* (1995) and *Stealing Second* (1997), confirming his status as a mandolin prodigy. At the same time, Nickel Creek, made up of Thile

(mandolin, vocals), Sara Watkins (fiddle, vocals), and Sean Watkins (guitar, vocals), was beginning to gain momentum as an acoustic act putting a different spin on the bluegrass sound. Under the auspices of Alison Krauss, the trio of prodigies released its major-label, self-titled debut on Sugar Hill in 2000.³ *Nickel Creek* went platinum and garnered two Grammy nominations (Best Bluegrass Album and Best Country Instrumental) and two CMA nominations (Best Vocal Group and Horizon Award (Best New Artist)).⁴ Despite their tendency from the beginning to push the bluegrass envelope, Nickel Creek also garnered several International Bluegrass Music Association (IBMA) awards, including Emerging Artist of the Year in 2000 and Instrumental Group of the Year in 2001. Their second album, *This Side* (2002) pushed into new territories musically, incorporating jazz, rock, and classical styles into their bluegrass-influenced sound, and was nominated in the Best Contemporary Folk Album category at the Grammys. Their third major studio release, *Why Should the Fire Die?*, continued the band's musical exploration away from their musical roots in bluegrass. Still, the album was quite successful and reached the top of the *Billboard* Bluegrass chart.⁵

Some of Nickel Creek's success may be attributed to the ideal timing of the band's appearance on the bluegrass scene. The Coen Brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000) kindled an intense interest in American roots music and bluegrass among a much broader audience demographic than bluegrass had found in recent decades. Around the same time, Nickel Creek emerged as a fresh-faced interpretation of the type of music featured in the film and on the film's successful soundtrack. They allowed newcomers to bluegrass an easy access point—a young, acoustic band with sex appeal that avoided some of the twang of more traditional bluegrass bands. The lack of a banjo, the subdued accents, the more polished vocal

³ Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 462.

⁴ "Nickel Creek." *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, 4th ed.. *Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed May 29, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/subscriber/article/epm/73060>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

timbre, and the youthful, urban/suburban image contributed to the band's accessibility. Country music scholar Bill Malone described Nickel Creek's music as conveying the "flavor and dynamics of a jazz string quartet, tempered by New Age sensibility, and even a touch of Christian Contemporary aesthetics."⁶

Much to the shock of fans, Nickel Creek announced in the summer of 2006 that they would go on hiatus to pursue other projects.⁷ In fact, Thile had already begun exploring the possibilities of solo projects by collaborating with progressive bluegrass heavyweights Béla Fleck and Jerry Douglas and future mentor Edgar Meyer on *Not All Who Wander Are Lost* (2001) and by releasing his farthest venture from bluegrass, *Deceiver* (2004). After the hiatus announcement, Thile immediately began making plans for the formation of a bluegrass quintet, the result of which became the Punch Brothers.

The Punch Brothers are a conglomerate of 5 musicians, each of whom had developed his own credentials in the bluegrass world long before joining together. Individually, the Punch Brothers' deep roots within the bluegrass world make their deviations from the genre's conventions that much more powerful and visible to the bluegrass community and to fans who value their progressive tendencies. Thile, whose timely success had made him as much a household name as any mandolin player could be, brought them all together to form a supergroup that was to begin as his bluegrass brainchild. Noam Pikelny began his professional banjo career in the bluegrass jam band Leftover Salmon in 2002 before joining the John Cowan Band in 2004. Pikelny has been acknowledged as a rising star in the bluegrass community, winning the first Steve Martin Prize for excellence in banjo and bluegrass in 2010, and he continues to play an eminent role in the bluegrass banjo community, giving the keynote address at the 2013 IBMA World of Bluegrass Conference. Chris Eldridge studied guitar with Tony Rice at Oberlin Conservatory and joined his father's well-known bluegrass band, The Seldom Scene,

⁶ Malone, 462.

⁷ Nickel Creek recently announced a new album to be released in April of 2014 and a tour to follow.

directly out of school. He was also a founding member of the progressive bluegrass band The Infamous Stringdusters. Before the Punch Brothers, fiddler Gabe Witcher was an in-demand session player in Nashville who also toured with bluegrass musicians such as Jerry Douglas. The original bassist for the band, Greg Garrison, has a DMA in Jazz Studies from University of Colorado. He has also been a member of Leftover Salmon since 2000. Garrison played with the Punch Brothers for *How to Grow a Woman From the Ground* and *Punch* before departing because of creative differences with Thile.⁸ Paul Kowert took Garrison's place in 2009 after studying with Edgar Meyer at the Curtis Institute of Music.

The Punch Brothers' first official album, *Punch* (2008), was not actually the first music the lineup of musicians had produced. In 2006, in the same summer that Nickel Creek announced their hiatus, Thile pulled the musicians who would eventually become the Punch Brothers together for an album entitled *How to Grow a Woman From the Ground*, released as a solo album under Thile's name. The album grew out of Thile's desire to put his "stamp on the traditional bluegrass ensemble," as he stated in a 2007 interview with journalist David Royko.⁹ In 2006, contrary to the strong wording of "of course it's not bluegrass" he offered in 2012, Thile claimed that he intended for the supergroup to be a bluegrass band.¹⁰ In an interview with *Nashville City Paper*, he said, "We played and there was a serious, instantaneous connection. Then I knew I wanted to put together a bluegrass band—one with a lot of range, but aesthetically a bluegrass band."¹¹

How to Grow a Woman integrates a mix of originals and covers that form a sort of progressive bluegrass concept album about a young protagonist's struggles following a break-up.

⁸ *How to Grow a Band*, Directed by Mark Meatto. New York, NY: Shaftway Productions, 2013, 1:12:55.

⁹ David Royko, "Chris Thile." *Bluegrass Unlimited* (June 2007), accessed online at <http://davidroyko.webs.com/thile2007bu.htm>.

¹⁰ Berkowitz, 37.

¹¹ Alexa Hinton, *Nashville City Paper* (August 23, 2006), http://web.archive.org/web/20060826212803/http://nashvillecitypaper.com/index.cfm?section=12&screen=news&news_id=51705.

More specifically, eight of the album's fourteen tracks are covers. Covering music, whether traditional songs or contemporary tunes by bands inside or outside of bluegrass, has a long-standing history within the bluegrass canon. The covers on *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground* come from artists as wide-ranging as The Strokes, The White Stripes, and Willie Dixon.¹² These covers from such disparate sources as alternative rock and blues allowed the band to show off their bluegrass chops, flash their roots credentials (Dixon, Jack White), and demonstrate their engagement with bands (The Strokes, The White Stripes) that grant a level of artistic seriousness amongst a certain demographic of fan.

The record also showcases three original instrumentals in prominent positions on the album, putting the band's instrumental virtuosity on display. These tracks feature the band's harmonically and rhythmically adventurous style and have strong resonances with bluegrass instrumentals from Bill Monroe (and the Blue Grass Boys), Flatt and Scruggs (and the Foggy Mountain Boys), and The Stanley Brothers (and the Clinch Mountain Boys) that solidified instrumental virtuosity as one of the genre's defining characteristics.

Thile relates the disparate sources of the songs on the album back to bluegrass saying, "It seems to me that on the great bluegrass records, there were always some originals, and a couple traditional songs, but then there were some contemporary covers, too. It's hard to beat a patchwork quilt."¹³ This patchwork quilt approach has historically allowed bluegrass musicians to prove their intimacy with the style and their virtuosity with their instruments. It has not only worked to codify what musical transformations are necessary to take a tune from another genre and play it in bluegrass style, but also to highlight which musicians are proficient in the style.

¹² The full list of covers on the album is: Dead Leaves on the Dirty Ground – The White Stripes, O Santo de Polvora – Milladoiro, Wayside/Back in Time – Gillian Welch, How to Grow a Woman From the Ground – Tom Brosseau, Brakeman's Blues – Jimmie Rodgers, If the Sea was Whiskey – Willie Dixon, Cazadero – Paul Shelasky, and Heart in a Cage – The Strokes

¹³ *Sugar Hill Records*, "Chris Thile: Bio." Accessed 27 February 2014.
http://www.sugarhillrecords.com/index.php?option=com_shrecords&controller=artists&task=view&id=46&Itemid=22.

At the time of its release, Thile acknowledged where he believed *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground* should fit in the bluegrass world and the minds of its fans:

All in all, *How To Grow A Woman From The Ground* is a bluegrass record. There are definitely some musical things that are out of the ordinary, but it sounds like a bluegrass record to me.

Ideally, I'd like the bluegrass community to feel challenged in a way that they're comfortable with—for them to say 'yeah, it's different, but it's comfortable.' Because I did set out to make a bluegrass record, which signals a certain amount of maturation, in that I'm completely comfortable with that element of my musicianship now. Every facet of music intrigues me, and I want a little piece of all of it. But I have a bigger piece of bluegrass than I realized or wanted for a while. It has always been a major part of me, but it will be a more acknowledged and cultivated part for the rest of my life.¹⁴

The bluegrass world approved. The album spent 11 weeks on the *Billboard* Hot 100 Bluegrass chart in 2006, peaking at number 2. It was nominated for a Grammy and received positive reviews from critics and fans. The description of the album on Sugar Hill's website, however, foreshadows the new directions in which the band would move next: "In some ways *How to Grow a Woman From the Ground* is a point of departure. A reconciliation of origin and experience. A musical exploration refreshed—and begun anew."¹⁵

After the success of *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground*, The Punch Brothers officially formed with their sights set on an ambitious new project: Thile had composed a 4-movement suite for bluegrass instruments called "The Blind Leaving the Blind" whose express purpose was to fuse the "folk and the formal."¹⁶ This new project became the band's first official album, *Punch*, which Nonesuch Records released in 2008. The "Blind Leaving the Blind" was premiered in April of 2007 at Zankel Hall during a series focusing on new music curated by well-known composer John Adams. Zankel is a 599-seat venue inside Carnegie Hall specifically intended for chamber music. The venue has developed a reputation for hosting new music

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Sugar Hill Records*, "How to Grow a Woman From the Ground," Accessed 27 February 2014. http://www.sugarhillrecords.com/index.php?option=com_shrecords&controller=albums&task=view&id=4&Itemid=22.

¹⁶ *How to Grow a Band*. 10:06.

performances, as well as more intimate pop, jazz, and world music concerts. The band's choice to premiere the work on Adam's new music bill at Zankel and switch from Sugar Hill Records to Nonesuch for the recording follows the shift in genre rhetoric that accompanies this album. This new rhetoric is about *fusing* folk and formal, or bluegrass and classical as the oft-used subtitle "String Quintet for Bluegrass Instruments" indicates. Thile claimed to be "aiming for something landing, hopefully, squarely in between the two disciplines."¹⁷

Punch received a mixed reception. Its centerpiece, *The Blind Leaving the Blind*, pushed the limits of much of the audience's tolerance. Many found it to be a breath of fresh air while others found it tedious. Reviews by fans on iTunes generally fall into one of two opinions: either they hail the album as a creative masterpiece, "originality for originality's sake," and "brilliant," or they dismissed it as pretentious, self-serving, and unfocused.¹⁸

In 2010, the Punch Brothers released their second official studio album, *Antifogmatic*, which marked yet another change in how the band situated itself in terms of genre. It is with this album that genre-resistant rhetoric came into play, including Thile's quote from the opening of this thesis predicting the "slow and painful death" of genre.¹⁹ When asked to comment on genre labels in 2009, Thile said, "They're arbitrary distinctions that have just sort of been sprayed on all sorts of music by people who know how to make money. It helps them sell things, I guess. But I meet very few accomplished musicians who are excited about putting any sort of label on what they do."²⁰ This kind of rhetoric continued through the release of their third studio album, *Who's Feeling Young Now?*, and their recent EP, *Ahoy!*, drawn from tracks not selected for *Who's Feeling Young*. Along with the shunning of genre labels, the band also began distancing

¹⁷ David Royko, "Ex Nickel Creek Player's Sound Packs 'Punch,'" *Chicago Tribune* (17 February 2008), Accessed 26 June 2014. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-02-17/news/0802150522_1_chris-thile-newgrass-classical,

¹⁸ iTunes reviews of *Punch*

¹⁹ Rachel, 88.

²⁰ Frank Oteri and Chris Thile, "Chris Thile: It's All One Thing" (January 1, 2009), Accessed 8 October 2013. <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/chris-thile-its-all-one-thing/>.

themselves from their earlier, more intentionally genre-referential work. Thile has called some of the band's earlier music "overthought" and "a little rigid" and guitarist Chris Eldridge remarked that *Who's Feeling Young Now?* marks the band becoming more "comfortable in our skin."²¹

These more recent albums do have a much more eclectic collection of genre references, but genre is still clearly playing a role in the band's music and reception. If they were completely unmoored from the bluegrass dock, as Thile seems to suggest would be preferable, the band's music would not be understood and valued in the same way that it has been. While they may say they long to be free from the perceived musical limitations of bluegrass, it is this struggle against bluegrass convention that grants them the constructions of "originality" and "depth" that they and their fans value.

The band's narrative is constructed as beginning from within the bluegrass mold with *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground*. Following that, the band tried to fuse bluegrass and classical music, and after some critical acclaim but purported dissatisfaction with the results, they claimed to leave genre behind altogether. This narrative's movement frames the band's reception. The individual members have been hailed as some of the best players in the world and their music as highly virtuosic. This virtuosity not only grants them access to push boundaries but also enables and sanctions the pushing as an outpouring of their skill and knowledge. But even as they push musically, granted safe passage by their skill, and verbally deny genre reference in the name of artistic freedom, they continue to evoke a sound world, and construct a narrative and an image whose source consistently references bluegrass.

²¹ Michael Hill, "Punch Brothers," Accessed 26 June 2014. <http://www.punchbrothers.com/about/>.

Literature Review and Methodology

This thesis draws primarily on reception, presentation, and sound recordings of the Punch Brothers—with a focus on frontman Chris Thile—to explain the band’s position with regard to genre within the bluegrass world and within the twenty-first century market and culture more broadly. In my discussions of genre, I will draw on work by Allan Moore, Simon Frith, Fabian Holt, and Keith Negus, all of whom contribute to a nuanced understanding of the interactions between musician, industry, and fan that produce genre categories and meanings in popular music. Jeffrey Kallberg’s work on the rhetoric of genre in Chopin’s music also influences my formulation of genre as an interaction between musician, listener, and expectation rather than a system of classification.

This thesis makes a useful contribution to the musicological scholarship on bluegrass more specifically, which still contains many lacunae. The earliest writings and scholarly attempts to define the genre and analyze its music are collected in *The Bluegrass Reader*, edited by Thomas Goldsmith, including Alan Lomax’s “Bluegrass Background: Folk Music With Overdrive,” L. Mayne Smith’s “An Introduction to Bluegrass,” and Neil Rosenberg’s “Into Bluegrass: The History of a Word.” This volume also contains primary sources written by journalists and musicians throughout the genre’s history, which offer less academic but no less useful, information and context about the genre throughout its history.

Robert Cantwell’s *Bluegrass Breakdown* was the first full-length exploration of the genre. Cantwell’s work established many of the conventions of bluegrass scholarship and provided a vivid picture of the cultural space in which the genre resided. Neil Rosenberg’s *Bluegrass: A History*, a rigorous study of the genre up to 1985, filled in much of the historical detail omitted by Cantwell, whose concern was more with cultural analysis than comprehensive history. Bill Malone’s *Country Music U.S.A.*, a broader history of country music, features large discussions of bluegrass that are especially strong in relation to progressive bluegrass.

The process of establishing lineage and pedigree—while clearly a primary focus for many fans and musicians—is rarely theorized in country and bluegrass music scholarship. Nonetheless, anecdotes and primary sources offer invaluable fodder for theorizing about how lineage works within bluegrass. Jocelyn Neal’s monograph, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers* provides a model for the tracing of musical sources by showing how the songs of Jimmie Rodgers have been appropriated and can be used to draw on legacies within country music. Daniel Neuman’s *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* provides critical analysis of musicians establishing lineage within the context of Hindustani classical music that I find translates well into the world of bluegrass, however unlikely the relationship between the two genres may be.

Murphy Henry, Thomas Adler, Robert Oermann, and Mary Bufwack provide useful historical documentation of the roles of women in bluegrass that forms the foundation of my discussion of gender in the genre. Christine Battersby’s *Gender and Genius* offers necessary feminist aesthetics for interpreting the kind of discourse surrounding the masculinized creativity of Thile and the Punch Brothers. Battersby’s book, while reaching a questionable conclusion, provides a comprehensive intellectual history of the concept of genius, detailing how gender has played an enormous role in its reception. Sheila Whiteley’s work on women in popular music, Philip Auslander’s work on musical personae, and Steve Waksman’s scholarship on gender and guitar performance also gave me tools with which to interpret the work of Punch Brothers and other bluegrass musicians through the lens of gender.

Chapter 1: Genre and Lineage

The establishment of lineage and pedigree is a vital process for musicians in many genres. In bluegrass, where the tension between tradition and innovation has existed from the genre's beginnings, this process becomes even more important to both fans and musicians. A pedigree accepted by fans is often a prerequisite to achieving authenticity and can determine the success or failure of a band or musician.

Several methods of establishing musical pedigree are common across different genres. Appealing to one's teacher or mentor and successfully emulating his or her musical style is a common strategy for establishing credibility. Several of the first and second-generation bluegrass stars performed for a time in Bill Monroe's Blue Grass Boys. Many of these musicians claim to have learned much of what made them the bluegrass musician they are from their time under Monroe's wing. Del McCoury served time under Monroe and recalls, "I learned a lot from Bill. And I've learned that a lot of jazz, country, blues musicians wish they had gotten to be Blue Grass Boys. I was lucky to have gotten to play with him."²²

A second method is by employing non-verbal signifiers such as dress or performance style, as I will discuss with the visual presentation of Punch Brothers. A third method is through association or collaboration with an artist or artists with whom one wishes to be identified, either directly or by covering or emulating them. A very successful example of this method is the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's collaborative album *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. While the California rock band had made previous attempts to penetrate country's borders, none had the impact that

²² Baker Maultsby, "Progress Rooted in Tradition: Del McCoury Talks About Work with Bill Monroe, Steve Earle." In *The Bluegrass Reader*, ed. Thomas Goldsmith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

this album did.²³ They clearly articulated their lineage by organizing a collaborative recording between themselves and several of country's patriarchs and matriarchs, including Roy Acuff, Maybelle Carter, Doc Watson, and Earl Scruggs.

A fourth method of establishing pedigree involves proving one has the right kind of upbringing, socio-economic status, or belief system for a particular genre. Darius Rucker's successful takeover of the country charts is a prime example of this. As a black man with a well-known career in a rock band and a less than successful attempt at an R&B album, the odds were stacked against Rucker achieving country authenticity. In the media campaign after the release of *Learn to Live* (2008), however, Rucker emphasized his southern, rural upbringing and his affinity for the genre.²⁴ The single "Don't Think I Don't Think About It" topped the Billboard country chart. Often an artist must use several of these strategies in order to solidify a lineage that grants him or her authenticity with a particular audience.

Through various channels, the Punch Brothers have established lineages that at times connect them with traditional bluegrass and at times give them alternative, progressive, and genre-transcending credentials. These lineages work to reinforce their place as musicians deeply rooted in the bluegrass tradition but capable of transcending its borders and synthesizing outside influences innovatively. Understanding where the Punch Brothers are operating within the continual splintering of bluegrass will facilitate our recognition of the types of lineages into which they are working to graft themselves.

The Splintering of Bluegrass

The Punch Brothers are contributing to a splintering of bluegrass arguably built into the genre's fabric from the beginning. Bill Malone, the first scholar to offer a broadly-conceived survey of country music, describes bluegrass as "The most vital form of alternative country music" that "has flourished...with a paradoxical but complementary blend of tradition and

²³ Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 240-1.

²⁴ Neal, *Country Music*, 466-7.

innovation.”²⁵ Malone notes that bluegrass both “continues to be a refuge for tradition-minded fans and musicians” while also “a seedbed for artistic experimentation within an acoustic context.”²⁶ It was Bill Monroe’s innovative synthesis of pre-existing styles, often later cast as resistance to mainstream Nashville, that later became “bluegrass” as defined today.²⁷ When placed within this conception of bluegrass, the genre bending of the Punch Brothers—and all progressive bluegrass for that matter—is in keeping with Monroe’s initial impulse.

Eventually this innovative ethos began to move beyond the circumscribed version of bluegrass codified by Monroe and the early bluegrass acts that imitated his sound. Folk revivalists in the 1960s such as Ralph Rinzler gave Monroe’s brand of deviation from 1930s string band music value because of its perceived rejection of the establishment. Although Rinzler was reacting against his 1960s version of Nashville rather than the Nashville of Monroe’s genre defining era decades earlier, bluegrass still offered an effective symbol of resistance to the commercialization the folk revival found troubling. Proponents of progressive bluegrass today continue to give its brand of deviation from traditional bluegrass value because of its innovation—its ability to creatively break the shackles of strict genre boundaries enforced by the so-called “bluegrass purists.”

These seemingly contradictory camps coexist within the genre framework of bluegrass. Joti Rockwell has argued that the negotiations of fans about the boundaries of bluegrass—the “What is bluegrass anyway?” question or WIBA—are what give it vitality as a genre.²⁸ This process of defining and resisting genre boundaries allows fans to grant their definition of bluegrass value, while keeping the question of the ownership of bluegrass alive perpetually. Along with bands that maintain the genre’s characteristics basically as Monroe and the other

²⁵ Malone, 454.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See Ralph Rinzler’s “Bill Monroe—The Daddy of Blue Grass Music” in *The Bluegrass Reader*, ed. Thomas Goldsmith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

²⁸ Joti Rockwell, “What is Bluegrass Anyway? Category Formation, Debate, and the Framing of Musical Genre.” *Popular Music* 31/3, 2012, pp. 363-381.

pioneers of the genre established them, bands that fall into two relevant trends have participated in the process of renegotiating the boundaries of bluegrass: artists pushing the boundaries of the genre from within, and classical musicians “slumming it” in the genre from the “high-brow” sphere. This two-fold distinction is separate from the “traditional” versus “progressive” dichotomy. All of the musicians that characterize these two trends fall within the progressive impulse to redefine the boundaries of the genre, rather than maintain them. The Punch Brothers appeal to various aspects of these trends, collaborating and associating with the musicians that are a part of them. These associations work to place the band within a long-standing history of negotiating the borders of bluegrass.

The first trend is a collection of “progressive bluegrass” or “newgrass” artists that push the boundaries of the genre from the inside, often with the perceived effect of “elevating” the music. The first wave of progressive bluegrass bands in the 1960s and 1970s picked up on the counterculture movement and transferred some of its ethos to bluegrass. In the late 1950s, The Country Gentlemen paved the way for later progressive bluegrass by using a smoother, more folk-oriented vocal timbre and readily utilizing material from outside the genre.²⁹ As Thomas Goldsmith says, “Picking by such adventuresome players as mandolinist John Duffy and banjo player Eddie Adcock presaged the wild-and-wooly musical approaches of the ‘progressive bluegrass’ movement that was a decade or so down the road.”³⁰ The Country Gentlemen and other groups such as the Charles River Valley Boys emboldened and inspired younger musicians like New Grass Revival, J.D. Crowe and the New South, David Grisman, and the New Deal String Band to push the circumscribed limits of the genre and consider them a starting place rather than a perimeter.³¹ This first generation of progressive bluegrass bands leaned heavily on the sounds of rock and jazz to flavor their versions of bluegrass. Bela Fleck, originally the banjo

²⁹ Neal, *Country Music*, 146.

³⁰ Goldsmith, *The Bluegrass Reader*, 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*

player for New Grass Revival, went even further in the 1990s with his band the Flecktones, pushing both his instrument and the types of music it was used for far afield from custom. Younger bands including the Avett Brothers, Greensky Bluegrass, the Infamous Stringdusters, and the Punch Brothers have assumed the mantle from earlier generations. These four bands move away from traditional bluegrass in different stylistic directions but because of their deviation from traditional bluegrass, critics, fans, and the music industry interpret them as progressive bluegrass (see Figure 1).

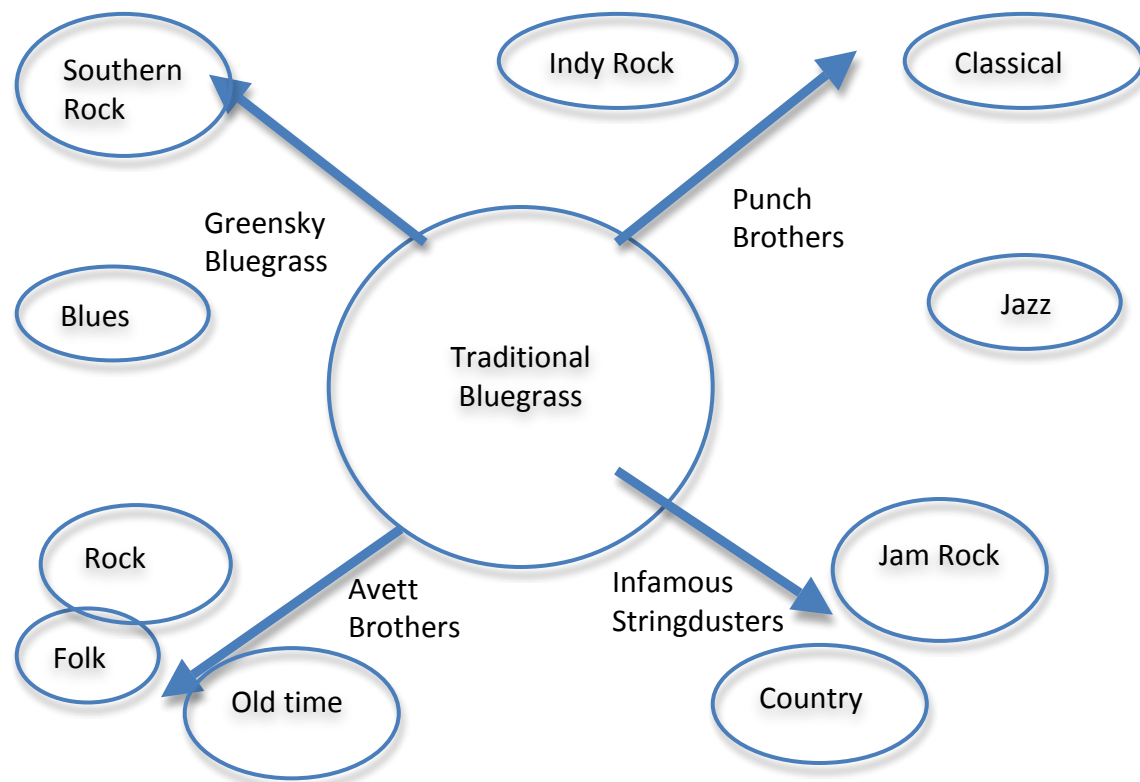


Figure 1: Progressive bluegrass bands working outwards from traditional bluegrass

One artist who provides an interesting transition from the first trend to the second is Stuart Duncan. Duncan is a fiddle player whose website bio begins with, “Stuart Duncan has built on his bluegrass roots to become an artist who defies categorization and surpasses the limits of any specific genre.”³² Duncan collaborated with Thile, Edgar Meyer and Yo-Yo Ma for the Goat Rodeo Sessions in 2011. The title of the collaboration suggests the confusion of genre that this music was meant to produce. About the Goat Rodeo Sessions, Thile remarked,

It's more of a little Frankenstein music monster. It's fairly easy to identify some of the elements... but I'm always eagerly looking to hide the seams. You want soup, not stew, and I think what you have is a broad range on the spectrum of formal to informal music-making. Everyone complements each other nicely. I think it's the kind of thing that maybe classical music listeners will think is bluegrass and bluegrass listeners will think it's classical. Hopefully it lands in the nebulous zone where it can't really be named.³³

Chris Thile’s genre-resistant rhetoric is clear here and the stated aims of the Goat Rodeo Sessions align this group of musicians in a unique way. While Thile and Duncan are coming to the Goat Rodeo sessions from the “folk” side, Ma and Meyer are coming from the “formal.”

The other collaborators on The Goat Rodeo Sessions participate in the second kind of genre-bending interaction associated with bluegrass: classical musicians trying their hand at folk styles and joining in collaborations that grant a level of perceived “authenticity” to their work. Edgar Meyer and Yo-Yo Ma represent a new incarnation of the movement amongst classical musicians to show an openness to “folk” genres that can be traced back to composers like Bela Bartok and Ralph Vaughan Williams. The Goat Rodeo Sessions was not the first project like this for Ma and Meyer. Meyer, Ma, and Mark O’Connor recorded *Appalachian Waltz* in 1997. In the same year, Meyer released *Uncommon Ritual* with Béla Fleck on banjo and Mike Marshall on mandolin. Meyer also composed a concerto for double bass, banjo, and tabla, adding Hindustani music to the mix. Meyer’s work seems to embody the eclecticism also prized

³² Stuart Duncan, Accessed 20 March 2014. <http://www.stuart-duncan.com/#!bio>.

³³ Chris Thile quoted in Gary Graff, “Yo-Yo Ma trades Bach for Bluegrass in ‘Goat Rodeo Sessions,’” Accessed 20 March 2014. <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/465471/yo-yo-ma-trades-bach-for-bluegrass-in-goat-rodeo-sessions>.

by fans of Thile and the Punch Brothers. In a review of *Uncommon Ritual*, Ben Ratliff wrote, “The short, original pieces tend to play with genre—Mr. Fleck’s stock in trade with his own band, the Flecktones—or work out a gentle musical puzzle. It’s sort of a chamberized health shake of music that’s acceptable to a National Public Radio listenership: it comes with an unmistakable patina of culture, the pieces are brief and funny and the sound of the music is comfortably familiar.”³⁴ Ma’s work in a similar vein includes his formation of the Silk Road Project in 1998. The Silk Road Project, inspired by the ancient trade route, seeks to “connect the world’s neighborhoods by bringing together artists and audiences from around the world.”³⁵ The impulse behind the Silk Road Project and its recording and touring ensemble is a global analog to the kinds of boundary crossing for which Thile and Meyer are known in the bluegrass and classical music worlds.

Behind this openness and eclecticism, however, is the assumption that there is something to be gained for folk traditions in interacting with classically trained musicians and that there is some indefinable sincerity lacking in the western canon that can be improved upon by appropriating folk styles—not to mention the much larger audience for folk genres in comparison to art music. Both Yo-Yo Ma and Edgar Meyer were at the vanguard of the “classical crossover” phenomenon. In this case, “crossover” does not refer to a record that succeeds on both a specialty chart and the popular chart, but as “the merging or hybridization of different musical genres.”³⁶ Their collaborations with bluegrass artists like Thile reflect value placed on transcending genre boundaries and fusing classical music with folk genres, much like the values of progressive bluegrass in the opposite direction.

³⁴ Ben Ratliff, “A Puzzle Whose Pieces are Bass, Banjo, and Mandolin” *The New York Times* (October 17, 1997). Accessed 31 March 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/10/17/movies/music-review-a-puzzle-whose-pieces-are-bass-banjo-and-mandolin.html>.

³⁵ “The Silk road Project: Mission and Vision” Accessed 31 March 2014. <http://www.silkroadproject.org/AboutUs/MissionVision/tabid/195/Default.aspx>.

³⁶ Kenneth Gloag, “Crossover,” in *Oxford Companion to Music Online*, Accessed 31 March 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e1730?q=crossover&search=quick&pos=3&start=1#firsthit>.

Understanding the historical context in which Punch Brothers are operating helps one to recognize the lineage to which they are appealing. Through various channels, the Punch Brothers work to establish credibility as a bluegrass band, specifically of the progressive variety. This analysis articulates a very specific place for the band, both currently and historically, within, and in conversation with, the genre of bluegrass.

Whose Brakeman's Blues?

Thile's performance of the song "Brakeman's Blues" on *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground* (2006) contains nods to both Jimmie Rodgers and Bill Monroe, and walks the line between sincerity and parody, simultaneously tying him to bluegrass tradition and untethering him as a progressive figure. Jimmie Rodgers originally recorded the song in 1928 and Bill Monroe brought the song into bluegrass by covering it in 1951. Rodgers was one of Monroe's most important musical influences, reflected in the number of Rodgers' songs Monroe covered in a bluegrass style.³⁷ Because of Rodgers' importance to Monroe, his music assumed a pivotal place in the lineage of bluegrass, similar to its ability to help country artists establish their authenticity and link themselves to tradition.³⁸

In Bill Monroe's 1951 version of the song, he dropped Rodgers' last two verses, one of which contained some pretty racy sexual innuendo. Thile's version maintains Monroe's four verses and adds a fifth where the protagonist visits a gypsy fortune-teller who reads his mind then slaps him after discovering that he is thinking less than wholesome things. Thile attributes this final verse to Rodgers' version of the song, but in fact, it is not on Rodgers' 1928 recording.³⁹ The verse originally appeared alongside the "Went down to the depot" verse on a Sam McGee record called "Railroad Blues," which the Grateful Dead covered as "Big Railroad Blues." Thile's

³⁷ Neal, *Country Music*, 129.

³⁸ Jocelyn R. Neal, *Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy of Country Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), xiv.

³⁹ David Royko, "Chris Thile." *Bluegrass Unlimited* (June 2007), accessed online at <http://davidroyko.webs.com/thile2007bu.htm>.

misattribution, however, reveals the lineage he wishes to establish with his version. While he adds the verse attributed to Rodgers, he clearly takes his yodeling cues from Monroe, rather than Rodgers:



Figure 2: Yodel comparisons from first verse of Brakeman's Blues

Along with the melodic shape of the yodel itself, Thile maintains Monroe's high version in the key of B, one of the distinctive features of his music. In verse three Thile riffs off of Monroe's falsetto leap on the lyric "I eat my breakfast *here*" by extending the phrase from a 5-bar hypermeasure to a 22-bar hypermeasure. Thile may also be conflating Monroe's falsetto leap in this song with the similar tradition that built up around "Muleskinner Blues," within which similarly comic extensions of Monroe's falsetto have made their way into the songs many covers. Figure 3 is a chart of verse three of Monroe's version of "Brakeman's Blues" and Thile's version of the same verse. The italicized numbers represent how long Monroe and Thile hold the high falsetto note.

Monroe Verse Three

1	1	1	1	1 ⁷
4	4	1	1	
5	5	5	5	5
1	1	5	1	1

Thile Verse Three

1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1 ⁷	1 ⁷	(22)		
4	4	4	4	1	1							
5	5	5	5	5	5							
1	1	5	1	1								

Figure 3: Brakeman's Blues Verse Three Comparison (one tab equals one measure)

The irregular phrase structure in both the Monroe and the Thile recalls Rodgers' irregular phrases that give his music an improvisatory feel. Thile's extension of the high falsetto note takes this irregularity to an absurd degree. In live performance, the crowd usually begins cheering and laughing after a few measures of the stunt, turning it into a moment of comedy in the set. Thile also slips into speech similarly to Rodgers and the band affects wide shifts in dynamics all of which contribute to the song's comic sound. This element of comedy starkly contrasts with Monroe's stoic ethos and pushes the limits of sincerity. Rather than covering a Jimmie Rodgers song in bluegrass style out of respect, the band's cover walks the line somewhere between satire and sincerity, and can be interpreted either way by fans of different inclinations.

The instrumental breaks after each verse put the band's skill in playing bluegrass style on display. For the most part, the solos and interjections during the verses are stylistically appropriate. However, Thile's mandolin solo after verse four (2:55) is more aggressive and downbeat oriented than anything Monroe recorded. The solo sounds more like an electric guitar solo in a hard rock song than a bluegrass solo. In many ways, Thile's playing extends the new, "aggressive" style credited to Monroe himself when he emerged on the Opry in 1939.

“Brakeman’s Blues” illustrates the complex web of lineage-establishing elements operating in many Punch Brothers recordings, both tying them to traditional bluegrass icons like Bill Monroe and also suggesting alternative lineages that begin to establish their progressive credentials.

Ronnie McCoury, Bluegrass Guru

As part of the production team for *How to Grow a Woman From the Ground* (2006), Thile and the Punch Brothers hired Ronnie McCoury to serve as the album’s “bluegrass guru,” a move that makes a clear attempt to grant traditional bluegrass credentials to the album. Ronnie McCoury, a well-respected figure in the bluegrass community, is the son of hall-of-famer Del McCoury and the mandolin player in the Del McCoury band. Fans, other bluegrass artists, and mandolin players specifically hold Ronnie McCoury in high esteem. David Grisman has said that McCoury is “certainly one of the greatest mandolin players to ever play bluegrass music and, more than anyone else, he has skillfully succeeded in bridging the gap between traditional and contemporary approaches to our instrument.”⁴⁰ Grisman later goes on to say that Ronnie McCoury was “born and raised” to be a bluegrass musician.⁴¹ On *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground*, McCoury’s role seems to have been something of an advisor and producer:

We really wanted somebody in there who knows the music inside and out – someone who could make sure we didn’t do anything clichéd or trite - so we had Ronnie McCoury. His official title was ‘bluegrass guru,’ beyond the bluegrass, he’s an amazing musician, with a killer pair of ears. He would hang out in the control room while we were tracking to make sure everyone’s tone and level were good and staying consistent.⁴²

Because of his stellar credentials and perceived authority within traditional bluegrass, his stamp of approval on the album transfers some of that authenticity to Thile and Punch Brothers. At the same time, he has been involved in some exploratory efforts, to which Grisman

⁴⁰ David Grisman, “The Ronnie McCoury Interview,” *Manodlin Café*, Accessed 26 June 2014. http://www.mandolincafe.com/news/publish/mandolins_001236.shtml.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Chris Thile: Bio.” Sugar Hill Records, Accessed 20 February 2014. http://www.sugarhillrecords.com/index.php?option=com_shrecords&controller=artists&task=view&id=46&Itemid=22.

alludes when he talks about McCoury “bridging the gap” between traditional and contemporary approaches to the mandolin.⁴³ This puts McCoury in a unique position to both understand what the musical goals of the Punch Brothers are while also maintaining some sort of sense of what is pushing the boundaries too far. In a different interview, Thile expounded on the idea that the band needed the assistance of McCoury to keep from sounding “clichéd,” admitting that there were times during the recording process when Ronnie would caution them not to overplay certain passages:

It wasn't me wanting the project to get any more bluegrass or the boys wanting the project to get any more bluegrass or anything, but just to make sure that we didn't cut something that sounded like a caricature of bluegrass to a guy who knows about it. Occasionally he was like, 'That there's going too far; that sounds a little silly.'⁴⁴

Interestingly enough, McCoury allowed the extended falsetto passage noted above to remain on the album, thereby granting even a moment that has all the hallmarks of caricature more sincerity. Thile also indicates that the instincts involved in this process of negotiation are naturally endowed:

I'm a Southern Californian. And then another guy is also from Southern California. Two of the guys are from Chicago. One guy grew up in Virginia; that's Chris Eldridge whose father, Ben Eldridge, started The Seldom Scene. So he's got cred; he's legit, although The Seldom Scene certainly had experienced the slings and arrows of the bluegrass purists. But none of us really come by bluegrass honestly.⁴⁵

Despite the fact that Thile himself grew up listening to bluegrass and had recorded two bluegrass albums with Sugar Hill by the time he was 15, he considers his and the rest of his bandmates' bluegrass knowledge “dishonest.” The only member of the band who Thile grants any birthright in the genre is Chris Eldridge, the guitar player. Eldridge is from Virginia and has a father in a famous bluegrass band just like McCoury (The Seldom Scene) and yet, according to Thile, he still does not approach McCoury's credibility. Most intriguing about this formulation is

⁴³ See collaborations with artists like David Grisman, Allison Krauss, etc.

⁴⁴ Frank Oteri and Chris Thile, “Chris Thile: It's All One Thing” interview on NewMusicBox (January 1, 2009), Accessed 26 June 2014. <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/chris-thile-its-all-one-thing/>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

that Ronnie McCoury is from Pennsylvania, a state outside of the boundaries of the authenticity-granting South. Several seminal acts in the early stages of bluegrass's development came from Virginia including the Stanley Brothers and the Clinch Mountain Boys and Jim and Jesse (McReynolds). In theory, Eldridge should be just as naturally endowed as McCoury, but because of how each musician has positioned himself in the genre, it is McCoury's instincts that determine whether the album is sounding authentic or caricatured.

In questioning his and his other band members' bluegrass credentials, Thile aligns himself with a long-held conception in bluegrass and folk genres more generally that birth matters a great deal when it comes to embodying what is perceived as a folk tradition. Authenticity is not always granted based simply on craft or whether one can play the style. For many styles including those traditionally considered "folk" in orientation, fans (and historically scholars as well) often weigh some combination of social circumstances in addition to musical talent, including regional identity, class, or race to determine whether the artist has the credibility to communicate truthfully in the idiom. Folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and anthropologists strongly committed to the idea that the cultural identity of the performers was of vital importance to the music did much of the early musicological work on bluegrass. In the academic climate of the 1960s, it may have even been necessary to convince the reader of this point in order to have bluegrass accepted as a viable field of study.⁴⁶ Many scholars now compare the folk revival's lust for authenticity to an earlier, but no less romanticized, bourgeois invention of "the folk."⁴⁷ Because bluegrass was folded into the folk revival by people like Alan Lomax, L. Mayne Smith, and Ralph Rinzler, these same attitudes shaped the discourse

⁴⁶ Joti Rockwell, "What is Bluegrass Anyway," 367. Also, see examples like Cantwell's *Bluegrass Breakdown*, one of the first full-length academic studies of bluegrass, that contains a chapter-long hagiography of Bill Monroe, detailing how he embodied the blue-collar, Appalachian character of his audience and establishing his unassailable authenticity as the pioneer of the genre.

⁴⁷ Seeger, Bohlman, etc.

surrounding bluegrass, and players such as Thile still appeal to this kind of authenticity, especially when they perceive themselves as lacking it.

This professional collaboration with Ronnie McCoury is a clear instance of the establishment of lineage. The relationship to Ronnie McCoury recalls the kinds of master-disciple relationships prevalent in the Hindustani music tradition, about which some of the only literature on the establishment of musical pedigree and lineage exists. Using the Sanskrit term “guru” strengthens this association. For Hindustani musicians, it is necessary to maintain an adequate master-disciple relationship and to trace one’s stylistic lineage through his or her teacher into a certain group of musicians.⁴⁸ This group of musicians makes up a style collectively called a *gharana*. Establishing one’s place in a *gharana* is one of the only ways a Hindustani musician can earn authority in the tradition. A very similar process is at work with the Punch Brothers on this album. In order to gain some sort of authenticity in the bluegrass community, they are making an appeal to a lineage by drawing on Ronnie McCoury as their teacher and gateway into the tradition. Ronnie McCoury connects them to Del McCoury, who was a member of Bill Monroe’s Blue Grass Boys in his early career. By drawing their bluegrass lineage through Ronnie, they are able to connect themselves to the very creator of the genre and the pinnacle of bluegrass authenticity.

By designating McCoury their “bluegrass guru,” the Punch Brothers show deference to a bluegrass legend and an important family in the genre and downplay their own claim to authenticity. In doing so, the band ends up reinscribing what defines authenticity in bluegrass while simultaneously confirming their own insider knowledge of the mores of the bluegrass community. Denying their natural claim to the genre but appealing to the right lineage grants them credibility and allows bluegrass fans of differing camps to enjoy *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground*. Any challenges to the authenticity of the album from bluegrass purists must go through McCoury. In “Authenticity as Authentication,” Allan Moore suggests we ask not

⁴⁸ Daniel Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980), 145.

“what” is being authenticated but “who.”⁴⁹ By bringing in Ronnie McCoury, the Punch Brothers are deflecting the “who” of the act of authentication from themselves to Ronnie McCoury, someone with unassailable credentials, giving them the freedom to push the boundaries without necessarily losing the core bluegrass audience.

Nonesuch Records, The Label-less Label

After *How to Grow A Woman From the Ground*, when the Punch Brothers began discussing plans for their first album featuring Thile’s “The Blind Leaving the Blind,” they initiated a move from Sugar Hill Records to Nonesuch Records.⁵⁰ This move made a very significant statement about the direction of the band and the group of musical acts with which they wanted people to associate them. The label switch symbolized the band’s move from appeals to bluegrass roots to the eclectic world of Nonesuch, with all of its associated acts and genres.

Sugar Hill Records occupies a unique place in bluegrass history as one of the few labels specializing in the genre. Barry Poss founded the label in 1978.⁵¹ Until 2007, the label was headquartered in Durham, North Carolina, maintaining physical distance from Nashville to compliment its alignment with a style defined as ever resistant to the Nashville mainstream. Sugar Hill released albums by bluegrass heavyweights such as Ricky Skaggs and Jerry Douglas, Seldom Scene, The Country Gentlemen, Doyle Lawson, and the Nashville Bluegrass Band. By the time of *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground* (2006), Thile’s history with Sugar Hill was long. He had already released four solo albums [*Leading Off* (1995), *Stealing Second* (1997), *Not All Who Wander Are Lost* (2001), and *Deceiver* (2004)] and three albums with Nickel Creek on the label [*Nickel Creek* (2000), *This Side* (2002), and *Why Should the Fire Die?* (2005)]. The

⁴⁹ Allan Moore, “Authenticity as Authentication” *Popular Music* 21/2 (May 2002), 210.

⁵⁰ Jane Doe, email to author, 19 February 2014.

⁵¹ Rounder (Cambridge, MA), Rebel (Charlottesville, VA), County (Charlottesville, VA) and Vanguard (New York, NY) are other well-known bluegrass labels.

transitional time after the Nickel Creek hiatus offered an opportunity for Thile to make a clean break from his former musical persona, and the reputation of the new label would play into the network of lineage Thile was working to establish.

Nonesuch is decidedly not a bluegrass label. They are especially well known for new (classical) music, world music, and alternative artists Wilco, EmmyLou Harris, and k.d. Lang. Although they specialize in new, world, and alternative, the label has no definitive genre allegiance. In a quote that the label put in its website's "About" section, Boston Globe critic Ed Seigel called Nonesuch "a musical world where boundaries between genres stretch and snap."⁵² This lack of definition with regard to genre enhances the message the Punch Brothers began to tell after 2008. With each successive release on Nonesuch, the band's affinity with the label becomes clearer. Simultaneously, Thile and the other members of the band seem to grow more averse to genre labels in their rhetoric. The year Punch Brothers released *Punch*, their first album with Nonesuch, the label also released albums by The Black Keys, John Adams, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Pat Metheny, Brad Mehldau Trio, k.d. Lang, and the Kronos Quartet among others. This pantheon, while diverse in terms of genre, has something in common: they are considered highly original and artistic by fans and critics, whether they are operating in a genre considered "popular" or not.

Visual Signifiers of Lineage

In a 2013 interview with me, bluegrass guitarist Tommy Edwards remarked, "I wonder what would happen if they [the Punch Brothers] showed up to play on stage in Hawaiian shirts and shorts?"⁵³ It was an astute remark. Edwards has been performing bluegrass professionally in the triangle region of North Carolina for over forty years and is the founder of Tommy Edwards and the Bluegrass Experience. More than most, Tommy Edwards understands the intricacies of marketing oneself as a bluegrass performer and how important visual image is to

⁵² Ed Seigel quoted in Michael Hill, "The Nonesuch Story," *Nonesuch Records*, accessed on 20 May 2014, <http://www.nonesuch.com/about>.

⁵³ Tommy Edwards. Interview by Stephen Stacks. Personal Interview. Pittsboro, NC. November 8, 2013.

the reception of one's music. There is a specific history of bluegrass-appropriate visual presentations that not only includes the more traditional suit and tie and constructed hillbilly imagery, but has also subsumed the dress and hair stylings of the hippie counter culture during the 1970s progressive bluegrass wave along with a more recent casual, rural look. Bluegrass artists today have a panoply of choices that place them in interaction with very specific visual lineages and contribute to meanings derived from their performances.

The very make-up and organization of the Punch Brothers already fits within a specific lineage. The traditional, 5-piece bluegrass ensemble recalls the genre's foundational bands and many of its contemporary standard bearers. The Punch Brothers are all white and male, which reflects the overwhelming majority of bluegrass performers. The fact that Thile is the lead singer and mandolin player very directly recalls the Father of Bluegrass himself, Bill Monroe.

Beyond instrumentation, the band's visual presentation references the iconography of traditional bluegrass, while not alienating their young, urban, alternative fanbase outside the bluegrass community. The band strikes a unique balance. To the bluegrass community, their visual presentation proves that they know and respect the traditions of the genre. To the urban, hip crowd, they manage to look like a bluegrass band that is retro and stylish, rather than old-fashioned or conservative. The band is almost always pictured dressed in three-piece suits and ties, with one member of the band often in a newsboy hat. Suits, vests, and ties may not on their own be a specifically bluegrass reference, however, the clothes in combination with the instruments themselves do send a targeted message. By making a specific visual appeal to the more traditional image of the genre, they are given more leeway in other areas such as sound and performance without being completely dismissed as outsiders that do not understand the genre.

In marketing photos, the Punch Brothers very often hold their instruments, both adding the symbolism of the instruments themselves as well as indicating their musical virtuosity. The band's competence with their instruments coupled with the number of photos containing them,

elevates the instruments to core identity-forming status. The members of the band are presented not just as Chris, Noam, Chris, Gabe, and Paul but Chris the mandolinist, Noam the banjoist, Chris the guitarist, etc.



Figure 4: Representative Images of Punch Brothers

A well-dressed bluegrass band pictured with the instruments that form such a key part of the genre's identity is a long-standing convention with which Punch Brothers are clearly interacting. Figure 5 gives some representative photographs of early bluegrass acts in similarly formal attire.



Figure 5: Images of Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers

The clothing has been updated, but it is remarkable how similar the images of bluegrass's founding fathers are to the images of the Punch Brothers. They have toned down the more country western signifier of the cowboy hat by replacing it with the intentionally retro yet young-looking newsboy hat or removing it altogether. This well-dressed style has been important to the image of the genre since its inception. It provided a counter-narrative to the commonly constructed hillbilly hayseed portrayal of bluegrass musicians and emphasized the professionalism and commercial appeal with which the musicians have always invested the genre. This too goes back to Bill Monroe, who claimed to be the first musician to wear a white shirt and tie on the Grand Ole Opry.⁵⁴ Other newgrass bands have chosen to use their visual image as well as their sound to resist bluegrass norms (see Figure 6).

⁵⁴ James Rooney, "Bossman Bill Monroe" in Thomas Goldsmith, ed. *The Bluegrass Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 44.



Figure 6: Images of the New Deal String Band and Greensky Bluegrass

Punch Brothers, on the other hand, use their visual image to both communicate an understanding of bluegrass's valuing of tradition, while also not alienating their audience outside the bluegrass community, which frames the reception of their music before an instrument or a voice ever sounds.

The lineage that the Punch Brothers have cultivated for themselves stretches back to Jimmie Rodgers through the Father of Bluegrass Bill Monroe. It connects to one of bluegrass' first families through the guidance of Ronnie McCoury. It moves from the roots of Sugar Hill to the offbeat and innovative credentials of a hard-to-define Nonesuch Records. It visually links them to the well-dressed imagery of bluegrass' past, while carefully maintaining the style of young urbanites. This lineage carefully balances the band's connection to the conventions of bluegrass and their resistance to those same conventions in order to carefully produce "progressive bluegrass."

Chapter 2: Genre and Sound

Perhaps the most obvious way one thinks about a band interacting with genre is sound. Most of the other interactions with genre discussed in this thesis frame sound in a certain way and shape its reception. But the sound itself must also negotiate established genre frameworks in very specific ways. The simple acoustic properties of the Punch Brothers' instrumentation are deeply tied to bluegrass as a genre. Because of the history of associations with these five specific instruments and their playing techniques with bluegrass music, the band's sound is automatically related to bluegrass on a fundamental level. Until the Punch Brothers' 2012 release, *Who's Feeling Young Now?*, no effects or significant enhancements were made to the sound of their acoustic instruments and voices.⁵⁵ Beyond instrumentation, the band manipulates sound in a way that reinforces their progressive reception, maintaining connections to the sound of bluegrass and pushing well beyond its boundaries.

The Glasgow Incident

Chris Thile's stated intentions with his 40-minute string quintet, "The Blind Leaving the Blind" were to fuse the "folk" and the "formal."⁵⁶ Along with "folk" and "formal," the band has also described the piece using other noteworthy terminology. First, they sometimes use the language of a uniting of "informal" and "formal," where informal translates as not written down and formal as completely written out; second, they describe the "Blind Leaving the Blind" as a suite for bluegrass instruments; and third, they call the piece a song in four movements. "Suite for bluegrass instruments" places the emphasis on the classical designation "suite" while "song in four movements" places the emphasis on song. Using all of these interchangeably has a

⁵⁵ Genevieve Koski, "Punch Brothers: Who's Feeling Young Now," *A.V. Club* (14 February 2012), Accessed 26 June 2014. <http://www.avclub.com/review/punch-brothers-emwhos-feeling-young-nowem-69187>.

⁵⁶ *How to Grow a Band*, 10:08.

neutralizing effect in which the language employed attempts to create the fusion that is the stated purpose of the music.

All this linguistic posturing highlights one of the vital components of genre creation and reception: the establishment of expectations by pre-aural framing, and the fulfillment or frustration of expectations through the sound itself. A scene from the documentary *How to Grow a Band* reveals just how much Thile and Punch Brothers are aware of how audience expectations of genre affect their reception. Before one of the early performances of “The Blind Leaving the Blind” at the Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow, Scotland, we see and hear one side of a phone conversation between Thile and one of the promoters involved in marketing the show:

Thile: It says, ‘Tonight! Bluegrass! Punch Brothers!’ and then, like, on their program it says, ‘Hot Bluegrass Show!’

(Silence)

Thile: If they feel they absolutely need to say ‘bluegrass’ then I would have to say put ‘progressive’ or ‘contemporary’ bluegrass.

(Silence)

Thile: (laughs) Yes, not ‘Hot Bluegrass!’ What does that make you think of?

(Silence)

Thile: Exactly. Rhonda Vincent and the Rage. Mountain Heart. Exactly. Okay? Now think of a band that plays the same instrument (sic) that couldn’t be less like any of those bands I mentioned. Who comes to mind?

(Silence)

Thile: Yea. Good! Excellent. Um, can the promoter be called right now?

(Silence)

Thile: I don’t like Chambergrass either but I’m just saying, anything that would give them a hint, cause right now, seriously, it says hot bluegrass show. Okay? And we’re going to play a forty-minute string quintet. Awesome!⁵⁷

Thile’s exhorting the promoter to “give them a hint” of what they are about to hear foreshadows what happens at the show and underlines the importance of the one-word qualifiers often attached to genre designations. The documentary later depicts the audience during the show. Initially they seem intrigued by the band’s sound, but after the challenging Second Movement, where any sense of typical bluegrass melody, harmony, and rhythm are

⁵⁷ Ibid., 14:35-15:44.

undermined, the audience becomes restless. A man yells from the back of the room, “Do ya know any good tunes?” to which the audience chuckles. Thile responds, “Uh...Well there’ll be some bluegrass right at the end.”⁵⁸ This scene makes it clear that at least for some audience members, the expectations established by the promotional material were not being fulfilled by the 40-minute string quintet. If “hot” had been replaced with “progressive” or “contemporary” as Thile suggested, it may have made a difference in audience expectation, perhaps preventing the heckling episode. This simple act of framing prepares the listener to understand the sound in a specific way, rather than developing an expectation based on a genre label (hot bluegrass) only to be disappointed by the performed sound because of its failure to live up to that expectation.⁵⁹

A review of the Glasgow concert cited the venue, The Old Fruitmarket, as a contributing factor in the audience’s reception of the punch Brothers:

The Fruitmarket is not the place for chamber bluegrass, as Chris Thile and his superb quintet discovered...The Fruitmarket is no place for music of any subtlety at the best of times, with its persistent chatter and air-conditioning noise, but when Thile and company boldly embarked on what was effectively a four-movement string quintet for bluegrass ensemble, some attention spans were clearly taxed and there was the odd catcall from those Thile wryly referred to as ‘the bluegrass police’—pity, because this was intriguing and at times very beautiful music, with its subtly shifting moods and tempi.⁶⁰

An examination of the venue suggests, however, that the Fruitmarket fits neatly with Punch Brothers’ aesthetic. It is a restored, Victorian-era market, dripping with nostalgia and evocative of a time gone by, yet outfitted with the latest in technology to be a modern performing arts venue. Along with the Celtic Connections festival, The Old Fruitmarket hosts classical performances of composers such as Stravinsky and Stockhausen alongside the annual

⁵⁸ Ibid., 17:54-19:42.

⁵⁹ I use “framing” here to describe the mediation of presentation that establishes an audience’s expectations and influences their reception and interpretation of a performance. Framing devices can include everything from the publicity materials and the décor of the venue and dress of the musicians at a performance, to the exact wording and tone of voice of on stage speech, and much more. Scholars have explored this concept with regard to semiotics and musical communication; within the field of Peircean semiotics in particular, framing is a site for close analysis of how meaning is created and managed. For example, see Thomas Turino, “Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music,” *Ethnomusicology* 43 no. 2 (1999), 221-255.

⁶⁰ Jim Gilchrist, “Packing a Punch.” *The Scotsman* (21 January 2008). <http://www.scotsman.com/news/reviews-packing-a-punch-1-1074814>.

Celtic Fiddler's Convention, and even caters to fusion acts like Treacherous Orchestra, whose artistic goals and descriptions (a "supergroup that defies definition," "an undefinable collective force fusing people, concepts, styles and influences") sound eerily similar to those of Punch Brothers in 2008.⁶¹ The reviewer's comments focus more on the people who inhabited the space than the building itself or its aesthetic bent. Because the venue itself seems uniquely tailored to Punch Brother's brand of "elevated folk music," the expectations established by the promotional material are further implicated. Had the promotional materials been different, an audience with different expectations may have filled the Old Fruitmarket, and the disappointment may have been avoided.

The reaction to this performance reveals the hypersensitivity with which Thile and the Punch Brothers as well as many bluegrass fans approach the music with regard to genre. As much as the band portends the increasing obsolescence of genre, it is clearly something through which they must operate and with which their fans and critics continually use to evaluate their work.

Sound(s) of the Punch Brothers

The Punch Brothers cultivate a narrative that begins within bluegrass, moves to fuse bluegrass and classical music, then moves beyond genre altogether. However, this narrative can be partially deconstructed to reveal their continued engagement with bluegrass by comparing analyses of *The Blind Leaving the Blind*, recorded in the "fusion" stage, and "Down Along the Dixie Line" recorded after the band had supposedly ceased relying on genre frameworks. The latter song contains significantly more bluegrass markers than the former, suggesting that the genre of bluegrass continues to play a significant role in the band's sound and reception.

The first recorded sounds of the band appeared on *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground* in 2006. Above, I mentioned the album's "patchwork quilt" approach, which features not only originals (both songs and instrumentals), but also covers from disparate sources

⁶¹ Treacherous Orchestra, "About." Accessed June 24, 2014, <http://www.treacherousorchestra.com/about/>.

outside bluegrass.⁶² This approach allowed the band to prove that they had the chops to play bluegrass but also satisfied fans of a more eclectic musical palette. Analysis of tracks like “Brakeman’s Blues” reveals the enormous debt to traditional bluegrass found on *How to Grow a Woman from the Ground*.⁶³ The album begins and ends with bluegrass instrumentals, both of which contain traditional and progressive elements. For the most part, however, Thile stayed true to stated intentions on this album. Despite its progressive elements, it clearly sounds like a bluegrass album.

After *How to Grow a Woman*, the band members officially formed and released *Punch*, featuring Thile’s purported landing point between “folk and formal” music, “The Blind Leaving the Blind.” The piece is constructed in four movements and contains about seventy percent planned, and thirty percent improvised music.⁶⁴ One striking aesthetic difference in terms of the average bluegrass fan’s listening practice would be the formal structure of the movements. There are no verse-chorus constructions, the most common form in bluegrass. The regularity of the recurring tune of successive verses and the repetition of a catchy chorus is gone. The first movement is in a large two-part form:

Part I	Part II
Intro (0:00)	B (8:00)
A (1:52)	C (8:42)
A (2:38)	Interlude/Solo (9:08)
Interlude (3:20)	C (10:11)
A (5:46)	Playout (10:45)
A (6:16)	
Interlude (7:03)	

Figure 7: “First Movement” Form, *The Blind Leaving the Blind*

⁶² See p.6

⁶³ See pp. 18-22.

⁶⁴ Brance, “Interview: Chris Thile and Chris Eldridge,” <http://bluegrasstoday.com/interview-chris-thile-chris-eldridge/>.

The length of the movements might also be challenging for the average bluegrass fan. One would be hard-pressed to find a bluegrass tune over four minutes in length, whereas the shortest movement of *The Blind Leaving the Blind* is 8:38 (“Fourth Movement”) and the longest, 12:13 (“First Movement”).

The formal aspects of *The Blind Leaving the Blind* may cause long-term unease for the average bluegrass fan but the more immediate and guttural reactions are most likely responses to the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic qualities of the music. Harmonically, the piece is constantly referencing bluegrass but also constantly challenging its boundaries. The introduction to the “First Movement,” for instance, is built around the C# minor pentatonic scale. Although most of the harmonic changes are also determined by the pentatonic scale, the changes happen much more frequently and unpredictably than in traditional bluegrass. The level of chromaticism the band introduces can even be disorienting to the classical music listener not accustomed to post-romantic harmony. Below are the two themes from which most of the “Second Movement” is generated. Theme 1 is meandering and unstable, and forms a sort of fugal subject for the first two minutes of the movement as the different instruments enter with the theme at different pitch levels.



Figure 8: Theme 1 from “Second Movement”

Theme 2 is a jagged, angry sounding gesture that returns in various incarnations as the movement.



Figure 9: Theme 2 from “Second Movement” (1:50)

Both themes are harmonized quite dissonantly at various points in the instrumental sections of the movement. The resonances with 20th century classical composition are quite strong. It is by far the most challenging music in the work and is the point at which the band lost the audience at the Old Fruitmarket.

Another frustrating element of *The Blind Leaving the Blind* for the traditional bluegrass listener is the rhythm. There is rarely a moment in bluegrass when the bass is not playing a strong downbeat and the band not playing a groove that includes a strongly voiced backbeat. There are brief moments of that construction in *The Blind Leaving the Blind*, but they quickly dissipate into more opaquely defined rhythmic motion. For 40 minutes, the listener experiences a series of rhythmic false starts, which creates a feeling of unresolved suspense. This can be uncomfortable for the average listener but faithfully expresses the subject matter of the piece, which is about the disintegration of Thile’s marriage. A clear instance of this comes in the “Third Movement” starting at 1:38. The band establishes a clear bluegrass groove as described above, then breaks it apart with a gradual *ritardando*, uneven subdivisions, and the jarring entrance of melodic material from a different part of the movement in the “wrong” key. This is one example of many. Throughout the 40-minute work, the band continually sets up bluegrass-like grooves,

and then deconstructs them in unexpected ways, leaving listeners with nothing like the steady, driving groove typically associated with bluegrass to anchor them.

The synthesis of art-music-derived elements with bluegrass evident in *The Blind Leaving the Blind* is consistent with the band's stated intentions with regard to genre. After this album, the band began to grow resistant to any attempts to define their music in terms of genre, often balking at the "limitations" such labels impose.⁶⁵ This, however, does not mean that the band ceased interacting aurally with bluegrass genre frameworks. In fact, on several of the band's most recent tracks, their music sounds more aligned with bluegrass than ever before.

As the Punch Brothers' rhetoric has begun to resist genre more and more, their sound often returns to bluegrass. This contradiction between rhetoric and sound is where their cultural power lies. They cannot bend bluegrass if they are not a bluegrass band and so they must both maintain strong ties to bluegrass while also working to blur the lines and sustain credibility as progressive. Analysis of "Down Along the Dixie Line" from the band's most recent EP *Ahoy!* suggests that the band continues to interact with bluegrass as a genre through sound.

"Down Along the Dixie Line" is a cover of Gillian Welch's much more relaxed original from the 2011 album, *The Harrow and the Harvest*. The Punch Brothers' transformation of the song engages yet again with a process that requires an intimate knowledge of bluegrass style in order to complete. The differences between the two versions are so jarring that the song almost ceases to be recognizable. Punch Brothers' bluegrass version is almost 100 beats per minute faster than Welch's singer-songwriter version, with a dizzying web of mandolin, banjo, guitar, and fiddle licks contributing to its sound. The highly syncopated, embellished melody in Thile's mandolin in combination with Pikelny's rapid-fire, three-finger banjo picking begin the track, followed quickly by the entrance of the guitar and bass, and finally the fiddle. Before the verse begins, the band establishes a fairly standard, energetic bluegrass groove with the bass thumping on one and three and a strong backbeat emphasized in guitar and mandolin. The

⁶⁵ See quote on p.1

harmonies in the chorus feature the characteristic high fourth in between the tenor parts and are idiosyncratically bluegrass.

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Down Along the Dixie Line". It consists of two systems of three staves each. The first system includes Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Baritone parts. The second system includes T 1, T 2, and B parts. The music is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The lyrics are: "Can't you hear those dri-vers wail, Can't you see those bright rails shine, Gon-na catch that fire-ball man, Leave the North-land far be - hind." The score shows a characteristic high fourth interval between the tenor parts.

Figure 10: “Down Along the Dixie Line” Chorus

Despite a slightly atypical introduction where each instrument enters in sequence rather than at once, “Down Along the Dixie Line” follows a conventional verse-chorus form with and instrumental solo after the first chorus, and an instrumental verse after the second chorus leading back into the final chorus. The melody, the rhythm, and the harmony all sound familiar to traditional bluegrass. “Down Along the Dixie Line” provides us a glimpse into the fact that while this recording was released well after the Punch Brothers began to verbally resist their association with bluegrass. Thile’s “of course it’s not bluegrass” remark becomes quite difficult

to accept at face value when the band continues to release tracks that fit comfortably within that mold aurally.⁶⁶

Another approach to covers

While “Down Along the Dixie Line” highlights the process of transforming a song from another genre or style into a bluegrass song, some of the band’s cover songs perform very different musical functions. Rather than displaying insider knowledge of bluegrass, many of the band’s cover song choices contribute to a sound world that is often at odds with traditional bluegrass in many ways but certainly in harmony with the ideals of progressive bluegrass and the band’s push for an alternative or resistant pedigree.

Two approaches exist within the collection of recorded covers by the Punch Brothers. The first is the type of cover previously discussed, represented by “Brakeman’s Blues” and “Down Along the Dixie Line,” that transforms a song from another genre by altering its musical materials to strongly signify bluegrass. The opposite pole, represented by the band’s cover of Radiohead’s “Kid A,” merely reorchestrates the song for the 5-piece bluegrass ensemble, maintaining most if not all of the song’s other generic markers. While the instrumentation itself still strongly evokes the sound world of bluegrass, the other elements of the songs are often difficult to reconcile with the genre. These conflicting signals, along with the web of associations that come along with the original recording artist of the song, reinforce the Punch Brothers resistant approach to the genre of bluegrass.

In their version of “Kid A,” the Punch Brothers transfer Radiohead’s atmospheric song to acoustic instruments, in effect borrowing from the indie ethos of the original while exploring the only element suggesting any ties to bluegrass: the sound of the instruments themselves. The British indie/progressive/art rock outfit, Radiohead, is known for several major directional changes in the band’s life. In a narrative similar to the Punch Brothers, the band gained popularity in the early 1990s with a more melodic response to grunge bands such as Nirvana

⁶⁶ Berkowitz, 37.

with their single “Creep.” In their following albums, however, they explored varying soundscapes. Many critics pinpoint this exploration as a move towards “more ambitious and sophisticated” music.⁶⁷ “Kid A” is the title track on a 2000 release that moved into a more electronically-based avant-garde space. Only “connoisseurs” of Radiohead—which is to say “the connoisseurs of connoisseurs”—identified with “Kid A,” garnering it a reputation as the band’s most misunderstood, and therefore most “artistic,” album.⁶⁸ Chris Thile often cites Radiohead as an important musical influence for him and the selection of this track to cover works on multiple levels to solidify the progressive reputation of Thile and the Punch Brothers.

The Punch Brothers’ “Kid A” is an exploration of sound on acoustic instruments. Each element of the largely electronic original had to be recreated with one of the five acoustic instruments of the bluegrass ensemble. The irony of the cover is that the one thing still anchoring the band in the bluegrass tradition—the timbre of the instruments themselves—is the element that is on display in a cover that pushes the boundaries on all fronts. Alongside the typical techniques of the instruments, “Kid A” features several extended playing techniques that take the timbres of the traditional bluegrass ensemble in unfamiliar directions. The ghostly violin slide that opens the song mimics a similar noise produced electronically on the Radiohead version. Throughout the song, the guitar experiments with harmonics and non-traditional picking techniques. The mandolin mostly provides a percussive, muted, chop that assumes the role of Radiohead’s electronic drum machine. The bass is bowed rather than plucked, and replaces Thom Yorke’s highly-effected vocals. The banjo and violin produce several synthesizer and keyboard sounds heard on Radiohead’s version. Aside from instrumentation, the cover stays very true to the original in musical materials. The notes and rhythms are reproduced directly, making the track quite far melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically from anything that fans

⁶⁷ David Buckley, “Radiohead.” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/52010>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

would consider “bluegrass.” The sound of “Kid A” again demonstrates the band’s virtuosity with their instruments, but this time in service to song that bolsters their progressive, alternative, and “artistic” credentials, rather than their knowledge of the conventions of bluegrass.

Chapter 3: Genre and Gender

*'Cause there's somethin' so feminine about a mandolin
The way that they feel, the way that they ring
Just to see slender fingers, movin' so quickly
Made this boy want to sing*

- Jimmy Buffett, "Something So Feminine About a Mandolin," *Havanna Daydreaming* (1975)

The opening scene in Mark Meatto's documentary about the Punch Brothers features Thile performing a mandolin solo that encapsulates his performance of physical masculinity.⁶⁹ The camera tries to zoom in on his head but his head continually darts in and out of frame, highlighting how much he is moving his upper body as he plays. When you can catch a glimpse of his face, it is clear that it is contorted and ever changing, responding to the improvisation and communicating concentration, agitation, and perhaps even (sexual?) ecstasy.⁷⁰ As the solo progresses, it gets more and more aggressive and dissonant and Thile's movements become jerkier. The tension builds to a palpable level before Thile relaxes back into the song proper and the scene cuts away. His on-stage writhing recalls the hyper-sexualized performance of rock musicians such as Jimi Hendrix and Freddie Mercury, as well as the movements of classical musicians generally accepted as a part of the emotional interpretation of the music. Thile's highly physical performance style makes the viewer-listener acutely aware of his embodiment and highlights a particular construction of masculinity as important in his reception.

Masculinity has always occupied a prominent and peculiar place in bluegrass. L. Mayne Smith included "from four to seven *male* musicians" in a list of characteristics of bluegrass bands in the first piece of academic writing published about the genre, specifying "male" as a

⁶⁹ *How to Grow a Band*. 0:45-2:36.

⁷⁰ Philip Auslander discusses "guitar face" in his article, "Musical Personae" *TDR* 50 (Spring 2006), 112.

fundamental identifier of the genre's musicians.⁷¹ Scholars such as Murphy Henry have begun the important task of challenging Smith's assertion of male homogeneity in bluegrass by re-narrating the genre's history to include the women who have played a vital role in the music's production and dissemination.⁷² However, because bluegrass has been a perceived "boys club" for much of its history, values and characteristics of normative masculinity have been deeply intertwined in the ways fans and performers have defined it.

Deepening this assumption of masculine values is bluegrass's reception as an "artistic" and "rootsy" music, and therefore anti-popular, after its appropriation by the folk revival. Feminist scholar Christine Battersby illustrates the relegation of popular art forms to the realm of the "feminine" using the attempted isolation of novel-writing from "high art" by its supposed feminine qualities.⁷³ Bluegrass, through its reception as "art" rather than popular culture, takes on the weight of gendered interpretation of "high" and "low" cultural production. As we will see below, the narrative of the mandolin from instrument used in popular (and feminized) salon music to the lead instrument in the anti-popular genre of bluegrass, also reinforces this reception.

Examining Chris Thile's performance of gender demonstrates how he both fits into the constructions of masculinity within bluegrass and resists them, and reveals another layer of his engagement with the genre. His gendered performance of genre is two-pronged: he embodies the powerful, commanding frontman reminiscent of Bill Monroe and the sensitive, subtle Bach interpreter. These two modes of gendered performance ultimately come together to contribute to the reception of Thile as a musical genius and heir of Monroe's legacy of male creativity.

⁷¹ L. Mayne Smith, "An Introduction to Bluegrass," In *The Bluegrass Reader*, ed. Thomas Goldsmith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁷² Murphy Henry, *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

⁷³ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), 40.

Making the Mandolin Masculine

Before it made its way into rural song traditions in the 20th century, the mandolin had become an instrument coded as feminine in American culture. The instrument fell out of use in Western classical orchestras in Europe and America by the end of the eighteenth century and in the second half of the nineteenth century was primarily a parlor instrument whose repertoire consisted of light salon music and arrangements of popular opera arias.⁷⁴ In the 1890s in the United States, the instrument experienced a resurgence in popularity. It became a middle-class women's instrument of choice for playing in social situations.⁷⁵ In *Mandolins in the United States since 1880*, folklorist Scott Hambley reproduces several images from periodicals around the turn of the 20th century that depict young women with mandolins, including an image from the periodical *The Cadenza* that shows a woman entertaining a young man by playing mandolin while they drift along in a boat. This scene demonstrates the instrument's importance in middle-class courting rituals at the time. Hambley also gives us the cover of a music publication with the title "Sentimental Songs for the Lady's Songster," a collection which ties the often saccharine repertoire associated with the mandolin to femininity.⁷⁶ The instrument's reputation made it "fit for the hands of a summer girl" as another article in *The Cadenza* remarked. This assertion references both the physical size of the instrument itself and the perceived "delicacy" of its sound. Jimmy Buffet's feminizing of the mandolin from the song, "Something So Feminine about a Mandolin" quoted at the beginning of this chapter may also be due to the instrument's slowness, given the proximity of the "feel" of the mandolin and the "slender" fingers of the woman playing it in his description.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ James Tyler and Paul Sparks. "Mandolin." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. Oxford University Press, accessed 4 April 2014, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/46239>.

⁷⁵ Scott Hambley, *Mandolins in the United States Since 1880* (University of Pennsylvania, diss., 1977), 39.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁷ Jimmy Buffett, "Something So Feminine About a Mandolin," *Havana Daydreamin'*, Jimmy Buffett, ABC Dunhill, MP3, 1975.

Examples like this one show writers and advertisers using verbiage that is clearly marked as feminine to describe the sound of the mandolin. Mandolins were said to “produce a *soft* and *desirable* music, which makes a *pretty effect*.”⁷⁸ The role of the mandolin, not just as a “woman’s” instrument but also as an instrument on which to perform sentimental popular music, led to its frequent disparagement as inferior to other instruments. Many conflated their feelings for the commonly played repertoire of the mandolin with the instrument itself, naming it “less artistically valuable, being now in use for the most part by people who wish to play simple music without much trouble.”⁷⁹

It was into this atmosphere that early bluegrass performers such as Bill Monroe entered with their mandolins. Monroe recounts that as the youngest of his siblings, he was stuck with his third choice for an instrument behind fiddle and guitar: “There was three of us brothers, and one of them—he was the oldest one—he wanted to play the fiddle. I wanted to play the fiddle but he played the fiddle. And Charley, he wanted to play the guitar. So I was left the taterbug mandolin player.”⁸⁰ Biographers often repeat an anecdote about Monroe’s early experiences with the mandolin in which his older brothers would only allow Bill to play with four strings, rather than the typical eight, further exaggerating the “weak” sound of the instrument. At this time, tracing the melody with tremolo technique and strumming the chord progression in rhythm were the accepted playing methods on the mandolin.⁸¹ Monroe, unsatisfied with the instrument’s secondary function, began developing his own playing style. “When I started to play the mandolin,” Monroe recalled, “I wanted to be sure that I didn’t play like nobody else,

⁷⁸ Hambley, 36.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 14.

⁸⁰ Bare, Bobby. Interview with Bill Monroe. *Bobby Bare and Friends*. Accessed on 10 June 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZal2svJKyM>. Repeated in Neil V. Rosenberg and Charles K. Wolfe, *The Music of Bill Monroe* (Urbana: University of Press, 2007), 3.

⁸¹ Tyler and Sparks.

and I was going to have a style of my own with the mandolin.”⁸² Cantwell describes in depth Monroe’s playing and is representative of the way most speak and write about his style:

Their [Monroe Brothers] pace, too, was steady and swift, often conscientiously accelerated. Coupled to that light dancing tempo, or perhaps demanded by it, was the unique feature of the duet, Bill’s athletic mandolin playing. Other mandolin players had confined themselves to single-noting...Bill’s playing was somehow more textured and resonant, more dynamic...certainly more inventive and plastic rhythmically than any hillbilly instrument save the fiddle. The older mandolin technique was one largely dictated by the physical properties of the instrument: the mandolin is a tiny fretted instrument with a short neck and double strings...The shallow, metallic, and sometime toylike sound characteristic of the mandolin, a tone which had confined the expressiveness of the instrument and restricted it to the background, arises from the difficulty of striking the double string accurately and with enough force to arouse the tones of which the string is capable. This is the problem Monroe solved by abandoning the effort to produce discrete, pure tones. Monroe’s tones are not discrete; they come at us like meteors trailing the smoke and flames of a multitude of sounds compounded of tones, overtones, and sheer noise.⁸³

Cantwell goes on to say that Monroe’s style was “far more aggressive and forceful than anything that had been heard before in country music.”⁸⁴ Cantwell casts Monroe’s mandolin playing as a conquering of the physical qualities of the instrument itself with a more aggressive, hard-driving style. In this case, the physical properties of the mandolin itself become a stand-in for the instrument’s “femininity;” it is small, delicate, “pretty” instrument that must be infused with a jolt of testosterone in order to achieve its “full potential” as the lead instrument in a male-dominated space.

This narrative of Monroe creating a “masculine” image for the “feminized” mandolin is perpetuated in the literature about bluegrass. Mark Humphry writes,

Did he [Monroe] harbor some fear that the mandolin, a kid’s instrument, even a girl’s, was not fit for the image he would project as an adult bandleader? That Monroe may once have felt this is supremely ironic, given the way in which he and the mandolin are welded in public consciousness. That he was ‘the baby of the family,’ given an instrument no one much valued may account in part for the way in which he turned this instrument

⁸² James Rooney, “Bossman Bill Monroe,” in *The Bluegrass Reader*, 41.

⁸³ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 49-50.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

into an aggressive alter ego. He would create a ferocious and hell-bent man's music on an instrument disparaged as a kid's or a woman's.⁸⁵

In a 2013 review of Thile's most recent solo album, Alec Wilkinson explicitly connects Thile to the lineage of Monroe's perceived masculinization of the mandolin:

No one who saw the father of bluegrass, Bill Monroe, play the mandolin would regard the instrument as comic. Monroe, who died, at eighty-five, in 1996, was a fierce, almost scary man. He played with a virtuosity, a vehemence, and an originality that was distinctive among musicians of any genre in the twentieth century. He kept his strings high off the fretboard so that he got a bright, harsh sound, and he developed a spare, stuttery phrasing. He had big, strong hands, and he played with great confidence, like he'd fight you if you didn't agree with him. Playing string-band music and fiddle tunes aggressively, he brought a form into being, something like the way musicians in New Orleans transformed horn and keyboard music. When people use the phrase "the high lonesome sound," they are referring to bluegrass the way Monroe established it—a man singing from the soul in a tenor voice.⁸⁶

Wilkinson's use of the term "originality" is the key here. He is perpetuating the aura of masculine creativity that exists around Bill Monroe and by extension the entire genre of bluegrass. Wilkinson explicitly connects this "originality" with Monroe's virtuosity on the instrument, the "harsh" sound achieved by an instrument with high action, the size of his hands, the "aggressive" manner in which he played fiddle tunes. Even the high tenor sound—a vocal timbre that could potentially be received as feminine for its proximity to the female vocal range—is made masculine in Wilkinson's estimation because of its connection with the "authentic" expression of the lonesome mountain personality, one that is "fierce" and "confident."

Interpretations like this become the basis for discourses of empowerment and disempowerment that directly connect the language about aggression, power, and originality with the gender of the performer. A review of a recent Nickel Creek concert illustrates the gendered undertones of different readings of Chris Thile and Sara Watkins:

⁸⁵ Mark Humphry, "Monroe and the Mandolin: The Instrument Chooses its Master," *The Essential Bill Monroe and His Blue Grass Boys, 1945-1949*. Liner notes. Columbia Country Classics, 1992.

⁸⁶ Alec Wilkinson, "Chris Thile's Bach Recording," *The New Yorker* (19 Sep. 2013), Accessed 26 June 2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2013/09/chris-thiles-bach.html>.

All three original members shared the spotlight and the lead vocal equally and graciously, but this was clearly Thile's show. He took and held center stage throughout the set, dancing, stomping and clowning with the Watkinses and bassist Mark Schatz, his rock 'n' roll posturing almost enough to make mandolin look cool.

Sara Watkins' soaring voice gives the ballads their airy character. Her punky-librarian look is immediately endearing, and her body soars with her solos - sometimes on a single toe with one leg extended behind her, birdlike. She put down the fiddle in favor of a ukulele and won the crowd with the melancholy "Anthony," a lovelorn ballad, intimately humorous at her own expense.⁸⁷

Reviewer Joshua Zucker describes Thile's performance using language of control ("took," "held," "this was clearly Thile's show") and active verbs ("dancing," "stomping," "posturing") that suggest command of one's physicality while depicting Sara Watkins as a mere body, often off-balance, and describing her "endearing" look, her "airy" voice, and her self-deprecating humor. The juxtaposition is striking. Thile is given all the authority as a musician and a performer while Watkins is interpreted as an accessory to his performance—a nice-looking songbird with little musical depth or heft. Zucker's interpretation of Watkins falls in line with a long-standing bias that Christine Battersby traces back to Renoir: that a woman is confined by her "status as a beautiful object" to the role of "artistic display rather than artistic invention."⁸⁸

The authority given Thile (and denied Watkins) as an artist extends to the realm of highest distinction for the creative artist—genius. His masculine posturing, both on stage through his playing style and physicality, as well as off-stage through his interactions with the media and his creative control of the bands in which he plays, evokes Monroe's struggle to masculinize the mandolin and therefore engages ever deeper with bluegrass. Through his reception as genius, Thile's role as heir to Monroe's legacy is reinforced and the second mode of his gendered performance, that of sensitive Bach interpreter, is given a framework through which to be read as a nuancing of genius, rather than a radical departure from genre.

⁸⁷ Joshua Zucker, "Nickel Creek Review: Band Pushes Bluegrass Limits." *SFGate* (20 May 2014). Accessed 13 June 2014, <http://www.sfgate.com/music/article/Nickel-Creek-review-Band-pushes-bluegrass-limits-5493165.php#photo-6329297>.

⁸⁸ Battersby, 39.

Thile as “Genius”

In 2012, Chris Thile joined the ranks of an elite group of musicians—those who have been awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. The MacArthur Fellowship, affectionately and perhaps more commonly referred to as the MacArthur “Genius Grant,” comes with a \$500,000 stipend, no strings attached. The mission statement of the MacArthur Fellowship states that the program “awards unrestricted fellowships to talented individuals who have shown extraordinary originality and dedication in their creative pursuits and a marked capacity for self-direction.”⁸⁹ This language of originality, creativity, and independence is repeated in many of the fellows’ biographies on the website and in the discourse surrounding the people who have won the award. Thile’s bio on the MacArthur Foundation’s website reads,

Chris Thile is a young mandolin virtuoso and composer whose lyrical fusion of traditional bluegrass with elements from a range of other musical traditions is giving rise to a new genre of contemporary music. With a broad outlook that encompasses progressive bluegrass, classical, rock, and jazz, Thile is transcending the borders of conventionally circumscribed genres in compositions for his own ensembles and frequent cross-genre collaborations.⁹⁰

Below is a sampling of other musician’s bios that reinforce similar ideas about the nature of those who win the award (emphasis mine):

Regina Carter (Class of 2006): “*Marrying* conservatory training with a broad range of *eclectic* influences to *invent* a modern repertoire for the violin in contemporary and improvisational music.”

Corey Harris (Class of 2007): “leading a revival of Mississippi Delta blues by *infusing traditional styles with influences* from jazz, reggae gospel, and African and Caribbean folk styles .”

Vijay Iyer (Class of 2013): “*forging a new conception* of the practice of American music in compositions for his ensembles, *cross-disciplinary collaborations*, and scholarly work.”

Leila Josefowicz (Class of 2008): “*broadening* the instrument’s repertoire and captivating audiences through her *juxtaposition of the avant-garde and eclectic with the more traditional*.”

⁸⁹ “About the MacArthur Fellows Program,” Accessed 31 March 2014. <http://www.macfound.org/pages/about-macarthur-fellows-program/>.

⁹⁰ “MacArthur Fellows Program: Chris Thile,” Accessed 1 April 2014. <http://www.macfound.org/fellows/879/>.

Walter Kitundu (Class of 2008): “*inventing instruments inspired by experimental and traditional musical forms to produce electro-acoustic works that navigate the boundary between live and recorded performance.*”

Edgar Meyer (Class of 2002): “*fusing classical and bluegrass styles to create an expansive repertoire of American music.*”

Jason Moran (Class of 2010): “*blending a variety of musical styles in genre-crossing performances that expand the boundaries of jazz expression.*”

Miguel Zenon (Class of 2008): “*drawing from a variety of jazz idioms and the indigenous music of his native Puerto Rico to create a new language of complex, yet accessible sounds that overflow with emotion.*”

John Zorn (Class of 2006): “*creating inventive music that explores the spaces between and among genres, defying convention and redefining the experimental possibilities of musical performance.*”⁹¹

Strong emphases on creativity, novelty, eclecticism, and resistance to convention surface as common denominators within the descriptions of many of the fellows. These ideals are connected by this discourse to genre bending and to the fusing of “high” and “low,” other actions for which Thile and the Punch Brothers are valued by fans.

This discourse is gendered, along with being full of what Janet Levy unmask as “covert and casual values.”⁹² It is only in our post-Romantic context that “originality” and “novelty” are accepted uncritically as foundational values. These covert values also become problematic when gender concerns are considered. While originality, creativity, and self-direction are not inherently gendered concepts, they are historically and culturally gendered masculine, particularly when it comes to the production of art. This gendered history is borne out in the demographics of the MacArthur Fellowship recipients. Of the forty MacArthur Fellowships that have gone to musicians, only eight have gone to women. This skewed proportion is not unique to the Fellowship’s music category, but music is one of the categories more clearly biased by gender, most likely because of engrained stereotypes of the “creative genius” as a masculine figure. It is difficult to ignore connections between the language found in the program’s mission

⁹¹ “MacArthur Fellows Program: Music,” Accessed 1 April 2014.
<http://www.macfound.org/fellows/search/?area=music>

⁹² Janet Levy, “Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings About Music” *The Journal of Musicology* 5 (1987), 3-27.

statement and scattered throughout the musicians' bios with the nickname that has affectionately stuck with the Fellowship: the "Genius Grant."

The concept of genius has a murky and problematic history entangled with gender and sexuality. Except for small pockets within academia, the ideals of what constitutes "genius" in art have not only survived, but have thrived, and are pervasive and unquestioned by most who encounter the discourse in commonplace interactions about art or music. Feminist scholars such as Christine Battersby have unmasked the deeply problematic and gendered rhetoric of genius throughout history and pinpointed what she cites as the historical moment at which what constituted genius underwent a paradigm shift—the Romantic Era. Battersby writes:

Long before I decided to study the Romantics as a graduate student, I had acquired their admiration for 'originality' and 'creativity'. Romanticism valued artists for their capacity to express their own feelings and imaginings in their works. Authenticity and sincerity became the most important kinds of truth: more important by far than faithfully mirroring Nature, Beauty or Goodness. The originality of the art-work was not seen as a reflection of the external world, but of the mind and the personality that brought that work into existence. Consequently, the uniqueness and individuality of the artist's own character also became aesthetically significant. From Byron and William Blake to Nietzsche and Van Gogh, the typical genius was atypical: in one way or another, an Outsider, misunderstood by society and at odds with it. The history of art was represented as the history of the achievements of isolated individuals at war with the Establishment. But Romanticism always represented that extreme form of individualism in terms of male social roles and male power."⁹³

The resonances here with the rhetoric surrounding Thile's compositions, performance, and virtuosity are loud. His challenges to traditional bluegrass contribute to his reception as the misunderstood Outsider, whose "resistance to genre" is attributed to his originality and creativity, and whose performative eccentricities are explained as a part of his expression of genius. Fan reviews of the band's album *Punch* on iTunes reveal that this language of genius is deeply embedded in the reception and discourse surrounding their work. One reviewer wrote, "This is true progressive bluegrass. *The Blind Leaving the Blind* is the most unique work, classical or otherwise, that I've ever heard."⁹⁴ Another clearly states, "Chris Thile is a musical

⁹³ Battersby, 13.

⁹⁴ nmguitarplayer, iTunes review of *Punch* (May 30, 2008).

genius, and his bandmates' mastery of their instruments is unquestionable."⁹⁵ One reviewer simply begins, "Pure genius [sic]" followed by "the originality of it all is remarkable."⁹⁶

Thile's most recent solo release forms the basis for his second mode of gendered performance and contributes greatly to his reception as a musical genius. In August of 2013 Thile released a collection of sonatas and partitas for the violin by Johann Sebastian Bach played on the mandolin. The album was simply titled *Bach: Sonatas and Partitas, Vol. 1* and was released on Nonesuch Records. Although it is perhaps the furthest music from bluegrass in Thile's oeuvre, it nonetheless contributes to his reception as a progressive bluegrass artist by solidifying his reputation as a mandolin virtuoso and musical genius.

In his review of the Bach album, Alec Wilkinson extols Thile's interpretations of the Bach works as "stunning" and connects Thile's "impeccable" sense of timing with his experience as a bluegrass musician.⁹⁷ Along with connecting Thile to Monroe's originality, Wilkinson adds another wrinkle to the reception of Thile as a player. Wilkinson notes that Thile's lowered action gives him a "sweeter, less authoritative" sound and that Bach played on Monroe's high action would lose all its subtlety and sound like "turning gears."⁹⁸ Here the metaphors of aggression and confidence are turned on their heads. At times Thile's virtuosic playing contains the aggression and confidence attributed to Monroe's male creativity; but at other times it contains the subtlety and the sweetness for Bach on the mandolin.

Reviews of Thile's Bach album on iTunes are also full of similar language that provides a counterbalance to the discourse about his aggressive authority and command of the stage and his instrument. Reviewers use words like "sweet," "elegant," "intimate," "lush," and "gorgeous" to describe the merits of Thile's Bach performance, often connecting these ideas to their

⁹⁵ I love Punch also the drink, iTunes review of *Punch* (March 12, 2010).

⁹⁶ muhRia, iTunes review of *Punch* (March 25, 2008).

⁹⁷ Wilkinson.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

conceptions of Thile's musical genius.⁹⁹ The album description from the iTunes Editors also finishes with a statement replete with gendered language and a connection to Thile's relationship to genre: "Even with the quickened movements of Sonata No. 1 and Partita No.1—which suit his formidable technical prowess—Thile retains a lighthearted touch. The result is an effortless, airy collection that—like the artist himself—transcends musical conventions."¹⁰⁰

Thile's physical movement on stage as well as his facial expressions and awkward verbal delivery contribute to the eccentric, misunderstood "genius" trope into which his musical persona plays. His jerky movements and on-stage gyrations not only play into his role as heir of Monroe's authoritative playing style, but also reinforce his eccentricity, and therefore heighten his authority as a progressive bluegrass musician and increase the likelihood that his eccentricity will be interpreted as a "side effect" of his artistic genius, rather than mere social awkwardness.

While these two modes of gendered expression I have been discussing may seem contradictory, they work together in Thile's case to contribute to his reception as a musical genius. As Todd Reeser theorizes, "In some cases effeminacy can actually masculinize a man."¹⁰¹ Reeser goes on to explain that displaying qualities of effeminacy often allows a man to deploy gender hegemony more effectively in the end.¹⁰² This, I argue, is what Thile's reception as a sensitive Bach interpreter allows him to do. Monroe-esque male creativity, flavored by the feminized yet sophisticated presence of the Bach album, makes Thile a consummate virtuoso and genius, able to traverse boundaries, yet reinforcing his authority as a creative figure. In Thile's case, both extending Monroe's "aggressive" playing style, while also demonstrating the ability to play in a very delicate, clean, subtle vein, contribute to his reception as genius. Thile

⁹⁹ iTunes reviews of Chris Thile, "Bach: Sonatas and Partitas, Vol. 1," *Nonesuch Records*, CD, August 2, 2013.

¹⁰⁰ iTunes Editors' Notes for Chris Thile, "Bach: Sonatas and Partitas, Vol. 1," *Nonesuch Records*, CD, August 2, 2013.

¹⁰¹ Todd Reeser, *Masculinities in Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 120.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

himself has mentioned that he believes all great music to contain “a balance of masculine and feminine energy.”¹⁰³ Because this feminine energy is read as a part of Thile’s “musical genius,” a label that has been almost exclusively reserved for men since the Romantic era of art, it reinforces his brand of masculinity rather than countering it, and more deeply invests him in the legacy of bluegrass’s most important patriarch, Bill Monroe.

¹⁰³ Robbie Whelan, “A Hipster Goes Baroque” *Wall Street Journal Online* (Aug. 22, 2013). Accessed 4 April 2014. <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324108204579024771230675620?mg=reno64-wsj&url=http%3A%2F%2Fonline.wsj.com%2Farticle%2FSB10001424127887324108204579024771230675620.html>.

Conclusion

The complexities of Punch Brothers' interaction with genre were on display at their performance at the IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) Wide Open Bluegrass Festival in September of 2013. The concert was a masterful manipulation of audience perception of genre in order to both entertain and challenge an audience with a predilection for traditional bluegrass. The Punch Brothers were the penultimate act of the night, billed to precede a collaboration including Sam Bush, Tony Rice, Del McCoury, Béla Fleck, Jerry Douglas, Jason Carter, and Mark Schatz. While several of these players represent some form of progressive bluegrass, the collaboration focused on old favorites and typical bluegrass instrumental interaction. However, in order to hear the living legends of bluegrass (and stay in the seats they had claimed) the fans had to first endure the Punch Brothers' set.

I was interested to see how the band would play to a crowd heavily saturated by industry professionals and people possibly sitting through their performance in order to hear the headliners. Although everyone in the crowd clearly loved bluegrass, they all loved a different view of bluegrass, and, unlike the band's typical concerts, this audience had not necessarily purchased a ticket to hear them play. One could forgive the band if they played a set list full of their more traditionally-bluegrass oriented songs like "Down Along the Dixie Line" and "Brakeman's Blues" to appease the present audience.

There were two very interesting moments in the setlist. The first came as Thile was introducing "Brakeman's Blues" to the audience. He said, "We're going to play a few Bill Monroe tunes for you now," to which the crowd seemed quite excited. On IndyWeek's music blog the following day, reviewer Spencer Griffith took issue with Thile's introduction: "Sure, frontman Chris Thile's poppier ideas occasionally fall flat, and the band's cover of 'Brakeman's Blues'

could make any purist cringe, particularly after Thile introduced the Jimmie Rodgers original as a Bill Monroe tune, though the latter did play it.”¹⁰⁴ Griffith seems unaware that Thile may have possibly named Bill Monroe rather than Rodgers on purpose, given the crowd, as an act of live lineage establishment. Whether Thile was aware of his “mistake” or not, his naming of Monroe, the Father of Bluegrass, as the source of the tunes gave the band added credibility for those that respect Monroe’s influence (that is to say everyone there) and made the “cringe worthy” moments in Brakeman’s Blues acceptable.

The second fascinating moment in the setlist came as the band played “Kid A.” With the Glasgow incident in mind, I thought that the crowd—a complete mix of people more or less invested in the traditional mores of the genre—may react poorly should the band choose to play the cover song. I watched the older gentleman in front of me grow increasingly tense as the song progressed. Towards the end of the song, they began a build up while sustaining an incredibly dissonant chord. The crescendo continued until I thought the man might get up and walk out of the amphitheater. Just as the tension threatened to overwhelm, the band launched directly into one of their more hard-driving, straight-ahead bluegrass numbers. I watched as the man visibly relaxed into his seat, turned to the person sitting next to him, and shook his head in disapproval before turning back towards the stage, seemingly enjoying the remainder of the performance.

The Radiohead cover leading directly into the traditional bluegrass song reveals yet again that the Punch Brothers are thinking about genre and reception. The transition was expertly crafted so as to push the more traditionally-minded audience members to the limit before allowing some release in the following song. As Thile gyrated on the stage, I was reminded of the myriad ways a band like Punch Brothers can interact with genre frameworks and how each such interaction forms meaning for fans and musicians alike. Even a band seemingly resistant to the very thought of genre must navigate its waters, and often does to its own advantage. Despite

¹⁰⁴ Spencer Griffith, “The Magic of Del McCoury, the Splendor of the Mood” *IndyWeek Music*. Accessed April 4, 2014. <http://www.indyweek.com/scan/archives/2013/09/29/the-magic-of-del-mccoury-the-splendor-of-the-mood-spencer-griffith-on-world-of-bluegrass-night-four>.

Thile's frequent denials that genre is an appropriate interpretive tool for his music, close examination of his output reveals that his identity as a musician and as a performer is deeply entangled with the genre of bluegrass and the values and expectations that come along with it. Without the genre framework of bluegrass to resist, the Punch Brothers lose much of their creative edge. Without appealing to both bluegrass and other generic markers, fans do not have the opportunity to evaluate their music as "progressive" with all the cultural and artistic capital attached to such a label. In the end, the resistance of genre is a tool for determining the identity of Thile and the Punch Brothers as musicians that would not be possible without negotiation of the genre that gives such resistance meaning and purpose.

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