GOING BACK TO SUMTER, AGAIN: TRACING A STRINGBAND’S EXPERIENCE IN THE FOLK REVIVAL

Amanda Lynn Stubley

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Folklore Program, Department of American Studies.

Chapel Hill
2013

Approved by:
Bernard L. Herman
Jocelyn R. Neal
Robert S. Cantwell
ABSTRACT

Amanda Lynn Stubley:
Going Back to Sumter, Again: Tracing a Stringband’s Experience of the Folk Revival
(Under the direction of Bernard L. Herman)

Going Back to Sumter, Again examines the ideologies and inner workings of the folk revival, through the experience of a South Carolina stringband. The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina met with partial success in the folk revival of the 1960s. After a brief period of national exposure, their national career faded and they returned to local performances. Through archival research and ethnographic research with musicians, record producers, and family and community members, this thesis traces their career, and identifies the processes by which their music was edited and reframed as “folk.” Beyond the story of a single band, this research illuminates the flows of power within the folk revival, and draws conclusions about the ideological underpinnings of the revival.
This work is dedicated to the “folk” of the world, in the hopes that it encourages all who read it to remember that at home, no one makes “folk music.” They just make music.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although it is posthumous, I thank Edna Poplin-Shivers and Hunter China Poplin; even after hundreds of hours of thinking, listening and writing, your music still quickens my heartbeat! I extend my deepest gratitude to Laura Legrand (Poplin), who generously opened her home to this curious Canadian. I also owe a depth of gratitude to Poplin producers Jack Tottle and Richard Spottswood, who shared deeply of their time and professional stories with me. Without these three kind souls, this project would not have been possible.

To Val Mindel, Margaret Martin, and Mac Benford: your eloquent words and your own passion for the Poplins inspire me. In South Carolina, Ashley Carder’s advice and support was invaluable. In Canada, thank you to Jenny Newton and Marshall Mangan for wisdom and editing. To my North Carolina musical community: your warm reception and support of my entire family for our year in Chapel Hill meant the world to us. Brett and Pan Riggs, Gail Gillespie and Dwight Rogers, your material and musical support touched my heart and lightened my load.

Thank you to my committee members Bernard Herman, Jocelyn Neal and Robert Cantwell. You were literally my dream team. To Bernard Herman, thank you for your support, patience and creativity in working with me in complex circumstances. Thank you to my University of North Carolina department, especially Patricia Sawin and Glenn Hinson, for support and inspiration.

Thank you to my own family, from whom I have inherited my own musical legacy. And finally, my husband Martin Horak and our young sons adventurously agreed to use Martin’s sabbatical year to move to North Carolina for this degree. Jacob and Oliver light up my heart. Without Martin’s incredible support of me, and thoughtful insights into this project, this degree would not have been possible.
I first heard about a band called “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina” in a singing class in West Virginia in 2006. Attending for the first of what would become an annual event, I had traveled from Ontario, Canada to be a student in “Vocal Week” at The Augusta Heritage Center, in Elkins, West Virginia. “Augusta,” is a part of Davis and Elkins College, a small, liberal arts college, located in north-central West Virginia. Each summer for the past 41 years, Augusta has offered a series of short summer courses in what it calls “the heritage arts.” Recently, the college launched a Bachelor’s Degree in Appalachian Studies. Augusta’s mission includes “to encourage wider understanding and practice of artistic expression found in local, regional and ethnic traditional folk cultures.”¹ In 2006, I was enrolled in a five-day class called “Brother Duets and Sisters Too,” taught by singer Valerie Mindel and her daughter Emily Miller. On day three, they taught a song called “The River of Jordan.” The handout indicated that while the song was originally recorded by country musicians the Louvin Brothers, their version was based on the singing of “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina.” That winter, feeling lonesome for my summer adventure, I ordered a CD called The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina, from Smithsonian Folkways.² Being, at that time, primarily a singer of bluegrass music, I was caught off guard by the sound of the recordings that arrived. Rather than the “high, lonesome” sound of trio-


² The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina, Washington, DC: Smithsonian-Folkways, FW 02306, undated, CD.
harmony and fiddle, there were two, mixed-gender, lower-register harmony singers. As well, the two-finger style of banjo was rollicking and emphasized bass notes, recalling minstrel banjo styles. The song choices were also surprising: some, like “The River of Jordan” were reflected bluegrass music themes – love of church and home. However, others were popular commercial songs, taken from the recordings of the 1930s and 40s, like the saucy and direct “I Don’t Want to Get Married,” or “The Preacher and the Bear.” I was impressed by “Eyes Like Cherries” and “Sit At Home,” both original songs with poetic lyrics and stunning accompaniment. Equally surprising were the changes to the fiddle tunes. New melodies, new keys and lyrics set Appalachian dance tunes in the sandy hills of Sumter: “Cindy Gal,” typically played in the key of D, was transposed to G, while “Old Joe Clark” became “Going Back to Sumter,” with a new melody and lyrics.

What initially shocked my ears came to romance them. The new (to me) styles of banjo playing intrigued me, as did the photos of the band on a farm, decked out in hand-made, polka dot dresses and button-down shirts and bib-overalls. The sonic landscape did not take me to the fantastical high mountains of bluegrass iconography, but painted new and less-familiar imagery. The jazz-tinged banjo licks reminded me of ragtime music; the woman’s voice was low and resonant; the finger-style guitar pulsed while delivering its lead notes with grace and light. Taken together, the music on this album opened my mind to a much broader musical world than the bluegrass I had been listening to: on local college radio stations to which I listened and occasionally hosted, and on internet radio shows from powerhouse public radio station WAMU out of Washington, DC. The bluegrass I loved began to sound a little forced to me; I noticed the frequency of songs about cabins on hills, rocky roads and wind in pine trees. I also noticed that singing instructor Valerie Mindel, by
now my friend, had a singing style remarkably similar to Edna Poplin. The more I listened, the more curious I became about this little green CD that had arrived in the mail. Five years later, when I spent a year in North Carolina, I managed to make contact with a great-niece of singer Edna Poplin, who kindly put me in contact with Edna’s daughter Laura.

I came to find out that “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina” was actually siblings China and Edna Poplin, born in 1905 and 1915 respectively. While both Edna and China had passed on, their family received me with warmth and surprise. With their help, and the help of the producers of the Poplins’ two records, I came to understand the “backstory” of this band. Their story has, in turn, contributed to a wealth of understanding of the inner workings of the folk revival.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I ................................................................. ................................................... ............................................... 1
   Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1
   The Folk Revival: Scholarly Lacuna or Folkloristic Opportunity? ...................................... 3

CHAPTER II ............................................................................................................................. 13
   Setting the Scene: The Poplins’ Story in Context: ............................................................ 13
   Who Were the Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina?.................................................... 14
   Musical Context: Country Stringband Music in South Carolina .......................................... 18
   Before They Were Folk: Poplin Music Before 1963 ........................................................... 20

CHAPTER III ............................................................................................................................. 24
   The Discovery: Entry into the Folk Revival ........................................................................... 24
   The Recordings ....................................................................................................................... 25
   The Poplins After the Recordings ......................................................................................... 29

CHAPTER IV ............................................................................................................................. 34
   “Success” in The Folk Revival ............................................................................................ 34
   Shaping Poplins as Authentic Folk Music: Behind the Myth of the Mountains .................... 42
   Local Understandings of Poplins’ Music: Country Musicians ............................................. 47
   Poplin Music in Circulation: Edna’s and China’s Ongoing Influence .................................... 50

CHAPTER V .................................................................................................................................. 54
   Conclusion: Power, Genre and the Poplins’ Music ............................................................... 54

REFERENCES: ............................................................................................................................ 59
CHAPTER I

Introduction

Edna Poplin and her brother Hunter China Poplin had been making music together for several decades when they first came to public notice beyond their state. In 1963 the Poplins’ first record was issued by the influential label Folkways. Their album came at the peak of the folk music revival, a social movement and cultural phenomenon which saw a generation of young adults hungering for new modes of cultural expression, in response to the industrialization, suburbanization and homogenization of post-World War II American culture. Music from the rural American South was one considered an excellent source of cultural expression by revivalists. Building on the examples set by prominent members of the folk movement, during the revival aspiring folk musicians frequently sought to satisfy their desires for “real” music by immersing themselves in the cultures of the rural South. Young people, especially those from eastern seaboard cities and colleges across the USA, bought banjos and learned to play them from mimeographed copies of Pete Seeger’s self-published book, How To Play the 5-String Banjo. While much of its activity was centered in the USA, the folk revival stretched across the globe. Its American iteration saw youth make pilgrimages in search of what now might be called “roots music.” For such folk music seekers, Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music was highly instructive and highly influential. Issued by Folkways in 1952, Smiths Anthology reissued and re-framed commercial music for many seekers of folk music. What had been the popular music of the

day in the 1920s and 1930s was transfigured into folk music through its repackaging and recontextualization. At the height of the folk revival recordings like Smith’s Anthology came to form a sonic tapestry that fueled the passions and imaginations of devotees. It was one such youth, in the final months of his military service in South Carolina, whose encounter with the Poplin family led to their recording career. Jack Tottle, using informal recordings he had made at Edna’s home, arranged for Moses Asch to release their first album, *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina*, on his Folkways label in 1963.

This thesis is centered on the story of a duo who had a short career in the folk revival, but who have left a lasting musical legacy. By carefully listening to the story of the Poplin Family, we can hear the ideological underpinnings of the folk revival movement: the Poplins’ story offers insight into how the folk revival operated. Further, it raises questions about the relationship between the revivalists in northern U.S. cities and the southern cultures which so often inspired the revival, and gives us the opportunity to understand the processes that allowed southern cultural forms to be used, adapted and ultimately refigured in the revival. This thesis provides a vantage from which to consider important questions of power and agency within the folk revival.

In what follows, I review the scholarly study of the folk revival, and note scholars’ limited engagement with specific communities whose music was taken (up) in the folk music movement. With the hopes of enriching the scholarship through ethnographic engagement, I trace the Poplins’ history and personal story and consider the inter-relationships between them, their story, their music and the American folk revival. Beyond its college and urban settings, American cultural expression existed and continues to exist and develop in local communities, who understood it on their own terms. In the case of the folk revival, southern communities were

---

music which circulates as “folk” had often been previously understood simply as “music,” “popular music,” or “country music” in its home context. The research I am presenting here recognizes that although the Poplins’ music was taken up within the folk revival as folk music, it had differing meanings within their local community. Building out from the Poplins’ experience, this thesis considers the Poplins’ experience from dual standpoints. One offers the story of their reception within the revival, while the other considers how their music was understood within their own community, and more generally outside of the folk revival.

The understanding that emerges when we think about both of these standpoints constitutes the value and intrigue of the Poplin story. As performers, the Poplins achieved limited commercial success in the revival, and through the limits of their success, we can understand something of the inner workings of the folk revival. By including and taking seriously local perspectives on the Poplins’ music, we can know and acknowledge that a world exists (and existed) beyond the revival, a seemingly obvious point that all too often is unacknowledged, if not disregarded in the scholarly study of folk music. Both perspectives richly enhance our understandings of the complex and contested histories and meanings of American folk music.

The Folk Revival: Scholarly Lacuna or Folkloristic Opportunity?

The American folk revival was a post-World War II cultural phenomenon which, although rooted in youth culture, extended beyond age and nation. The movement made a real and lasting impact on mass culture in the United States and the entire western world. Ray Allen describes the revival as “a tremendously complex social phenomenon not easily reducible to a single category of music, a particular political ideology, a common set of
values, or even a shared cultural perspective." The folk revival was, in part, a movement with an interest in the traditional. “Traditional” here was understood as innate cultural expression that was free of contemporary innovation, like jazz music, as well as excluding the “pollution” of commerciality in the music. In both cases, the interest in tradition indicated an ideological investment that framed traditions as unadulterated authenticity; for those interested in Southern music, it seemed as though unspoilt culture that was tucked into the hills and hollers of the American South. That the South featured so prominently as inspiration for the revival is notable. Geographer David Jansson describes this fascination with the South as a form of “internalized orientalism,” where an “essentialist binary of the imagined spaces of ‘America’ and ‘the South’” work to define and inspire American identity, either through fixation on the South, or an identification in binary opposition to it.

Although its influence continues to be felt, the folk revival has received limited attention academically; however, important works have helped develop a picture of the culture and sociological conditions related to 20th-century folk music. Most scholars mark the folk revival as spanning from the late 1950s until at least the mid-1960s. This time is labeled a revival because it is understood as a second wave of an earlier interest in folk music, known as the “folksong movement.” This earlier phase began in the late 1930s and lasted until the late 1940s. The folk movements are tied together through their ideological investment in the concept of “folk”; as Eyerman and Barretta argue, traditional music was “reinterpreted as a


depository of the ‘people’ or the ‘folk’, and as providing an alternative to manufactured, mass-mediated forms.” The folksong movement had its roots in New York City’s leftist community, where an educated elite offered up folk songs as representing the voice of “the people.” Songs were compiled in workers’ song books, and presented in workers’ choruses, with explicit political aims. Performances emphasized collectivity, and were typically tied to the labor movement and community organizations. Later this collectivity extended folksongs to the war effort. Folksongs were understood as anti-commercial. Key figures in this era included folksong collector Alan Lomax, as well as the Almanac Singers, a quartet that included songwriter Woody Guthrie and folk revival icon Pete Seeger, the son of musicologists Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford. The political nature of this movement attracted the attention of the McCarthy era congressional hearings and by the 1950s, association with folksongs brought suspicion of communist leanings. The folksong movement quickly ended.

Many scholars date the folk revival as beginning with the Kingston Trio’s 1958 smash hit of “Tom Dooley,” their recording of an Appalachian murder ballad from western North Carolina’s Frank Proffitt. Scholars also tend to agree that by 1965, if the revival was not dead, it had at least marked a turning point. That year, folk music troubadour Bob Dylan replaced his acoustic guitar with an electric one at the Newport Folk Festival. Following Dylan’s example, many revivalists turned away from a fascination with traditional music,

---


11 Cantwell, When We Were Good, 2. Eyerman and Barretta, “The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” 520.
and toward songwriters, mass audiences and rock and roll. In retrospect, the revival years (between 1958 and 1965) were transitional, more a process than a destination.\textsuperscript{12} The ultimate products of this time of transition were quite different than the acoustic, unprocessed music that had inspired the folk revival. By the end of the 1960s, rock and roll was the dominant musical form, especially in youth culture. The folk music fans who had been intensely dedicated to “real” folk music, were evidently just as intensively dedicated to the folk-rock movement. By the late 1960s, folk-rock’s popularity brought in a new phase of cultural change.\textsuperscript{13}

Folklorists took an early interest in the folk revival, and in 1965 the \textit{Journal of American Folklore} issued a special “Hillbilly Music” issue, in which D.K. Wilgus, Archie Green and several others appealed for folklorists to engage seriously with the cultural products of the folk revival.\textsuperscript{14} Folklore scholars, themselves a part of the folk revival movement, engaged first by considering the historical roots and the cultural implications of the revival and later offered up case studies that identified and documented the performance of particular musicians.\textsuperscript{15} What has been less common, however, has been a broad analysis

\textsuperscript{12} Eyerman and Barretta, “The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” 505. Eyerman and Barretta take the perspective, that the folk revival was really just a time of transition in the development rock and roll. We might quarrel with the extent to which they dismiss the revival as transitional, given the lasting impact it has made. We must accept that they were right, however, that the dominant musical development of the era was not, in fact, folk but rather rock music.

\textsuperscript{13} On Dylan’s auspicious appearance, Allen writes “Dylan’s betrayal, [Pete] Seeger’s wrath and the death of folk music have become urban folk legend.” Allen, \textit{Gone To The Country}, 1.


of what the folk revival was, what it was not and what conditions brought it about. Far and away the most thorough consideration of that topic comes from Robert Cantwell, in his *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival*. Building out from his own experience as a young banjo player, Cantwell connects the folk revival to historical and political context, offering historiographic, chronological and political analyses of the folk song movement, the revival and the relationship between the two. As the title might suggest, *When We Were Good* identifies the process by which the voices, stories and music of often marginalized Americans could be repackaged into the commercial, cultural phenomenon that shaped American mass culture, through an ideology that emphasized the moral value of folk music.  

While Cantwell and others did pioneering work identifying the influence of the folk revival on American culture, much less work has been dedicated to an academic engagement with the folk revival’s source communities, including those of rural whites in the South, the “hillbillies.” In 1965 D.K. Wilgus complained of “academic ignorance,” and noted that “‘pure hobbyists’ have been contributing more than their share, and in a more respectable fashion” to serious study of hillbilly music. With several notable exceptions, this absence of serious folkloristic consideration of rural, white folk music continues. Of particular relevance for the present project, little attention has been directed towards the relationship between musicians who became the folk-revival’s sources and inspirations, and those who

---


18 While the exceptions are few, Allen’s *The New Lost City Ramblers* and Cantwell’s *Bluegrass Breakdown* are certainly exceptions.
recorded, distributed and traded in those sources. At issue in this relationship are questions of relational power both between the revivalist and the “folk,” and between (often) the same revivalist and other revivalists, musicians and institutions. In the case of the American folk music revival, a handful of key figures asserted their influence and centrally shaped of the movement. Chief among them was, Pete Seeger, whose involvement connected the folk song movement to the revival.19 Pete Seeger’s younger half-brother Mike Seeger and half-sister Peggy Seeger were both also deeply involved in the revival. Mike Seeger had a particularly important role in raising the profile of musicians from the American musician South. In the late 1950s Mike Seeger formed an influential band – the New Lost City Ramblers – that would be credited with “introducing oldtime and bluegrass music to young, urban audiences.”20 Together with band member John Cohen and New York city bluegrass musician Ralph Rinzler, Mike Seeger researched and perfected regional playing styles, located and toured with aging musicians, and inspired countless others to follow in his tracks.

In Eyerman and Barretta’s terms, central figures such as Cohen, Rinzler and Mike Seeger were “movement intellectuals.” They argue that movement intellectuals “articulate the collective identity of the movement [and] through their expressive role give meaning and content to the movement’s more formal structures.”21 Obviously, these key figures were holders of a great deal of power, within the context of the folk revival. We get a sense of that power in Robert Cantwell describes Mike Seeger as one of several “revivalist impresario-

19 Allen, Gone To The Country, 4. Ray Allen claims that in 1965, Seeger was the “reigning godfather of the folk music revival.”

20 Cantwell, When We Were Good, 42.

21 Eyerman and Barretta, 506.
performers” who had the role of “mediator or broker.”

Seeger’s trio of identities – reviving aged musicians’ careers, performing himself, and highly successful promoter/impresario – afforded him the opportunity to broadly influence many key moments in the folk revival. Scholarly considerations of the meaning and roles of these centrally important figures has recently begun to appear, but has been limited.

By understanding the role and social position of those who were finding and presenting folk music, we can gain insight into what it meant to be a folk musician. To call a person or their music “folk” was, and still is, to stake a discursive claim about the origin, social position and qualitative value of that music; as such, labels like “folk” represent ideological positions. We can bear this in mind when considering many revivalists’ vocal performances. Eyerman and Barretta point out that among revivalists, “rural vocal styles were apparently too much for many in leftist circles, who preferred the interpretations of urban stylists, which lay closer to contemporary popular song.”

Eyerman and Barretta are correct. Often, in vocal performance, lyrics were stylistically stripped of their specific regional linguistic markers after they began to circulate in the folk community. For women, this meant that songs were sung in a higher-pitched soprano, with a lot of vibrato; for men it meant, a rich, full baritone with a lot of vibrato. In both cases, the complexities of the so-called nasal vocal placement, well-controlled vocal breaks, and flatted thirds, all associated with Southern vernacular music, were absent.

Meeting the qualification of “folk artist,” it

---

22 Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, 42.

23 Recently appearing, and providing this much needed analysis is Ray Allen’s *Gone To The Country: The New Lost City Ramblers and the Folk Music Revival*.

24 Eyerman and Barretta, 512.

25 Classic examples of this kind of performance would be Judy Collins’ performance of “Amazing Grace,” The Kingston Trio’s version of “Tom Dooley” and Burl Ives’ “Blue Tail Fly.”
seemed, required that one could not be present, either in the flesh or in performance style. This recalls the dilemma faced by non-elite (which is to say non-art-school educated, and often Southern) visual artists. Art historian Colin Rhodes argues that “the status of the artist as cultural outsider is a vouchsafe for the ‘purity’ of the art.” For these so-called “outsider artists,” often highly productive and highly skilled, presenting their work on the art market can be perilous, since presenting themselves as professionals, and implicating themselves in the art-world, threatens their status as outsiders. Rhodes explains “direct engagement with the art-going public, and worse, the art-market, has always proved a dangerous activity for individuals named as outsiders… professional ambition is regarded as anathema to the ‘authentic’ artist outsider.”

Luckily for musicians from rural areas who might have been looking to earn a living as musicians, the risk in commercializing one’s music was significantly less than for visual artists, perhaps because music is more amenable to repeated performance and engagement. Nevertheless, Rhodes’ analysis is valuable in considering the experiences of “folk” musicians who inspired the folk revival. Typically, their entry into the marketplace of listeners was dependent on a sponsor or patron; direct engagement was difficult a threat to their status as “folk.” Richard Spottswood, musicologist, and producer of the Poplins’ second record points out that in practical terms, “folk music,” means “people who are not us… there’s something between anthropological and condescending to the whole notion.”

Identifying the ideology embedded within the “folk” label reveals underlying issues of cultural and social power: the power to present, the power to access audience and to quite literally give or refuse voice; perhaps most significantly, the power to label – to assign

---


27 Richard Spottswood, telephone interview with author, 6 April 2013.
a person, their music, or their culture, to a category. Academic work that directly addresses questions about cultural and social power in cultural revival is minimal, but the discipline of Folklore is particularly well-positioned to do this work.\textsuperscript{28} The methodology of ethnography is meant to lend an emic perspective to an etic situation, while folklorists are uniquely positioned within academics as analysts and appreciators of vernacular culture. The academic folklorist’s role offers powerful tools of engagement and analysis that allow us to develop understandings of the differing functions, meanings and receptions of creative expression in diverse contexts.

This thesis, while not exclusively an ethnographic study, has benefited from ethnographic research on the history of the South Carolina country stringband the Poplin Family, who had a brief but luminary career during the folk revival of the 1960s. I consulted with Poplin family members, with upland South Carolina country musicians, with both of the producers of the Poplins’ two records, and with several musicians whose encounters with Poplin music have proven influential on their professional careers. Additionally, I conducted research in audio archives at the University of North Carolina’s Southern Folklife Collection, and the East Tennessee State University’s Archives of Appalachia. This mixed research methodology has developed new insights into the folk revival. Through interviews and archival research, my research reveals the contours and limits of the folk revival, both by identifying the limitations The Poplins’ faced in their careers as folk musicians, and by considering the perspectives of The Poplins’ own community. As we shall see, the story of the Poplin Family’s involvement with the folk revival reveals that involvement with

\textsuperscript{28} Robert Cantwell, “Folklore’s Pathetic Fallacy,” \textit{Journal of American Folklore}, 114.451 (Winter, 2001), pp. 56-67. Cantwell launched an appeal for folklorists to seriously consider questions of power in their research, with this article.
movement intellectuals was essential to gaining entry into participation in the revival. The Poplins’ success in making recordings was tied directly to their personal connections, and the limits of their career seem also to reflect the limits of their connections with the folk revival’s key figures.
CHAPTER II

Setting the Scene: The Poplins’ Story in Context:

The story of The Poplins’ involvement with the folk revival begins with their chance encounter with young mandolin player Jack Tottle in 1962. His subsequent visit to Edna’s home, and his choice to make field recordings of their jam session led to the 1963 release of *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina*. Edna Poplin played guitar, her brother China Poplin played banjo, and together they sang close harmony. The pair were joined by China’s son Bill on bass and occasionally mandolin, a friend David on guitar, and by Tottle himself on mandolin. The album represented a specific construction of authentic Southern stringband music, created primarily by record company owner and record producer Moses Asch. By this time, Asch had released hundreds of recordings of folk music from numerous regions and cultures within the US and had a clear sense of how he wished to present the styles of Southern white music. The songs Asch chose to include on the album, and those he chose to omit, constructed a particularly “rough-hewn” sonic aesthetic for the Poplins, emphasizing Appalachian dance tunes, and limiting the inclusion of commercial songs. Over time, the Poplins’ first album has been widely distributed, and it has influenced and inspired generations of musicians who received it as a deep source of powerful music.

One year after the release of their first album, Edna and China recorded a second album, *Gwine Back to Sumter*, on the much smaller Melodeon label. Unlike their first recording, this time they recorded in a studio. The Melodeon album had a significantly different sound than the first album, featuring refined female vocal trios, in musical
arrangements that were stylistically in line with the smooth “countrypolitan” sound popular in Nashville at the time.\(^29\) Unlike its predecessor, the second album has not had the same, lasting influence as their first album, *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina. Gwine Back To Sumter* was only distributed for a year before it went out of print, due in large part to the label owner’s health problems.\(^30\) The second Poplins’ album represented a fairly dramatic shift in repertoire and style from the first album. While the first album had featured a significant number of banjo instrumentals that came from the Appalachian fiddle and banjo dance tradition, the repertoire on the first album had been edited to omit any songs that were obviously derived from minstrelsy (of which there were a number). On the second album, the plethora of driving banjo tunes was replaced with ornate, smooth and sweet country music, reminiscent of the countrypolitan sound that was popular in Nashville at the time. The apparent shift in musical style on *Gwine Back to Sumter* has perplexed and mystified fans of the Poplins’ more widely distributed first album, and likely limited the second album’s popular success. After the Poplins’ encounter with the folk revival, the Edna and China returned to playing locally in South Carolina, until China’s death in 1979. Edna reconfigured the band and performed as often as possible until her death in 1997.

**Who Were the Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina?**

Sumter, South Carolina, lies about 40 miles east of Columbia in the Sand Hills region, a part of the uplands that run between the coastal lowlands and the piney Piedmont. The Sand Hills start about fifty miles east of the state capital of Columbia, and transition into the Piedmont about thirty miles to its west. As the name implies, the sandy soil is not


\(^30\) Richard Spottswood, telephone interview with author, 6 April 2013.
especially fertile, which limits the success of the region’s cotton and tobacco farms. Historically, the economy depended on lumber and related industries, and to a significant extent continues to do so. The region’s history of European settlement dates prior to the formation of the nation – the city and the county both take their name from Thomas Sumter, the so-called “fighting gamecock” in the Revolutionary war. Several plantations were established in Sumter County in the antebellum period. Contemporary history has afforded Sumter an important role in the development of the civil rights movement – in 1960 an early sit-in was staged, and was used as an opportunity to develop protest strategies for subsequent sit-ins. There is a strong sense of local pride in Sumter, and its barbeque joints, its magnolia-lined streets and parks, the municipal library’s permanent on-line exhibitions of wedding gowns, *Wedding Belles: Brides of Sumter County* suggest that this identity is a self-consciously Southern one. This region – flatter, drier, and hotter than his mountainous home in Anson County, North Carolina – greeted Edna and China’s father Henry Washington Poplin when he arrived in Sumter in 1870.

Edna and China Poplin kept close ties to Sumter County their entire lives. Their father Henry had fled Anson County, on the North Carolina/South Carolina border, after

---

31 Anne King Gregoire, *History of Sumter County, South Carolina* (Sumter, SC: Library Board of Sumter County, 1954): 485-88.


33 *Wedding Belles: Brides of Sumter County, 1845-1940*, digital exhibition of the Sumter County Museum, accessed 12 February 2012, [http://www.sumtercountymuseum.org/exhibits/bridal/title.htm](http://www.sumtercountymuseum.org/exhibits/bridal/title.htm). The region’s connection to Thomas Sumter is mentioned in its both the chamber of commerce and city websites. Both sites offer detailed histories of the Revolutionary and Civil wars, but skip from 1865 to 1940, indicating a discomfort in acknowledging and addressing the Jim Crow and Civil Rights Movement histories in the area.

shooting at his sweetheart’s father. When he came south in the late 1890s, the story goes that he carried with him a banjo, a fiddle and a number of traditional fiddle and banjo songs. In Sumter County he met and married Josephine Hodge and together they had twelve children, of which eight survived early childhood. Born in 1905, Hunter China Poplin started playing his father’s banjo as soon as he was old enough to pick it up. His sister Edna Poplin was born in 1915, among the youngest in the family. Edna’s daughter Laura LeGrand explains that the children heard music nightly:

Mama said at night, of course with the fireplaces, you know, you heated the house with the fireplaces… you didn’t dare leave a live fire! She said late at night that her father would sit by the fire and play the banjo, into the wee hours of the morning, until the fire died down. And just first listening to him, even I guess the rhythm and timing came all from him.

Laura tells that Edna started out playing her brother’s guitar as a young teenager, and went on to play the banjo and sing.

Mama used to steal my uncle Felder’s guitar when he would go to work and she would take it out into the edge of the woods and she would play the guitar. She taught herself how to play the guitar and then she would bring it back and put it under the bed, where it belonged.

In the 1960s, the population of Sumter County was more rural than urban. The county seat had about 22,000 people, while the total county population was close to 80,000. The

---


36 Shalini Venturelli, “Guardian of Tradition: Sumter woman uses vast talent to keep mountain songs alive,” The Sumter Daily Item, 6 January 1986, 4A.

37 Laura LeGrand, interview with author, Sumter, South Carolina, 1 February 2012.

38 Laura LeGrand, “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina: Tracing the Story of a South Carolina Stringband” (panel discussion, Folklife Colloquium series, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 14 March 2012).

39 Laura Legrand “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina” (panel discussion).

family lived in a rural area known as the “Privateer Section” of Sumter, a neighborhood that Edna’s son-in-law Fritz LeGrand jokingly says was for “flatland hillbillies.”  

There, Henry ran a small, rural lumber mill that he had inherited through his wife’s family. While the surviving family reports that the family was not wealthy, its position as employer and business owner would have afforded them some status within their rural community. The value of formal education was limited value for them, and was often at odds with the necessities of their lives. In an interview that China gave to a South Carolina music newsletter in 1975, he explained the exigencies of rural life for him during World War I, when he would have been nine to fourteen years old.

My daddy run a sawmill during the First World War and he couldn’t get no help. I’d have to go help him. I’d have to fire the boiler, roll off lumber or something….I’d out of school two weeks at a time cutting a carload of lumber… it wasn’t much chance of me going to school back in that day. If everybody’d went to school, they’d have starved to death.  

China began working in his father’s saw mill as a boy and by grade four he had stopped attending school.  

Being ten years younger, a younger sibling, and female, may have helped prolong Edna’s opportunity to go to school, but by grade seven, Edna had also left school. Their family provided some of the only live music in the area, and the Poplin children often played in peoples’ homes. A Sumter newspaper interview with Edna from 1986 says “Ms. Poplin recalls leaving with a comfortable hat-full of coins tossed by the revelers.”  

While their formal education was constrained, China and Edna were richly educated in their

---

41 Fritz LeGrand, interview with author, Sumter, South Carolina, 1 February 2012.


43 Shalini Venturelli, “Guardian of Tradition.”

44 Ibid.
immediate physical world. Both loved to fish and had a great love for their rural, southern lifestyle. Edna loved to cook, and care for her children and later, her grandchildren. Her daughter Laura fondly remembers her mother’s cooking. “I guess today it would be called soul food, though certain not back then; let’s just say country cookin’… you haven’t lived until you’ve tasted Mama’s white catfish stew!”

Music figured prominently in the family’s leisure activities; mother Josephine had access to a formal musical education, and played organ and piano. Father Henry used the fiddle and banjo he had brought with him from the North Carolina to play tunes he recalled from his father. China was playing banjo for dances before he was a teenager. Brother Felder, younger than China but older than Edna, was the family guitar player. Edna started practicing when she was thirteen; when she was finally comfortable, she surprised him with her prowess, and he consented to letting her play. She went on to learn banjo, mandolin and autoharp, but guitar remained her primary instrument.

**Musical Context: Country Stringband Music in South Carolina**

The uplands of South Carolina were an important location for the development of country stringband music, beginning in the 1930s and continuing up until the 1960s. Columbia, South Carolina and Charlotte, North Carolina, barely more sixty miles apart, were closely connected and musicians often circulated amongst their radio and TV stations and other performance venues. Broadcast venues included WIS in Columbia and WBT and

---

45 Laura LeGrand, email communication with author, 2 May 2012.

WFIG in Charlotte.\textsuperscript{47} A number of highly influential early country musicians travelled between these stations, including J.E. and Wade Mainer, banjo player Snuffy Jenkins, banjo innovator Don Reno, Bill and Charlie Monroe and great traditional fiddler Pappy Sherrill. Although many musicians developed in South Carolina’s uplands, very little research has been dedicated to unraveling the history of South Carolina stringband music. What scholarship does exist focuses almost exclusively on Snuffy Jenkins and Pappy Sherrill, who worked together as the “Hired Hands,” a band that played daily for decades at radio station (and later television station) WIS in Columbia.\textsuperscript{48} The apparent disinterest in South Carolina’s musical resources is reflected in the content of \textit{North American Fiddle Music}, a recent “research and information guide.” While the guide lists only six articles for South Carolina, it lists from sixty and ninety resources each for Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina and Georgia.\textsuperscript{49} When scholars have considered country music in the Charlotte area, the city’s close ties with South Carolina have been entirely absent.\textsuperscript{50} In contrast with its musical history, South Carolina’s music scene is no longer closely tied to neighboring states, and contemporary stringband musicians describe South Carolina as “isolated” from the rest of the oldtime music world.\textsuperscript{51} This isolation has meant that the musical communities of the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{47} Wayne Geddings, interview with author, Sumter, South Carolina, 1 February 2012.
\textsuperscript{50} Warlick and Warlick, \textit{WBT Briarhoppers}.
\textsuperscript{51} Erynn Marshall, personal communication, 28 April 2012.
\end{flushright}
neighboring regions tend to have limited interactions with South Carolina. Touring acts may bypass the region, and in my observation, music fans in South Carolina sometimes limit their musical interactions within the state, or travel beyond the neighboring regions for musical events. With some regularity I have heard stringband musicians from the South (but outside of South Carolina) tell me that they either are unfamiliar with South Carolina’s music, or intentionally avoid the region. Few words of explanation are usually offered in these discussions, although most suggest that they perceive South Carolina as significantly more conservative, although what “conservative” means has not been clear. Left implied is that these musicians would apparently prefer not to be in this perceived “conservative” environment.

**Before They Were Folk: Poplin Music Before 1963**

For a brief time in the 1940s, China worked the commercial radio circuit described above as a banjo player, playing mostly at WBT in Charlotte, North Carolina. In late 1940, fiddler Sam Poplin recruited him to play on radio stations in Columbia, as well as in Charlotte. The opportunity was short-lived, as World War II brought on rationing for gasoline and tires, and by year’s end China had moved to Charleston, South Carolina, where he found work in a junkyard. China reported “I never worked nothing but sawmills and junkyards all my life. The hardest work that there was in all the world is all I could ever get ahold of to do.” A year later, catastrophe struck, when China lost a finger on his left hand.

---

52 Throughout my fieldwork in South Carolina, it has been my observation that most musicians and fans I met tended to either remain in the state for music events; when they went out of state, it was typically for bluegrass festivals.

53 These musicians have demonstrated discomfort with making comments like this on the record, and for this reason I am not referencing specific names here.
in fan belt of a motor while at work. He put the banjo under his bed, until Edna came to Charleston and convinced him to start back on the instrument. Edna’s daughter Laura LeGrand says “Mama went down and insisted that he play. And he played.”55 China was previously adept at banjo, fiddle and guitar, but found with effort he could go back to the banjo but not the other instruments.56 China is fondly remembered as a joker and Laura recalls him making light of his finger injury “He always said after that, ‘everybody tells me I play so good, I reckon I could have played good if I’d had all my fingers!’”57

Edna’s visit reconnected the two siblings, and China began travelling between Charleston and Sumter on weekends so they could play parties and dances. By 1954 China moved back to Sumter and the duo began performing as The Country Ramblers, with China on banjo, Edna on lead and rhythm guitar.58 Occasionally they played with other musicians and especially sought out fiddle players. Their repertoire was a combination of mountain dance tunes learned from their father, songs they had written and popular commercial music, including bluegrass and minstrel songs, which they had adapted. The Poplins adapted versions of traditional standards like “Old Joe Clark,” by changing the melody and adding lyrics mentioning Sumter, and renaming it “Gwine Back to Sumter.” The duo integrated ragtime jazz influences into their country music, and wrote remarkably sophisticated songs like “Sit At Home,” as well as adapting popular commercial songs they had learned from the


55 Laura LeGrand, interview with author.

56 Dan Elton Harmon, “The Living Poplin Tradition.”

57 Geddings, interview with author.

58 Dan Elton Harmon, “The Living Poplin Tradition.”
radio in their youth. After China returned to playing much as they had prior to 1941 – playing local dances, parties and political rallies. Rarely, though, did the pair have the opportunity to raise their profile on radio and television, at the nearby radio stations in Charlotte and Columbia. On one such rare opportunity, they replaced Snuffy Jenkins on his television show in Columbia, and where their chance encounter with Jack Tottle at the television station led to their recording career.

There is no definitive explanation for why these talented musicians were not in regular performance with their contemporaries in these settings, as far back as the 1930s and 1940s, when banjo player Fisher Hendley met great commercial success with his Aristocratic Pigs band. While we definitively know why they did not have a more extensive career, we can acknowledge that the banjo players of the era, Snuffy Jenkins and Fisher Hendley among them, would have perceived China’s talented banjo playing as a threat. Richard Spottswood, producer of the Poplins’ Melodeon album, and a musicologist himself, muses “WIS was strictly going with the Byron Parker people, right? I mean [Pappy] Sherrill and [Snuffy] Jenkins and all of them… Well they would have seen the Poplins as competition, because I think you could argue that China was a better banjo player [than Snuffy Jenkins.]”

In a very real sense, China was directly in competition with Hendley, since he replaced him as Sam Poplin’s banjo player. In 1940, China had briefly broken into the radio circuit when Sam had quit Hendley’s Aristocratic Pigs (sponsored by a local hog company) band to start his own – The Musical Millers (sponsored by Adulah Flour Mills). Tottle recalls China’s response to Spottswood’s inquiries about Hendley: “Spottswood asked him if he either knew

59 Richard Spottswood, interview with author.
60 Dan Elton Harmon, “The Living Poplin Tradition.”
Fisher Hendley or had learned from Fisher Hendley and China said “‘No, I didn’t learn nothing from him, he wadn’t nothin’!’”61

Aside from competition amongst banjo players in the region, gender may have also been a factor in the peaks and valleys of the Poplins’ pre-folk revival career. Everyone agrees that Edna was the leader of their family band, a remarkable role for a woman in rural country band in the 1950s and 1960s. Edna is remembered as being a fun-loving, passionate and formidable performer, but there is no doubt that she could be command attention. Her son-in-law Fritz LeGrand describes her ability to command the attention of her audience,

She used to play these honky-tonk dives, and if the audience got noisy and wasn’t listening to her, she’d stop playing and say ‘Now listen. If you all are gonna talk, get the hell out of here! If you’re gonna listen to me, listen and be quiet!’ And they would shut up.62

Edna was equally resolute with the musicians that surrounded her, and her ear was very keen to pitch. Daughter Laura explains what happened when Laura met Ernest Tubb backstage in Sumter:

She and Uncle China and their little band opened for Ernest Tubb here, when Ernest Tubb was playing at the, was the high school. Mama was backstage, and Mr. Tubb was just going through some chords, and she told him, ‘You need to tune that guitar before you go out.’ He said ‘my guitar is tuned!’ Mama said ‘I’ll be damned if it is!’ Anyway, she took his guitar and tuned it for him and he just stood there and looked at her.63

---

61 Jack Tottle, interview with author.
62 Fritz LeGrand, interview with author.
63 Laura LeGrand, interview with author.
CHAPTER III

The Discovery: Entry into the Folk Revival

In January, 1962, Jack Tottle was a mandolin-playing soldier from South Carolina’s Fort Jackson army base. He visited TV station WIS in Columbia, South Carolina, to hear their popular local TV show Carolina in the Morning. The show had been hosted for decades by Snuffy Jenkins, the North Carolina banjo player who played in three-finger picking pattern long before Earl Scruggs made it a defining feature of bluegrass music. For reasons that no one can remember, Snuffy was absent that morning; instead, a brother-sister duo from Sumter played the show. That day, China played banjo, Edna played guitar respectively and together they sang. The soldier, Jack Tottle, recalls “I was at the show and I was just so overwhelmed with China and Edna’s playing – I just thought it was so wonderful.”64 Tottle was a young man of 22 and an aspiring musician. He would go onto a musical career of acclaim as a bluegrass folklorist and musician; he would be a cofounder of the Tasty Licks with banjo innovator Béla Fleck, and he would establish the first program to offer a university degree in bluegrass and oldtime music, at East Tennessee State University. But in 1962, a few months shy of his discharge from the army, his musical instincts led him to make a fifty-mile trek east, to Sumter. He describes that at the TV station, “I spoke with them, and arranged to go down to their home in Sumter, and I think that the first recordings that I made probably were made while I was still in the army …on this this old, Viking tape

64Jack Tottle, interview with author.
deck … we sat around the living room and just played.”

Tottle was so pleased with the recordings that he shared them with Folkways record producer Moses Asch in New York, and asked if he might bring this duo into the studio: “I just took him this tape saying ‘Wouldn’t it be good to get these people in a studio and record them because they’re so good?’ And he says ‘Oh we’ll just make the album from what you have.’ And I was appalled because, you know, it was not great fidelity.”

The Recordings

While Tottle had hoped for a professionally engineered album for the Poplins, Asch made plans to issue the field recordings as an album, and asked Tottle to return to Sumter for a second recording session. Edna’s description of the first recording session is evocative of the excitement that permeated that event, “we recorded in my living room ’til midnight, and then stopped and ate supper… I cooked supper for seventeen people and played all day.”

Edna’s anecdote also reinforces the extent of her passion for her life as musician and caregiver. The second session, while still at Edna’s home, was expressly for the purpose of making a record. Tottle recounts

The next time I went back I remember that they seemed a little stiffer and I thought that was true of the Melodeon session also, they were not quite as relaxed…the first recordings caught them at a time when they were really relaxed, because we were just standing around playing and had the tape recorder running.

In anticipation of the album, Tottle recalls “we took some pictures for Folkways’ album. Edna lived in a little small, working class neighborhood, little white house… I said, well why

65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Edna Poplin in Venturelli, “Guardian of Tradition.”
68 Jack Tottle, interview with author.
don’t we get something that’s got a little more local color of the area, so we went over to this farm… there’s a couple of mules in the background…there’s an old shed behind them in one picture, this was not their farm, but it just looked colorful and looked neat and I thought well this is a good background.” 69 In 1963, *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was issued as Folkways’ FA 2306, featuring fiery banjo on driving square dance-instrumentals like “Mississippi Sawyer” and commercial country songs like “Steel Guitar Rag,” and rough-edged vocal duets such as “Eyes Like Cherries.” Although the album did include some ragtime-jazz influenced material, suggesting some breadth of repertoire in the duo’s performance, the record’s overall stylistic impression is one of traditional American music, especially of Southern country or “mountain” music. As we will see later, the album’s presentation of the Poplins’ repertoire was edited, such that it reflects this particular construction of “mountain music,” in contrast to the music on their second album was stylistically more diverse, and left a different impression on listeners.

By the time that *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was issued, Tottle had been released from the army and had moved out of South Carolina and to New Hampshire. Tottle attempted to get the Poplins a second album with Asch, but ended up going to the fledgling Melodeon records out of the Washington, DC area, established by future musicologist Richard Spottswood. At the time, Melodeon represented blues guitar player Mississippi John Hurt, and the company held a lot of promise. Edna and China met Tottle in the Arlington, Virginia studio, and they made a second album. Spottswood describes what the aim was, in making the Poplins’ record,

> We were looking around for music of precisely that time and that quality level to record. We wanted to get some more traditional music out there, and to try to get

________________________

69 Ibid.
some professional productions, as opposed to Folkways Records, which, I mean, Moe Asch would publish stuff that you recorded, on a home recording machine. We didn’t want to – we weren’t into trying to be folklore collectors or anything. We wanted music to prepare professionally.\(^{70}\)

The first time the Poplins made a record, it was a chance affair, but the second time, they had an agenda. Spottswood was impressed by the band’s focus at the recording session: “I was bowled over by what they brought to me, because it was a wonderful combination of folk tunes and banjo songs of well selected, commercial country and all kinds of things and things.”\(^{71}\)

The second album’s stylistic departures included both commercial country songs of the era, as well as pieces that hint at the minstrel-roots of their musical style, with songs like “Hie Away” and “My Pretty Quadroon.” Equally notable are the sweet-sounding vocal trios in several songs on the Melodeon album. Edna had brought Margie Reece with them, a friend who sang smooth country and gospel trios with her sisters in Columbia, South Carolina; together with Edna’s daughter Laura, the three delivered exceptionally in-tune vocal performances that smoothed out much of the “edge” in their sound. The Poplins’ second album, *Gwine Back to Sumter*, was issued in 1965; at last they had the professionally produced album that Tottle had hoped to deliver to them.\(^{72}\)

Given that the Poplins’ studio-recorded music was significantly different from their first album, one might wonder if they had been encouraged by the producers to change or update their musical style. In Spottswood’s recollection, it Edna’s who widened the Poplins’ repertoire:

\(^{70}\) Richard Spottswood, interview with author.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.

Edna was pretty much the song–honcho. She brought the songs with her and …they all seemed liked things that they’d rehearsed in advance. To some extent ‘Gwine Back to Sumter’ seemed to be a family signature song, because she and China sang that…but Edna was the predominant singer, and she would sing variously with Laura, Margie and China. She would construct different trios for different occasions, it wasn’t the same three voices all the time.\textsuperscript{73}

Tottle concurs with Spottswood on the Melodeon recordings – he recalls that it was the Poplins themselves who had prepared the material for the session, and to him, Edna had always been the group’s leader.\textsuperscript{74} The music of the second album constructed a musically sophisticated and up-to-date identity for the band. While this identity was not completely at odds with the traditional, Appalachian sound constructed on the Folkways album, it certainly represented a change. Given that Edna Poplin was primarily responsible for this change, we must acknowledge that the second album represented a moment of agency for Edna Poplin, a moment of creative expression with which she crafted a musical product and image quite distinct from that created on the group’s earlier Folkways album.

No one is certain, but it seems likely that this time, the musicians were paid for their time, as Spottswood routinely paid session fees and royalties to his artists.\textsuperscript{75} Unfortunately Spottswood encountered serious health problems and the label folded within two years of the making of \textit{Gwine Back to Sumter}. Unlike the Folkways albums, which is still available for purchase through the Smithsonian’s acquisition of Folkways’ catalogue, the second album was in print for only about a year. It is now a rarity. The obscurity of the Melodeon album, combined with its sonic departure from their first album, has meant that the album is less popular among folk revivalists. The limited success of the second album suggests that while the album’s sound may have satisfied Edna’s professional and artistic goals, its departure

\textsuperscript{73} Richard Spottswood, interview with author.

\textsuperscript{74} Jack Tottle, interview with author.

\textsuperscript{75} Richard Spottswood, interview with author.
from the carefully constructed traditional sound of the Folkways album failed to satisfy the appetites of folk revivalists.

**The Poplins After the Recordings**

After their first record was released, Edna and China began travelling to Union Grove, North Carolina, and Galax, Virginia, for their annual fiddlers’ conventions. These were not paid appearances, but rather opportunities to showcase their work and compete as soloists in a variety of categories, and as a band. Both events had been around for decades, but served differing audiences; while the Galax event was primarily attended by local community members, Union Grove was in the process of becoming legendary for its celebration of folk music counter-culture. Hundreds of musicians, and at times thousands of enthusiasts, attended these conventions, which were in part local social events, and in part opportunities for musicians to demonstrate their prowess. An undated newspaper clipping that the family kept, from 1965 described China as “an old leathery-faced man from Sumter, S.C., who turns up at all fiddlers’ conventions.”

In 1964, banjo player Mac Benford, then in his early 20s and still learning his craft, made the pilgrimage south from Massachusetts, to Galax. He recalls the scene when Edna and China made an impromptu performance

China and Edna had been doing one of their little shows [in front of a car] and there a bunch of people all gathered around…that was a typical kind of situation for them to do a little impromptu performance. And suddenly a thundershower came up and the rain started pouring down and we were all getting wet and everybody scattered and we were standing there they jumped in the car and saw us standing there and just kind of beckoned us to come in the car with them. Well that was great!

---

76 The article is titled “Union Grove Lays It On,” but there is no indication of its name or date. I date it to 1965 based on its mention of the “41st Annual” convention, which happened in 1965.

77 Mac Benford, interview with author, 7 August 2013, Elkins, West Virginia.
Benford recalls that Edna and China were clearly eager to perform their music “

I never saw them sell records or pass the hat or do anything really commercial. It was just, you know, but they obviously loved the attention, and put on a great show. I mean there was no… you felt that they’d been doing that forever, because it was a very polished performance. They weren’t just goofing around, you know?  

The Galax convention winners’ lists represent the dominant players of their generation, and in 1965, China won first place in the “banjo (clawhammer)” category, beating out banjo experts George Stoneman and Kyle Creed. The following year, Edna won in the “folksong” category, singing the sentimental ballad “I’ll Be All Smiles Tonight.”

Despite their successes at the fiddler’s conventions, the Poplins met with limited success, in terms of paying engagements. In the end, the Poplins’ time in the broader public eye was brief, and by the end of the 1960s they were back to primarily playing around Sumter.

Edna’s daughter Laura reports that they had a regular gig playing at a pizza parlor for about a year.

An account of the pizza gig from a newspaper in Anson County, North Carolina helps us understand the typical performance context for these musicians by the 1970s. Dated September 10th, 1974 it begins, “If you’re ever in Sumter, S.C. on a weekend (and there’s no real reason that you should be) try to take in the city’s unique attraction: a country-and-western pizza parlor.” The short column goes on to make unflattering remarks about The

78Ibid.


The fact that China Poplin was a two-finger banjo player, but won in the “Banjo (clawhammer)” banjo category merits further consideration. As a two-finger player, China picked upwards on the banjo strings, whereas clawhammer style playing involves downpicking on the strings. Bluegrass is primarily thought of as a three-finger, up-picking style, usually while wearing finger-picks, and Galax also has a “Banjo (bluegrass)” category. The definition of the categories has been controversial, in part because there is very little formal definition of the two styles, and ‘clawhammer’ contestants, including Kyle Creed, have been disqualified for using picks. Banjo playing politics aside, China’s banjo style was definitively not clawhammer, making his individual win remarkable; it also reveals the extent to which, in 1965, what some were considering “folk” music, was in fact a complex array of diverse musical styles, with distinct musical, regional and cultural histories.

80 Laura LeGrand, email communication with author, 23 January 2012.
Village Inn Pizza Parlor’s “pretty good pizza, terrible sandwiches” and watered down beer. Author Clark Cox suggests, however, that the Poplin Family Band, including China’s son Bill on bass, makes a visit well worthwhile. He describes China as “an elderly banjo player” whose “distinctive two-finger style … has apparently been copied by every banjo picker in that section of South Carolina.” He reports that Edna “belts out song after song” during lengthy sets that run from 8:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m., and that she takes requests from songbooks she hands out, and from which patrons are invited to sing along. Cox suggests that the bar tab for China’s son Bill would have seriously reduced their $25 for the night.\(^\text{81}\)

Cox’s account is valuable, for it gives us an idea of how their neighbours might have experienced the Poplins. Cox calls their music “country and western,” and suggests that there were at one time numerous other two-finger banjo players in upland South Carolina. His report also makes it clear that the Poplins were willing to perform for little money and perhaps less prestige, if we recall the song books and requests. China died about five years after this newspaper report, and he seemed to have passed his final years as a musician not in obscurity, but playing casual, occasional performances in his community.

China died in February 1979, at the age of 74. Only one of his three published obituaries make mention of his life as a musician. China was survived by his wife, son, daughter, eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. Charleston’s News and Courier read, in part, “Mr. Poplin was born in Sumter County, a son of the late Henry W. Poplin and Mrs. Josephine Hodge Poplin. He was a member of Providence Baptist Church.”\(^\text{82}\)


After China’s death, Edna continued her musical life, playing as often as she could with other musicians around town. A newspaper feature on her in 1986, when she was 70, reported that she had put together a band with five members, ranging from 17 to 70 years old.

Intriguingly, the paper reports that after China’s death, she returned to performing under the name “The Country Ramblers.” Without offering an explanation, the author quotes Edna as saying “after my brother China died, we dropped the Poplin name for the group, and now call ourselves the Country Ramblers.”

The author describes Edna’s later life, saying “besides the Country Ramblers, Ms. Poplin fills in her spare time working as a site aide for the county’s Council on Aging, organizing sing-alongs and other activities.” Regarding suggestions of retirement, Edna responded “I’m going to play and sing as long as I can. I’d like to explore country rock, and learn many more songs.”

By her family accounts, Edna did just that, staying active in her community and continuing to play and performing locally until her death in 1997, at the age of 82. Looking back over the lives of Edna and China, daughter Laura explains that this dynamic pair had little idea that their music was celebrated beyond their region. Edna’s 1980s-era, one page biography ends by stating that fans can buy her music in Sumter’s local music store: “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina is available at SEACO Music Store.” Daughter Laura reports that prior to her mother’s death,

---

83 Edna Poplin, in Venturelli, “Guardian of Tradition.”

84 Venturelli, “Guardian of Tradition.”

85 Edna Poplin, in Venturelli, ‘Guardian of Tradition.’
the store refused to carry the album, saying there was just no market for it. She laments

They never made money with what they did. Mama always wanted to go to Nashville, she never had the money to go. I think they could have done something in Nashville. I think they could have done something somewhere else. You know, people in Sumter just took them for granted. You know if there was a party, if there was a dinner theatre, anything they were called on to play and if they were lucky they got a barbeque plate or something out of it. But, the boys can attest [Edna’s grandsons], they never were compensated for anything that they did.86

Despite this disappointment, Edna and China’s remaining family members are mightily proud of their musical legacy, and several family members continue to make music, although none are as heavily involved in music as their forbearers were.

86 Laura Legrand “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina” (panel discussion).
CHAPTER IV

“Success” in The Folk Revival

While the folk revival represented a massive cultural phenomenon, its transience and its relatively small economic scale makes it difficult to define “success” for musicians in the revival. In very real ways, success in the folk revival was not about money – until folk music became folk-rock, even the most successful musicians were still lucky if they could support themselves day-to-day with their music. This created a situation in which success was less about money, and more about exposure and public profile. Especially for the so-called “tradition-bearers,” (the typically older musicians who were “brought up” from the South to perform), this public recognition was an important way to mark success. One way to consider the Poplins’ careers is to compare China Poplin’s experience to that of other banjo players of his era. Two other two-finger banjo players met with success in the folk revival: Dock Boggs of Norton, in southwest Virginia and Roscoe Holcomb of Daisy, in eastern Kentucky. Like China Poplin, both Boggs and Holcomb were both two-finger banjo players with distinct, but hard-driving styles. Also like China, all had powerful singing voices, and played without a full band. In this way, Poplin, Holcomb and Boggs form an interesting trio for comparing their respective playing and singing styles. Each was a stellar banjo player, playing in a style which was not the three-finger style of Earl Scruggs’; each had a

---

87 Although China played most often with Edna’s guitar accompaniment, the effect, especially on instrumental tunes, is more of a solo banjo performance than of a band performance.
high-energy style of playing and singing. Unlike Holcomb and Boggs, however, China Poplin was did not achieve iconic status in the folk revival.

Beyond similarities in instruments and arrangements, Holcomb, Boggs and China shared a cultural background. Barely more than a decade separated their births (China was born in 1905 Boggs in 1898 and Holcomb in 1912), all were rural whites, born into the Jim Crow South. All three had families who worked in industry. Holcomb was a coal miner from Daisy, in the eastern part of Kentucky. Boggs came had grown up in the coal camps around in West Norton, in the southwest of Virginia, where his father worked as a carpenter. Through his father’s banjo playing and roots in the mountains of North Carolina, China shared an Appalachian cultural background with Boggs and Holcomb.

These three players form something of a cohort of banjo players of their era; each had a highly rhythmic style of banjo playing, which emphasized syncopation more than melody. Unlike the (now) more common oldtime banjo style of frailing, each played two-finger style. The two-finger style has received minimal attention from both musicians and scholars, who have focused more on developing a historiography of the bluegrass banjo.\(^8^8\) Those who do study the banjo beyond its popularization in bluegrass tend to focus on the complex story of its racialization.\(^8^9\) Folklorist Jay Bailey points out that, excluding bluegrass, Appalachian banjo players may have shared a basic approach to playing (as in the two-finger style), but the music they made tended to quite heterogeneous: “these mountain styles were used contemporaneously, with many variations within the basic patterns. This is one reason why

---


the mountain styles have such a distinctive individuality in their sound, and why the banjo sounds so different from one mountain player to another.\footnote{Jay Bailey, “Historical Origin and Stylistic Developments of the Five-String Banjo,” \textit{Journal of American Folklore}, 85.335 (Mar. 1972): 58-65.}

Bailey’s explanation of heterogeneous styles helps us consider how China Poplin, Dock Boggs and Roscoe Holcomb are musically connected, despite the fact that each musician had a distinctive playing style. This trio is further united, in that each met fame through an encounter with a folk revivalist. The story of his 1959 encounter with Roscoe Holcomb, in many ways, established banjo player John Cohen’s career. Cohen, a member of the influential band The New Lost City Ramblers, set out to “see what life was like in a depression, and maybe get some songs that we could use on our album of songs about the Depression.”\footnote{John Cohen in \textit{Remembering the High Lonesome}, produced by Tom Davenport and Barry Dornfield (Davenport Films, 2003): 1:15, accessed 22 February 2013, \url{http://www.folkstreams.net/film,42}.}

In his trip through Appalachian Kentucky, Cohen met and recorded Holcomb. Cohen was a photographer, and in addition to making sound recordings, he took still and moving pictures. He used his materials from the trip to make some of his most acclaimed visual art – photographic books, a film, and a Folkways album, each with the name “High Lonesome.”\footnote{John Cohen, producer, \textit{The High Lonesome Sound} (Audio-Brandon Films, 1963).}

Cohen coined the term High Lonesome, now associated with bluegrass music, as a way to describe the music he found in Kentucky, and most especially the singing and playing of Roscoe Holcomb. After his encounter with Cohen, Holcomb went on to record numerous albums with Folkways, and to tour to folk festivals across the USA.\footnote{Scott L. Matthews, “John Cohen in Eastern Kentucky: Documentary Expression and the Image of Roscoe Holcomb During the Folk Revival,” \textit{Southern Spaces}, 6 August 2008S, accessed 24 February 2013, \url{http://www.southernspaces.org/2008/john-cohen-eastern-kentucky-documentary-expression-and-image-roscoe-halcomb-during-folk-revival}.}
The story of Dock Boggs’ first encounter with folk revivalists is equally celebrated by folk music enthusiasts, but is somewhat less re-told and re-created, in comparison with the Holcomb-Cohen story, likely because Boggs one of many musicians located by Mike Seeger. As well, Seeger did not have a background in visual art. Although he did take photographs, he was not as active in creating visual art as Cohen. Nevertheless, the tale of Seeger detouring his family of three children through Kentucky, on a 1963 road trip from California to New York is well known. In the liner notes to Boggs’ subsequent Folkways album, Seeger describes that he took his family through the mountains, from Tennessee to Kentucky and eventually to Virginia, asking for Boggs as they travelled, and eventually tracking him down in Norton, Virginia. Boggs had captured folklorists’ imaginations after recording several 78 RPM records in 1927 on the Brunswick label. In the Folkways liner notes, Seeger writes that these recordings had made Boggs a “legendary figure” with early American folklorists like John Lomax and Charles Seeger. Mike Seeger reports that when he and his family arrived unannounced, he and Boggs met in “mutual disbelief: we couldn’t believe that this was the Dock Boggs, and he, though he was pleased that someone remembered his records, was not certain what I was up to.” It seems Boggs was confident enough in Seeger that he consented to let him record eight songs that night, and Seeger writes that “two weeks later [Boggs] was on the American Folk Festival in Asheville, NC… since that time he has appeared on the Newport Folk Festival.” Seeger goes on to list nine other prominent folk venues on the northeastern U.S. seaboard where Boggs had played since their encounter.⁹⁴

That Boggs and Holcomb held important roles as musicians in the folk revival cannot be denied. Their connection to Cohen and Seeger is equally important in understanding these

⁹⁴ Mike Seeger, liner notes to Dock Boggs, Legendary Singer and Banjo Player, New York: Folkways, FA 2351, 1964, 33 1/3 RPM.
players’ success and acclaim. In his book detailing the significance of Folkways Records, Richard Carlin writes “Cohen’s and Seeger’s importance to the old-time revival went beyond their roles as musicians in the New Lost City Ramblers. Both conducted extensive field work, recording both rediscovered musicians … and newly discovered performers. Mike Seeger’s major find was the rediscovery of banjo player Dock Boggs… Cohen’s major discover was banjo player and vocalist Roscoe Holcomb.”

Conventional understandings would indicate that the stars of the folk revival were the best musicians around – that there was a natural hierarchy based on talent. Yet accomplished musicians familiar with the Poplins are united in their belief that these musicians were top notch, both in terms of their skill, and in terms of their inspired and unique presentation of their music. The case of China and Edna Poplin reveal that skill was not enough – power and influence were what translated a “discovery” into a career touring the great northern and Midwestern folk festivals.

Dock Boggs had Mike Seeger, and Roscoe Holcomb had John Cohen. As “movement intellectuals” who were integral to the east coast folk music revival, Seeger and Cohen were well situated to promote their individual interests. The Poplins’ discoverer Jack Tottle, however, was in a notably different situation. Prior to his army service, Tottle had been a teenage bluegrass music fan in Arlington, Virginia, sneaking out of school and into bars to watch legendary DC area bluegrass figures like The Country Gentlemen, Buzz Busby and Scotty Stoneman. Tottle was clearly connected to the folk revival’s floes of power, since it was entirely through his connections that the Poplins’ first album was ever made; in

---


96 Tottle, Interview with Author.
1962, Tottle’s stature secured him a meeting with Asch, in which he Asch agreed to release the material. However, Tottle’s influence had its limitations. No one was paid for their efforts on the first Poplin album, although Tottle was partially reimbursed for expenses. While Asch agreed to release an album, he refused to bring the Poplins to a studio to record it; he was willing only to issue the field recordings that Tottle had made.

If the circumstances of Tottle’s arrangements with Folkways suggest the limits of his influence, details of a conversation between Tottle and Mike Seeger are more conclusive. Tottle explains that he had hoped that Seeger might help bring the Poplins to the Newport Folk Festival, since Seeger was on the board of the high profile event. Tottle took the suggestion to Seeger, who quickly shut down the idea. He recalls:

Oh yeah, that was a very brief attempt. It was at the time when Newport was bringing up people from the mountains of the southeast, and it seemed like such a great thing. And I did know Mike Seeger and I’d met Ralph Rinzler and they were involved in the committee that was making the decisions. And I just said “Mike wouldn’t these people be great at the Newport Folk Festival” and he said “Uh we’re having enough trouble getting our own people on there.”

Seeger’s comments about “our own people” are a strong indicator that a dynamic of insiders and outsiders existed within the upper echelons of the folk revival. Tottle explains how he understood Seeger’s comment: “I guess he meant… that they had certain that they had certain people they’d recorded and people they’d made friends with and people they wanted to get there, so that was… as far as it got. And I thought ‘well that’s too bad.’”

The story of a passing conversation between Jack Tottle and Mike Seeger reveals the level of informality and the tightness of the network that was involved in decisions which

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
would have life-long impact on performers. The conversation also speaks to who was in, and who was out, and what the stakes were for being “inside” in the folk revival. Being on the inside opened up access to resources, and in this case the resources significantly grew out of on the prestige of appearing at a high-profile folk music event. Seeger’s presumably casual comment that “we” were having a hard enough time getting “our” people at Newport clearly places Tottle as an outside of a network of power. He might have been a part of the folk revival, but he was not one of “us.”

The marginal economics of folk music magnified the importance of what might seem to be trivial details. Outside of the Kingston Trio and other “popular” folk acts, no one was getting rich on folk music – not Moses Asch, not John Cohen and certainly not musicians like Boggs and Holcomb. In most cases, the economics were simply aimed at covering costs. Success in the folk revival was measured through public acclaim and reputation, and in such a context, questions of being inside or outside would have had increased weight. Being in or out here was not simply important, in very real ways, it was everything. Spottswood, who represented Newport Folk Festival star Mississippi John Hurt, concurs that connections meant everything for musicians who were framed as “traditional.” He also agrees that the Newport Folk Festival was the event which opened up careers for them. Spottswood believes that Hurt’s acceptance at Newport in 1963 was the biggest factor in establishing him as a canonical figure in the folk revival. Spottswood argues that the only way for outsiders to break into that world was to be “anointed” by someone on the inside, which is exactly what he says happened with Hurt.

Pete Seeger knew who [Hurt] was… he was not available until the spring of 1963 and they had already prepared the schedules for the festival. When Seeger heard that Hurt was
available he’d like to have went through the ceiling. He just bulldozed everybody. Nobody else had heard of Hurt, but Seeger wanted him, so Seeger got him.¹⁰⁰

Spottswood’s anecdote about Pete Seeger hiring John Hurt paints a clear and compelling picture of realities in the folk revival. He reflects on the hard realities that the Poplins faced in furthering their career as folk musicians: “selling records by an unknown performing group in a very competitive market, just wasn’t going to happen unless you got some kind of a break. Hurt got the break, and the Poplins didn’t.”¹⁰¹ Spottswood’s Melodeon label had several other musicians play at Newport, in addition to Hurt, including blues greats Skip James and the Reverend Robert Wilkins. Even Spottswood, who clearly met with success in the revival, struggled to gain access to for his musicians. He reflects “we got our black folks there, but we weren’t able to do it with our hillbillies.”¹⁰²

The Poplins’ career as folk musicians was restricted by the limits of their connections to the most influential members of the folk revival’s inner network. Tottle describes that before their 1963 album was even released, he left the South, to pursue his own musical career as a bluegrass mandolin player. He recalls that Edna called him after the record was released, upset, because Folkways had sent several boxes of the album to her at the bus station. She reported that she had simply returned the albums, since she could not pay for them. Tottle believes that this was likely Asch’s way of compensating the Poplins – the albums were free, for them to sell at their shows, but that Edna just did not realize this.¹⁰³ It seems that the Poplins’ unfamiliarity with the music industry, and their lack of a proxy who

¹⁰⁰ Spottswood, interview with author.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Ibid.
¹⁰³ Ibid.
was familiar with the subtle and sometimes cryptic workings of the folk music industry, meant that Edna returned nearly the only income she ever received for being a musician.

**Shaping Poplins as Authentic Folk Music: Behind the Myth of the Mountains**

Putting the Poplins’ music into a stylistic category is a challenge. Their first album was a combination of original songs and Appalachian dance music, while their second focused on a contemporary country sound, with a few songs from the minstrel stage. Speaking of all their music, Richard Spottswood, producer of the second album points out “for the oldtimey people it probably sounds too country, and for the country people it’s too oldtimey.” Jack Tottle, producer of their first album describes the breadth of their musical stylings, “the Poplins’ music certainly encompasses elements of bluegrass, as well as early country, blues, vaudeville and American popular music.”

Clearly in the packaging and marketing of their music the Poplins were presented as “authentic American folk music,” where “authentic” was suggested pure music from an isolated, pre-modern South. Their first album used the standard Folkways label, a sturdy black album cover with a single-colour label glued on the front and wrapping one-quarter around the back. On the front is a photo of the band with their instruments - Edna and China with guitar and banjo respectively, along with China’s son Bill and their friend David. Trees and part of a fence are visible behind them. Between China’s aged appearance, the banjo and their outdoor setting, the imagery did a lot to label the album as traditional. Being on the Folkways label the album earned the musicians significant credibility as legitimate folk music simply by association. It is unclear

---

104 Ibid.

105 Jack Tottle, email correspondence with author, 15 February 2012.
how much marketing owner Asch did for any of his albums, but nevertheless many public libraries and college radio stations habitually purchased all records he released in given category. The second album, being on a much smaller label, had to do more to frame its contents for potential listeners. *Gwine Back to Sumter*, features close up photos of China holding his banjo, wearing bib overalls and a train cap; it also has photos of all the musicians on the album, and a close of up of Margie Reece, into which Edna’s arm, holding her guitar and playing a G chord, protrudes. This album includes a short narrative on the cover “Being a charismatic collection of old-time country songs, to wit: singular solos, delicious duets, trenchant trios, and bracing banjo tunes.”

In the liner notes to the Folkways album, Tottle acknowledges that the Poplins have some “popular music” in their repertoire, but writes that they were primarily playing folk music either composed by them or passed on to them from their Appalachian father. Tottle’s master tapes, preserved in the “Jack Tottle Bluegrass and Old Time Music Collection” in the Archives of Appalachia at East Tennessee State University tell a somewhat different story, however. My review of all of the songs that Tottle recorded in 1962, suggests that whole sections of the Poplin repertoire were left off of their Folkways album. In particular, music that was obviously popular commercial music of the day, and anything with clear connections to vaudeville and minstrel stages did not make the final cut. In total, Tottle recorded forty-three songs, of which twenty-four were released and nineteen were left off of *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina.*

The content of the album was chosen by Asch who received and edited Tottle’s master recordings. Most of the songs which were left off were not in-line with the traditional, mountain sound that Asch created on the album. Several commonly found

---

commercial songs that were left off included “Come Home Bill Bailey,” “Roll in My Sweet Baby’s Arms,” and “Gold Watch and Chain.” Others that were cut were both interesting song choices, and well performed. Many of these songs connected the Poplins’ directly to minstrelsy. For example, China and Edna gave a stellar performance of “My Gal’s a Highborn Lady,” featuring the second line “she’s dark, but not too shady,” was a classic “coon song.” Other songs with minstrel roots which were left off include “Daisy Don’t Tell” and “Darktown Strutters’ Ball.” Also omitted from the album was “Coconut Grove,” a slow, beautiful instrumental showing China’s ability to play more than just dance material, and a beautiful, apparently original, gospel tune called “Cross Over To Calvary’s Side,” featuring a call and answer chorus.

Richard Spottswood surmises that Moses Asch’s own politics were behind some of the repertoire editing on the album, “Moe was an oldtime leftist, and he knew that the music of white southerners was important; but it wasn’t as though he was willing to accept that culture in its entirety. So I’m sure that anything had minstrel show overtones was like a red flag.” The writings of Moses Asch’s son are helpful in considering the question of what he would, and would not, release. Michael Asch, an anthropologist at the University of Victoria in Canada, writes about his father’s practices in the article “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting.” Michael Asch explains that he believes his father’s goal with Folkways was a form of cultural relativism, where his goal was to promote the equality of all cultures. He adds, however, “my father did not see the principles of cultural relativism as

---

107 Master Tapes from which *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was produced, box 1, tape 6-9, Series I, Jack Tottle Bluegrass and Old Time Music Collection, 1940-1976, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.

108 Richard Spottswood, interview with author.
value neutral,” and quotes his father as stating that he would refuse to issue recordings that were “used against people.”\textsuperscript{109} It is conceivable that Moses Asch considered the music of minstrel and vaudeville shows, with their overt parody of African American cultural practices, to be “against people.” If so, then this would explain his choice to leave these songs off the Poplins’ album.

Visually, the Poplins were constructed as “authentic” folk musicians with the images on their album covers and liner notes, offering pastoral images of the musicians with their instruments on a farm. Recall here that they had to seek out a farm for the photos, because Edna’s house did not seem sufficiently picturesque. This fact is an example of the work that had to be put into constructing the Poplins in a way that ensured they would be received in the folk revival. This fact is further evidence of the difficult nature of the category of “folk” itself. Much like the construction of visual imagery, even the Poplins’ band name was adjusted when they entered the world of folk music. Prior to their Folkways album, the Poplins performed as “The Country Ramblers.” The switch to “The Poplin Family” represented a refiguring of their identity that aligned them with the idea that folk music was a family tradition. Understanding the work that went into framing the Poplins as folk artists, and recalling the songs that were left off the first album goes a long way to helping explain the seemingly dramatic transition from a “mountain” sound on the first album, to a newer, smoother and more commercial one on the second. These facts also aid in contextualizing China’s unusual two-finger playing style. Minstrel banjo players often played in a two-finger style called “thumb-lead.” China did not primarily play in the thumb-lead style, although

occasionally he did. For China to have been fluent in a two-finger style, including thumb lead, without having a minstrel-influenced repertoire would have been particularly surprising.

Another indication of the Poplins’ breadth and diversity comes from the 1944 music of Bobby Gregory and his Cactus Cowboys. Although obscure now, Bobby Gregory and his band were well-known in the mid-1940s, when they were recording in New York with Moses Asch for Folkways Records. Gregory is best known today to bluegrass musicians as the author of Jimmy Martin’s signature song “On The Sunny Side of the Mountain.” Gregory was popular in his own era, and it seems that his music must have reached Edna and China, as two of his songs ended up in their repertoire – both “Over The River Jordan” (recorded by The Poplins as “The River of Jordan”) and “My Pretty Quadroon” appear in Gregory’s 1940s discography.111

That Gregory’s music was most likely the source for several pieces of The Poplins’ key repertoire is a remarkable strike against the myth that good music cannot be “polluted” with popular, commercial material. Although many in the folk revival held were suspicious of commercial influences, the Poplins’ example demonstrates that rural music was not always isolated from commerce. Tottle’s liner note commentary about the Poplins’ “popular music influences” also makes it clear that he was well aware of the Poplins’ diverse influences. This would suggest that it was Folkways records that had the biggest role in constructing the Poplins as isolated, traditional mountain music musicians. One assumes that Moses Asch did not make the connection between Gregory and The Poplins, given that he

---

110 Margaret Martin, interview with author, 14 June 2012, Raleigh, North Carolina.

omitted numerous other quality songs with commercial connections, on *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina*.

While the stylistic shift from first to second album may have seemed surprising, the review of the complete master recordings from the Folkways sessions makes the second album make more sense. Where on the first album, much of the popular and minstrel music was held back from publication, on the second album, it was all there. Without an understanding of the breadth of the Poplins’ repertoire, this second album seems out of place. Once we understand that the breadth of the influences, tastes and influences went beyond the image of them constructed on their Folkways album, the second album no longer seems stylistically out of place.

**Local Understandings of Poplins’ Music: Country Musicians**

Close consideration of the circulation of the Poplins’ music indicates that the Poplins’ music has been understood in several different ways since it was recorded and released. While locally the Poplins were considered to be playing country music inspired by the commercial country music industry, their professional recording opportunity was gained by presenting their music as folk music. With their album’s release on the Folkways label, and by their involvement in the folk revival movement, the Poplins’ music was framed as a kind of folk practice outside of South Carolina. We get a sense of differing perceptions of Poplins’ music, by considering journalistic coverage of the Poplins’ recordings. When *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was released in 1963, *The Sumter Daily Item* described the music on the album as “country-style.” In October 1964, New York’s *Saturday Review* published a review of *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* in its

---

“Folk and Blues LPS” section. The reviewer reports that this is “one of the happiest collections waxed in many a day” and that these musicians are “a working unit in their native South Carolina.” The Folkways’ (now Smithsonian Folkways’) catalogue lists the album as “Folksongs – United States; Music-Appalachian region; Stringband.”

At the same time, coverage of the Poplins in Sumter reflects differing understandings and expectations locally. Rather than being seen as an opportunity to promote South Carolina folklore, at home *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was celebrated as a great professional opportunity for some local country musicians. In an article titled “Sumter’s Poplin Family Keeps Fingers Crossed Over Album,” in December 1963 The Sumter Daily Item reported that “Sumter’s newest musical group” played “quaint, country-style songs,” and noted that “radio stations have been sent copies” of the new album, and mentions “the Country Ramblers, as they are called, are continuing their one-night stands and party engagements in their home area. The article closes by stating “the Poplins hope their music will catch on.”

Local journalistic coverage confirms both that the Poplins music was not thought of in terms of its folk content, but rather, as connected to the commercial country music industry.

As well, reporting from Sumter indicates that the name change was not a local invention. An article from January 1965 titled “Poplin Family Riding High” reports on the positive coverage in *The Saturday Review*, stating “the current popularity of folk music has

---


115 Ray Guest, “Sumter’s Poplin Family Keeps Fingers Crossed Over Album.”
focused national attention upon a Sumter musical group, known as the Poplin Family on their albums, but better-known locally as the Country Ramblers.\footnote{Robert Raymond, “Poplin Family Riding High,” \textit{The Sumter Daily Item}, 14 January 1964, 4A.} Jack Tottle confirms that it was not the Poplins who decided on the name change:

As I recall, I presented the project to Moe Asch as “The Poplin Family” without consulting anyone else about it. I did send a copy of the written material to Edna and neither she nor Moe made any counter-suggestion. Why I thought of that name instead of the Country Ramblers I have no idea. There were other family groups from the Carter Family to the Fiddlin’ Powers family to the Stonemans and I imagine I just thought of them in a similar vein.\footnote{Jack Tottle, email communication with author, 3 November 2013.}

China and Edna’s surviving family members continue to call their family’s music “country,” and this local understanding of the Poplins’ music as country music has endured in their Sumter-area community.\footnote{Fritz LeGrand and Laura LeGrand, interview with author, Sumter, South Carolina, 1 February 2012.} At several local music events where China and Edna regularly played, their own community continues to remember the Poplins as country musicians. The music at these events is a mixture of contemporary bluegrass and commercial country music and pop songs from the 1950s and 1960s, with occasional forays into music which is more contemporary. Family and friends at these events seem to make little distinctions between the various styles of music, but tend to gather them together under
the “country” label. In casual conversations, members of the Poplins’ own community still remember them as country musicians.

**Poplin Music in Circulation: Edna’s and China’s Ongoing Influence**

At college radio stations and public libraries across the United States, the authority of the Folkways label meant that the Poplins’ first album received wide circulation, and for a time in late 1960s and early 1970s, it was in regular rotation on several college radio shows. Over the decades, the allure of the Poplin sound has persisted. Both professional and amateur musicians continue to perform songs off of their Folkways album, particularly their version of “The River of Jordan,” and their original songs “Eyes Like Cherries” and “Sit At Home.” Edna’s daughter Laura recalls receiving a letter from Japan, from an admirer of her family’s sound.

More than fifty years after their songs were first recorded, their music continues to inspire around the world. Recently a Russian video titled “29 – River of Jordan” appeared on

---

119 While it goes beyond the scope of this work, these local understandings of diverse forms of music as “country” merits further consideration. In my experience as a banjo and guitar player, as well as a researcher, applying the label “country” to a broad collection of musical forms is powerfully important to the identity of many fans and musicians. For these people, it seems that “country music,” can take a variety of forms, but is linked through a series of musical, linguistic and symbolic markers which combine to be discursively formed by and form those within a community.

120 I make this claim based on the fieldwork I have conducted in the uplands area of South Carolina. In addition to visits with the family, I made numerous trips to the region, met with other musicians and attended social functions in the fall of 2012.

121 Mike Sollins, personal communication with author, 15 December 2012. Steve Pritchard, email communication with author, 29 August 2012. Mike Sollins, a Chapel Hill, North Carolina fiddler and former college radio DJ in Boston recalls regularly playing *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina*, in the early 1970s, as does Toronto, Ontario, Canada DJ Steve Pritchard.


123 Laura LeGrand, email communication with author, 30 October 2013.
the video-sharing website YouTube, featuring two young men singing and playing, one wearing a red neckerchief, black cowboy hat and vest, and one wearing a short-sleeved plaid shirt and black jeans. The video’s description is written in Russian, but translates as “country gospel music from the repertoire of The Poplin Family (USA), performed by Dmitry Kozlov (vocals, guitar) and Roman Dementyev (banjo).” After a brief introduction in Russian, and with distinct Russian accents, the men sing and play an convincing version of the Poplins’ song. The popular early country music blog Allen’s Archive of Country Music offers file-sharing downloads of both of the Poplin albums, and calls them “Great Oldtime Music!”

Influential Czech country music collector and blogger “PragueFrank” includes both Poplin albums in his Prague Frank’s Country Music Discographies blog, where he files them under “Hillbilly” music.

*The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* circulated widely in North America and beyond, making a profound impression on aspiring musicians from the northeastern USA, California and Washington, Canada and Japan, many of whom went on to record and perform the songs from the album. In San Francisco in the early 1970s, a group of young women formed *The Any Old Time Stringband*. Member Val Mindel came across the Poplins’ Folkways album in a Bay-area library and checked it out repeatedly, until finally making a home recording of the album by placing a “shoebox” style cassette player in front of her record player’s speaker. She explains, “one cannot overstate the influence The Poplin Family

---


had on me in my younger days.” Mindel recalls that unlike the high-soprano voices of women folk singers like Judy Collins, Edna Poplin represented a role model she could relate to – an alto-voiced woman with impeccable instrumental skills:

What really struck me, I think [was that] I have a pretty low voice, and I came up through the ‘60s and there were a lot of ethereal women singers, singing way up in their head voices. I really felt that they weren’t talking to me. So hearing Edna was such an eye-opener, it was like ‘I GET that! I can totally get what she’s doing!’

Forty years later, the Any Old Time Stringband is still performing, and many of its core members continue their successful professional careers as highly respected musicians. Several continue to perform songs from the Poplin repertoire.

Banjo players inspired by China Poplin’s playing have made a lifetime study of his music. Raleigh, North Carolina banjoist Margaret Martin describes her experience of China’s playing in this way:

The Folkways album is long gone, I wore it out, and I’ve had two copies of the CD! So it’s quite inspiring for a lot of people … [but] I don’t know anybody that could play like China. He just had such an exuberant style! It must have been like he was right – I mean you couldn’t play like that without being full bore. I don’t think he used picks did he? He just had this wonderful, galloping style… I can only approximate it.

Banjoist Mac Benford concurs with Martin about China’s banjo style: “I have vivid memories of seeing them… the excitement of that banjo style, as a banjo player, it was just eye-opening for me.” Also like Martin, Benford has never been able to fully approximate China’s playing. Nearly fifty years after he first saw China play, he laments “I wanted to

127 Valerie Mindel, email communication with author, 17 December 2011.
128 Valerie Mindel, “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina: Tracing the Story of a South Carolina Stringband” (panel discussion, Folklore Colloquium series, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 14 March 2012).
129 Margaret Martin, “The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina: Tracing the Story of a South Carolina Stringband” (panel discussion, Folklore Colloquium series, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 14 March 2012).
130 Mac Benford, Interview with author.
learn how to play that ‘Eyes Like Cherries!’ That was the song that really, really stuck out.

And you know I’m still working on that – I’ve got little bits of it, and I can’t play it *anywhere near as fast* as he does, but I pretty much know what he’s doing now.”\(^\text{131}\)

\(^{131}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER V

Conclusion: Power, Genre and Poplins’ Music

A central goal in this thesis has been to consider both the history and experience of a southern family band, and the insights that their story affords us into the phenomenon of the folk revival. Unfortunately, many details of the Poplins’ careers as musicians are not known; however, we know enough about their careers and their music to draw some conclusions about the folk revival, and their experience within and beyond it. The Poplins and their music found themselves in a complex situation. In their own community they were aligned with a commercial recording industry associated with white, rural and often southern communities; through their recordings, they were aligned with a less overtly commercial, urban musical scene whose ideological orientation looked towards folk musicians as representing a universal “voice of the people.” The Poplins’ recording careers meant that however their music might be understood at home, it was decontextualized from local settings and meanings, and recontextualized as “folk music” in the folk revival. If we apply the concepts of linguistic anthropologists Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, this relationship between the folk revival movement and its traditional musicians was an intertextual one. The matter of the folk revival –its music – was moved from its original context into a new one, making it available for reinscription with new meanings and identifications.\(^\text{132}\) Although this paper does not focus on the differing perceptions of the

Poplins’ music in terms of musical genre, the linguistic anthropological conception of genre is useful in understanding the circulation of the Poplins’ music. Briggs and Bauman argue that intertextuality allows generic categories to “simultaneously render texts ordered, unified and bounded on the one hand, and fragmented, heterogeneous and open-ended on the other hand.”133 As well, they argue that generic claims are assertions of power, and explain that “by choosing to make certain features explicit (and particularly foregrounding some elements through repetition and metapragmatic framing) producers of discourse actively (re)construct and reconfigure genres.”134

In the case of the Poplins, their music was decontextualized from the setting in which Tottle found them, and recontextualized as folk music on the Folkways album. Along the way, certain changes were made in order to allow them and their music be reframed as folk musicians. One example of this process of reconfiguring is the name change from the Country Ramblers to the Poplin Family. Without intending criticism, it must be noted that the name change represented a significant change to the identity of the band. As Tottle notes that Edna Poplin was aware of the change and did not object, we must assume that she had no issue with the change.135 It may well be that she, like Tottle, was aware that a name change would help to convince Folkways owner Moses Asch to make their record. These seemingly small changes or shifts can lead to significant changes in perception; in this case, removing the allusion to commercial country music in the name, and concurrently aligning themselves with other well-known acts seems like a particularly astute move. Given that the

133 Ibid, 147.
134 Ibid, 148.
135 Jack Tottle, email communication with author, 3 November, 2013.
gambit led to the successful production of the Folkways album, we must acknowledge its success.

A second example of decontextualizing the Poplins’ music involves the song choices on the Folkways album. Tottle indicates that it was record label owner Asch who made those choices. As previously mentioned, a review of the original master recordings revealed that almost half of the songs recorded by Tottle were left off the Folkways album and have never been released. While the quality of the songs might have been an issue in a couple of cases, a number of excellent performances were left off the album. This would indicate that the songs that were left off were not in line with the musical image which Asch was constructing for the Poplins; specifically, any music with clear connections to minstrel songs was omitted from the album. This again is an example of the power and authority involved in the process of refiguring the Poplins as folk musicians. As described by Briggs and Bauman, “genre … pertains crucially to negotiations of identity and power – by invoking a particular genre, producers of discourse assert (tacitly or explicitly) that they possess the authority needed to contextualize discourse that bears these historical and social connections, and to recontextualize it in the current discursive setting.”136 While this is a critical analysis of how the Poplins and their music were presented, it is not a criticism. Indications are that Edna and China Poplin were thrilled to have recording careers, and pleased with how they were presented to the world. Briggs and Bauman point out that all communication, which certainly includes music, makes use of strategies of decontextualization and recontextualization to invoke authority and create power.137 The analysis offered in this

thesis establishes considers the ways that folk music was constructed through complex and active processes.

Beyond the story of one family band, the story of the Poplins opens up a vantage point for us to understand the development of all music in the folk revival. Exactly how “hillbilly” music made the transition from commercial to folk music, has received little attention. Historical studies on the early development of country music exist, and analyses of the revival and its music exist; but studies of the transition to folk music are sparse. The mysterious appearance of banjos as icons of pure American folk music deserves deconstruction. The powerful influence of the folk revival continues to impact American, and more broadly, and English language influenced cultures (which is to say all cultures). In the story of the Poplins, we see that their music, recorded in the 1960s but sonically reflecting the commercial music of the 1940s and 1950s was taken to a new audience, and understood in a new and entirely different context. In understanding this transition, we gain insight into both the trajectory of American country music and the contours of the folk revival.

The transition from commercial music to folk music is remarkable – what started as commercial music, recorded for 78 RPM records and broadcast on early radio, became orally transmitted folk music. Where there once may have been a commercially significant market, there no longer is. Ironically, through misunderstanding, bowdlerization or both, commercial music was, in fact, turned into folk music. This thesis demonstrates that in a very real way, the music of the Poplins has become folk music, in the sense that those who play their music

---

are learning it informally, taking part in orally transmitted, community circulation, and rarely engaging in professional performance.

This thesis has analyzed both the constitutive powers that allowed the Poplin Family to be reconfigured as folk music as well as an example of the limits of that power. Considering the career limitations encountered by the Poplins allows us to sketch the limits of the folk revival itself, creating a paradox where we can reveal the inner workings of the folk revival by the experience of those who were (at least partially) outside the revival. Concurrently, this thesis has engaging with local understandings of the Poplins’ music and experience, with the hope that this extends to them a new form of agency. In successive waves, early country music continues to meet revival – at the turn of the last century with the massive commercial success of the Coen brothers’ movie *O Brother Where Art Thou*, and currently with the wild popularity of the bands The Avett Brothers and Mumford and Sons.\(^\text{139}\) The Poplin family and their music are a part of that revival.

\(^{139}\) Ethan Coen (producer) and Joel Coen (director), *O Brother Where Art Thou*, Burbank, CA: Universal Pictures, 2000.
REFERENCES

I. Primary Source Materials:

- Interviews and Panel Discussions


__________. Interview with author, Elkins, West Virginia. 7 August 2013.

Carder, Ashley, Shirley Carder and Pat Ahrens. Interview with author. Leesville, South Carolina. 28 August 2012.


LeGrand, Laura, Fritz LeGrand, and Wayne Geddings. Interview with author, Sumter, South Carolina. 1 February 2012.

LeGrand, Laura. Email communication December 2011 – November 2013.


Lindler, Grady, Ashley Carder and Chris Boutwell. Interview with author, Batesburg, South Carolina. 29 August 2012.

Martin, Margaret. Interview with author, Raleigh, North Carolina. 14 June 2012.

Mindel, Val. Email communication, January – March 2012.

Spotswood, Dick. Telephone interview with author, 6 April 2013.


__________. Email communication, January 2012 – November 2013.
Archival Holdings

The Poplin Family. Master Tapes with from which *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina* was produced, Box 1, tape 6-9, Series I, *Jack Tottle Bluegrass and Old Time Music Collection, 1940-1976*, Archives of Appalachia, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee.


II. Secondary Sources

- **Commercially Released Sound Recordings**


  The Poplin Family. *The Poplin Family of Sumter, South Carolina*. Smithsonian-Folkways, FW 02306. undated. CD.


  ______________. *Gwine Back to Sumter*. Washington, DC: Melodeon Records MLP 7331. 1965. 33 1/3 RPM.

• Publications


- **Websites Consulted:**


  “Poplin Family úterý, 2. října 2012” *Praguefrank’s Country Music Discography,* 2 October 2012. [http://countrydiscography.blogspot.ca/2012/10/poplín-family.html](http://countrydiscography.blogspot.ca/2012/10/poplín-family.html).


