Ghost Singers, Citybillies, and Pseudo-Hillbillies: Freelance New York Recording Artists and the Creation of Old-Time Music, 1924-1932
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In 1924, searching for new artists with which to enter what would soon be called the hillbilly records market, Vocalion Records signed a promising prospect named George Reneau, a twenty-two-year-old blind street singer from Knoxville, Tennessee. Between April 1924 and October 1925, Reneau recorded more than fifty selections for Vocalion's new hillbilly catalog at the firm's New York City studio, beginning with his debut release, "Lonesome Road Blues." Few who purchased his records probably ever suspected that another artist, uncredited on the labels, was actually "ghost singing" on most of them. Nor should they have suspected anything, for his Vocalion records carried only the artist credit: "Sung & Played by George Reneau—The Blind Musician of the Smoky Mountains," or some variation of it. But Vocalion executives, for reasons that are not completely clear, decided to pair Reneau on approximately two-thirds of his recordings with a then little-known twenty-three-year-old vaudeville singer and songwriter named Gene Austin, who went on to become one of the best-selling singers of the late 1920s and is best remembered today for his 1927 hit "My Blue Heaven." Vocalion executives must have been pleased with Austin's hillbilly "ghost singing," because in July 1924, three months after making his first recordings with Reneau, the firm enlisted Austin to supply uncredited vocals and banjo accompaniment on ten hillbilly selections by the elderly Tennessee champion fiddler, "Uncle Am" Stuart.[1]

Today, George Reneau and Uncle Am Stuart are widely regarded as genuine folk musicians and pioneering hillbilly recording artists, but Gene Austin, in contrast, has not fared as well in the aesthetic judgment of modern-day country music scholars. Although he recorded a total of forty-one hillbilly sides at the beginning of his recording career, Austin has been relegated to a mere footnote in current country music histories, if he's mentioned at all, in large part because he has become so widely identified as the quintessential Jazz Age pop crooner. Charles K. Wolfe, for example, has dismissed Austin's vocal contributions on his hillbilly recordings with Reneau, noting that Austin "was anything but a country vocalist" and that "he went on to become the Bing Crosby of the 1920s."[2] But Austin was only one of almost 120 New York studio singers and musicians who performed on hillbilly records between 1924 and 1932, but whose contributions to this fledgling industry have been overlooked or undervalued (*See Appendix A*). Historians and folklorists have long viewed hillbilly music as essentially a commercialized form of the traditional rural white folk music of the American South. This definition, still the cornerstone of much of country music scholarship, has marginalized the important contributions of Gene Austin and these urban studio singers and musicians due to their lack of "authentic" folk backgrounds and their formal musical training.[3] As a result, they have been roundly dismissed in country music scholarship as "professional hillbillies," "citybillies," or, worse, as "pseudo-hillbillies"—that is, as nothing more than musical pretenders and

impersonators. Vernon Dalhart, whom historian Tony Russell has dubbed "dean of the citybilly singers," has come in for particular abuse. Despite his 1981 induction into the Country Music Hall of Fame, Dalhart has been derided as a "pseudo-hillbilly," a "musical carpetbagger," and, my personal favorite, "the John Denver of old-time music."[4] During the 1920s, however, based upon the tremendous sales of his and other citybilly singers' hillbilly records, record buyers embraced their music and did not, apparently, exercise the same harsh judgments as modern-day country music scholars. Many of the original topical songs Dalhart recorded, such as "The Death of Floyd Collins" (1925) and "The Santa Barbara Earthquake" (1925), for example, entered oral tradition among both white and black southerners, and were gathered and included in folksong collections during the 1930s and 1940s as examples of "authentic" southern folksongs.[5]

Dalhart and the other citybillies do not fit neatly into the master narrative of country music's history. Many of them, for example, were born in New York and other industrialized cities of the Northeast. Many of them were immigrants, or more often, the children of immigrants. And many of them were also Jewish.[6] But these New York studio singers and musicians had a significant impact on the early development of this musical genre. The full extent of these artists' involvement in the hillbilly recording industry has not been generally acknowledged, and in this paper I'd like to present a broad overview of New York citybillies' involvement in the hillbilly recording industry before 1933 and to highlight their critical role in establishing the core elements of the modern country music recording industry as well as in creating an appealing hillbilly-pop sound that attracted the first national audience for this music.[7] Perhaps most interesting, these New York freelance singers and musicians' participation in the hillbilly recording industry raises important questions about the issues of authenticity, commercialism, and the regional and class origins of this music, around which much of country music studies currently revolves.

In 1924, the hillbilly recording industry was less than two years old, and New York City, the headquarters of the nation's major talking-machine companies and music-publishing houses, was its epicenter. To obtain new selections for their expanding hillbilly catalogs, talking machine companies either brought southern recording artists, such as George Reneau and Uncle Am Stuart, to their northern studios to make recordings, or sent mobile crews to record these artists in makeshift studios set up in southern cities such as Atlanta, Memphis, New Orleans, and Dallas. Between 1923 and 1932, the major talking-machine companies made approximately one hundred such field-recording excursions in search of hillbilly material, but contrary to popular belief, most of the hillbilly recordings produced during this period were recorded not at these field sessions, but in New York City-area studios.[8] And no group played a more significant role in the New York studio production of hillbilly records than the citybillies, the freelance professional singers and musicians such as Carson J. Robison, Frank Luther, Frankie Marvin, Arthur Fields, Bob Miller, and, most notably, Vernon Dalhart, all of whom began their professional recording careers in light opera or popular music but who, during the mid- to late 1920s, shifted into recording, if sometimes only occasionally, hillbilly music.

Between 1924 and 1932, dozens of citybilly singers and musicians operating in the New York City area made at least one hillbilly recording as principal artists.[9] Many of them ranked among the most famous recording artists in the popular music field during the Jazz Age, including Al Bernard, Frank Crumit, Arthur Fields, Ernest Hare, Irving and Jack Kaufman,

Johnny Marvin, Harry Reser, and Roy Smeck. But by far the most significant was Vernon Dalhart, a classically trained light opera tenor originally from Texas. Dalhart's 1924 recording of "Wreck of the Old 97," coupled with "The Prisoner's Song," for the Victor label, sold a certified one million copies over the next three years and became the first national hit of the hillbilly recording industry. Dalhart had begun his recording career in 1915, and, in the decade before his 1924 runaway hit record, had recorded more than 350 sides in the semi-classical and popular fields, particularly what were called "negro dialect" songs. In an effort to capitalize on his newfound success, he began to specialize in recordings for the fledgling hillbilly market, particularly recently composed topical ballads about highly publicized disasters, tragedies, murders, and current news events, many of them composed by his regular guitarist and duet partner, Carson Robison. Dalhart went on to become the most prolific of the freelance New York studio singers working in the hillbilly music field, sometimes recording as many as three sessions a day, during his peak years between 1925 and 1928. By the time his recording career collapsed in 1931, he had compiled a massive discography of more than 1,800 masters—which, counting the various releases on the major labels and their subsidiaries, were issued on more than 5,000 sides. Approximately two-thirds of these were hillbilly recordings.[10]

Like Dalhart, most of the New York studio singers and musicians involved in the hillbilly recording industry worked as freelance recording artists for one or more of the fourteen or so record companies operating in the mid-1920s in or near New York City. Many of these artists had formal and, sometimes, classical training and professional recording careers that stretched back to the World War I era. Incredibly versatile and much in-demand, these artists moved fluidly across industry-defined genres, and recorded far more than just hillbilly records. For example, Carson Robison, who began his recording career in 1924 as a Victor studio guitarist and whistler, recorded a broad range of pop, jazz, and hillbilly records during the 1920s; in 1929, under the billing of Carson Robison and His Kansas City Jack-Rabbits, he and a studio band even recorded a pair of "hot" jazz foxtrots for Victor's race record series.[11]

The studio system of hillbilly record production that emerged in New York in the mid-1920s actually evolved from a longstanding industry practice. Since at least 1900, talking-machine companies had employed a small stable of some two to three dozen freelance studio singers to provide the bulk of the record selections for their popular catalogs.[12] Record companies came to rely heavily upon these New York studio singers and musicians, particularly before 1927, to help them develop their hillbilly catalogs as well. After all, most of the singers and musicians discovered in the South, as Charles K. Wolfe reminds us, "were basically amateurs who, though often highly gifted and innovative folk artists," had a limited repertoire and little, if any, formal musical training.[13] Thus, New York studio singers and musicians offered several distinct advantages over more "authentic" and "traditional" southern singers and musicians. First, studio regulars were experienced professionals who had proven themselves capable of managing the rigorous, sometimes nerve-wracking demands of making phonograph recordings. Second, these veteran studio artists were able to handle an array of musical material in a variety of musical styles, even to the point of being able to closely imitate the vocal nuances and phrasing of other hillbilly singers such as Charlie Poole and Jimmie Rodgers. Third, unlike most southern hillbilly artists, many of these studio regulars were formally trained artists who could read a lead sheet and quickly master new material assigned to them by the studios, sometimes in the recording studio itself on the very day of the recording. Such professionalism

and musical literacy allowed record companies to finish sessions efficiently and punctually, and thereby keep overhead studio costs down. Skilled singers and musicians also enabled firms, ever alert to the shifting trends of the market and to changing public tastes, to quickly record and release cover versions of strong-selling songs on rival labels and recordings of other songs then in vogue, before such selections peaked in popularity.[14] Finally and most obviously, these studio veterans were accessible to the record studios and available for a session with only a few days notice. As a result of these distinct advantages, studio regulars served as the "workhorses" of this New York studio system of hillbilly record production, and talking machine companies employed them to compile much of their earliest hillbilly catalogs.[15]

As freelancers, these studio singers and musicians recorded prolifically, sometimes recording the same selection for several different firms. Between 1924 and 1934, for example, Vernon Dalhart recorded his smash hit, "The Prisoner's Song," for twelve different companies, which issued the recordings on at least 53 labels in the United States alone. As a result of their busy recording schedules, these New York studio singers and musicians amassed an enormous discography of hillbilly recordings—more than 7,500 issued sides between 1924 and 1932. Collectively, these citybilly artists accounted for fully one third of the approximately 11,400 hillbilly records released in the U.S. market before 1933 (*See Appendix B*).[16] Perhaps even more astonishing, nearly 85 percent of these citybilly recordings were produced by just six artists: Vernon Dalhart, Carson Robison, Arthur Fields, Bob Miller, Frankie Marvin, and Frank Luther.[17] To conceal the fact that these prolific studio singers and musicians made so many records for their hillbilly catalogs, record companies often disguised their true identities behind pseudonyms. Dalhart, for example, had his recordings issued under his own name as well as at least ninety-eight different pseudonyms on U.S. releases; another fifty-seven pseudonyms were used on records released in foreign countries. Despite the fact that these citybilly records featured professional New York studio singers and musicians, often performing original songs written by professional New York songwriters, talking-machine companies nonetheless advertised these records as commercial offerings of genuine folk ballads from the South and particularly the Mountain South. Victor's *Olde Time Fiddlin' Tunes* brochure, for example, described Dalhart's "Wreck of the Old 97" and "The Prisoner's Song" as "genuine songs of the Southern mountaineers, given with all their original lyric vigor and their quaint melody."[18]

Unlike most southern hillbilly artists, who usually recorded either with, or as part of, regular, self-contained bands, citybilly singers typically relied upon formally trained studio musicians to provide the musical accompaniment on their records.[19] Among these session players were some of New York's finest jazz and dance band musicians, including May Singhi Breen, Frank Ferera, Ross Gorman, Phil Napoleon, "King" Bennie Nawahi, Nat Shilkret, and Joe Venuti.[20] On Bernard "Slim" Smith's 1931 hillbilly recording of "My Little A-1 Brownie" for Columbia, for example, "King" Benny Nawahi juggled "hot" solos on four different instruments—the Hawaiian steel guitar, mandolin, standard guitar, and harmonica. Also playing on this recording was another young session musician, who would also eventually be crowned a "king" and also, coincidentally, named Benny, a twenty-two-year-old clarinet player named Benny Goodman. The use of studio musicians to provide the instrumental backing on commercial recordings is often identified chiefly as a 1950s development in country music history, particularly associated with the Nashville Sound, but, in fact, from the first formative decade of hillbilly music this practice was firmly established.[21]

The New York studio system in which these freelance singers and musicians participated also helped to establish other elements of the modern country music recording industry. This system, for example, encouraged the rapid professionalization of the hillbilly music industry, including the production of original songs written by a new class of songwriters who specialized in hillbilly numbers. Most southern hillbilly recording artists relied upon older banjo and fiddle tunes, traditional ballads, and turn-of-the twentieth-century Tin Pan Alley songs for material for their records. But because their extraordinarily busy recording schedules consumed material voraciously, citybilly singers often either wrote their own songs or, in the case of Vernon Dalhart, turned to others to supply them with new material to record. Dalhart's guitarist and duet partner, Carson Robison, the first professional songwriter of the hillbilly recording industry, pioneered the practice of writing for the hillbilly recording industry what *Farm & Fireside* magazine in 1927 called "new old songs." Robison was particularly adept at composing so-called event songs, such as "The Wreck of the Shenandoah," "The Miami Storm," and "The John T. Scopes Trial," all of which relied upon a standard formula and needed to be produced quickly in order to capitalize on the public interest in a particular headline-making incident.[22] Moreover, although it organized the recording of this and other genres of music on a regimented, assembly-line basis, the New York studio system also promoted the careful crafting of hillbilly records as musical commodities. In contrast to southern field-recording sessions, for example, New York studio sessions allowed A&R men, in collaboration with musical directors, arrangers, and the musicians themselves, to exert greater control in creating a particular desired sound, with the addition of certain instruments and, in many cases, special sound effects, such as train whistles, bird calls, bells, and even whistling and hammering. On these New York citybilly recordings, A&R men employed the standard stringed instruments such as fiddles, guitars, banjos, and mandolins, as well as harmonicas, found in so much of the southern tradition of hillbilly music. But they also sometimes added such "alien" instruments as violas, cellos, clarinets, piccolos, trumpets, trap drums, and even xylophones, tubas, and saxophones.[23] Occasionally, recording directors also employed New York studio musicians at the sessions of southern hillbilly singers and musicians summoned to New York, as in the case of Gene Austin's Vocalion recordings with George Reneau and Uncle Am Stuart.[24]

Within this comprehensive New York studio system, citybilly singers and musicians played a significant role in defining a distinctive new style of hillbilly music that appealed to a broad audience of American record-buyers. Originally, the earliest recordings of hillbilly music had featured solo fiddlers, fiddle-and-guitar duets, banjoists, and some stringband music. Much of this music was derived from the southern dance tradition, and was performed in, for lack of a better description, a rough, raw style. If such music featured vocals at all, the lyrics were usually sung in a thickly accented style that sometimes rendered them almost incomprehensible, as in the singing of Fiddlin' John Carson or Charlie Poole. But New York studio singers employed clear, easily understood vocals on their hillbilly recordings, and the sedate pop orchestration that session musicians provided on these records was chiefly intended to showcase the singing and the song lyrics. New York citybilly singers and musicians recast hillbilly music as a principally vocal tradition, a listening—as opposed to a dance—music, and this new emphasis on song lyrics and vocals, one of the defining features of 1920s citybilly recordings, paved the way for the rapid rise of later singing stars such as Jimmie Rodgers, Gene Autry, and Jimmie Davis.[25]

On their recordings, New York citybilly singers and musicians typically applied a light classical or pop treatment to hillbilly themes and content. In doing so, they brought an unparalleled degree of sophistication and elegance to hillbilly music, and created, some three decades before the "Nashville Sound," a new, strikingly original hillbilly style that I call the "New York Sound." Consider, for example, Arthur Fields and Fred Hall's 1931 Crown recording of "Eleven More Months and Ten More Days," which is representative of this uptown hillbilly sound in its vocal style and pop orchestration. It features Fields and Hall singing a duet of one of their self-composed songs, a comical prison ballad, with jaunty accompaniment provided by Eddie Grosso on clarinet, (possibly) Charles Magnate on accordion, and Al Russo on banjo.[26] To be sure, this New York Sound was not without its musical and aesthetic shortcomings. Not surprisingly, much of this music degenerated into a highly predictable formula, and many of these records, like much of commercially recorded music in general, featured trite and utterly forgettable selections. But during the second half of the 1920s, this slick, sophisticated, and mellow New York Sound attracted a broad audience that established hillbilly music as a commercial genre with a national and, indeed, an international appeal. In creating this uptown sound, studio singers and musicians gave birth to a new, mainstream hillbilly-pop hybrid that led to the Hollywood singing cowboys of the 1930s and 1940s, and, ultimately, to the Nashville Sound of the 1950s and 1960s.[27] Even Jimmie Rodgers's commercial recordings, in many respects, represent simply a refinement of the 1920s New York Sound.[28]

Beyond their significance in defining the New York Sound and establishing many of the core elements of the modern studio production system still in use today in Nashville, New York citybilly singers and musicians are also significant because their very participation in the hillbilly recording industry raises several important questions that are central to the scholarly study of this music as a commercial genre. In closing, I wish to pose a series of questions about how we, as scholars of American music, have understood and interpreted this music. Considering that these New York citybilly singers and musicians accounted for fully one-third of the hillbilly records released in the United States before 1933, to what degree can we argue, as so many scholars have done, that hillbilly music was actually a traditional rural folk music? In fact, collaborations of traditional artists and studio musicians, such as those of Gene Austin and George Reneau, reveal the constructed nature of hillbilly music as a musical genre and challenge our understanding of this music as simply a commercialized form of southern white folk music. Likewise, to what degree can we actually call hillbilly music a working-class music? And to what degree can we even describe it as a "southern" music? The participation of the New York citybillies in the hillbilly recording industry suggests that we need to reevaluate our understanding of this music, and view it not as a centuries-old organic folk music of the rural South but rather as a carefully constructed commercial genre that was part of the broader expansion of mass-mediated music in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their involvement, in fact, reveals that recorded hillbilly music was, in many respects, similar to other genres of American popular music and often recorded by the same artists who made recordings in these other genres. Indeed, like these other genres, hillbilly music was a largely an invention of the talking-machine industry, complete with a fabricated identity and imagery that made it distinctive in the marketplace. If country music studies, now in its fifth decade as an academic enterprise, is to advance interpretively and theoretically, we will need to embrace the cosmopolitan, the professional, the popular, and the Manhattan influences on 1920s hillbilly music. Surely restoring these citybilly singers and

musicians to their rightful place within country music scholarship is a good first step in these long-term endeavors.

Appendix A:
New York Studio Singers and Musicians
Who Performed on Hillbilly Recordings, 1924-1932

Bernard Altschuler	Frank Crumit	Ewen Hail	Frankie Marvin	Al Russo
Gene Austin	Vernon Dalhart	Fred Hall	Johnny Marvin	Joseph Samuels
Abel Baer	Philip D'Arcy	Ernest Hare	Joseph Mayo	Andy Sannella
Smith Ballew	Horace Davis	Gus Helleberg	Bob Miller	Lucien Schmitt
Frank Banta	Saxie Dowell	Billy Hillpot	Emmett Miller	Roy Shield
Clement Barone	Seger Ellis	Bert Hirsch	Borrah Minevitch	Jack Shilkret
Charles Bates	Jack Erickson	Almoth Hodges	Sam Moore	Lew Shilkret
Al Bernard	Abe Essig	Harry Holden	Leroy Montesanto	Nat Shilkret
Frank Black	Roy Evans	Adelyne Hood	Al Morse	A. Sirillo
George Black	Frank Ferera	Eugene Jaudas	Phil Napoleon	Roy Smeck
Joe Biondi	James Ferraro	Leonard Joy	Benny Nawahi	Del Staigers
Rube Bloom	Arthur Fields	Frank Kamplain	Frank Novak	Leonard Stokes
Bert Borodkin	Anthony Franchini	Gene Kardos	James O'Keefe	Ed Thiele
May Singhi Breen	Frank Franchini	Irving Kaufman	Lester O'Keefe	Paul Tremaine
Larry Briers	Carl Freed	Jack Kaufman	Earl Oliver	Emil Velazco
John F. Burckhardt	Sam Freed	Murray Kellner	Jack Parker	Joe Venuti
Barney Burnett	Clarence Gaskill	Scrappy Lambert	Steve Porter	Tom Vodola
John Cali	Wilfred Glenn	Zora Layman	Benny Posner	N. Weiner
William Carola	Jack Glogau	Frank Luther	Lou Raderman	Bill Wirges
William Carlino	Benny Goodman	Bob McGimsey	Sam Raitz	John Witzmann
Chris Chapman	Ross Gorman	Leo McConville	Harry Reser	
Chezz Chase	Meyer Gorodetzer	Charles Magnante	Justin Ring	
A. Cibelli	Joe Green	Bob McGimsey	Dick Robertson	
Tony Colucci	Eddie Grosso	Jack Major	Carson Robison	

Appendix B:

Total Hillbilly Recordings Made by New York

Studio Singers and Musicians, 1924-1932

	Recorded Masters	U.S. Releases (Sides)	Foreign Releases (Sides)
New York Studio Singers & Musicians	2,774	7,537	1,188
All Recording Artists	11,400	22,800	3,200
Percent of Total	24.2%	33.1%	37.1%

NOTES

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[1] "Young Blind Musician Records for Vocalion," *Talking Machine World* 20 (June 15, 1924): 46; Charles K. Wolfe, "George Reneau: A Biographical Sketch," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 15 (Winter 1979): 205-207; *Johnson City (Tenn.) Press*, April 27, 1939; Jim Walsh, "Favorite Pioneer Recording Artists: Gene Austin," *Hobbies* 61 (February 1957): 35; Barry Mazor, "The Father of Southern Pop," *No Depression* no. 54 (November-December 2004): 86, 80-90; Norm Cohen and Tor Magnusson, "George Reneau: A Discographical Survey," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 15 (Winter 1979): 208-213; Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942*, with editorial research by Bob Pinson, assisted by the staff of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 740-741, 880-881. Reneau and Austin's Vocalion recordings were commercially successful enough for Thomas A. Edison, Inc. to recruit the two artists to reprise several of these same selections for its label at a September 1924 session. Unlike Vocalion, however, Edison was far more forthcoming in assigning artist credits on their records, listing both Reneau and Austin's names on the labels, and billing them as the "Blue Ridge Duo."

It remains unclear why Vocalion recruited Austin to sing on Reneau's records rather than allowing the young Tennessean to sing himself. Austin later claimed that Cliff Hess, Vocalion's A&R man who supervised the duo's recordings, told him that Reneau's voice "didn't record well" on the acoustical recording equipment, and, moreover, "he lacked a sense of timing." In October 1925, Vocalion did permit Reneau, now working without Austin (who was under exclusive contract to Victor), to do his own vocals on the remaining eighteen sides he waxed for the label. See *Johnson City (Tenn.) Press*, April 27, 1939; Wolfe, "George Reneau," 206; Cohen and Magnusson, "George Reneau," 211, 212-213; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 741.

[2] Charles K. Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings: The Story of Country Music in Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977), 32; Mazor, "The Father of Southern Pop," 90.

[3] Patrick Huber, comp., "New York Studio Singers and Musicians on Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932," unpublished list (a copy of which remains in the author's possession), compiled in 2009 from

Russell, *Country Music Records*; Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002 [1968]), 1, 28-29. Unfortunately, citybilly singers and musicians are often considered beyond the pale of country music studies. Even Tony Russell, who employs one of the most liberal working definitions of country music of any scholar currently writing today, wrestled, by his own admission, with the thorny problem of whether to include such singers and musicians in his definitive *Country Music Records* (2004) discography. In the end, to his great credit, he did include the recordings of many of them. Others, however, he omitted. See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 4-5; Kip Lornell, review of Russell, Country Music Records, in *American Music* 24 (Summer 2006): 232.

[4] See, for example, William Ruhlmann, *Breaking Records: 100 Years of Hits* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 47; Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992 [1979]), 385 (quoting Bill Ivey, then director of the Country Music Foundation in Nashville); Ralph S. Peer, "Ralph Peer Sees No Hypo for Late Jimmie Rodgers; Dalhart Not a Hillbilly," *Variety* 200 (November 2, 1955): 52. Writing in *Variety* in 1955, Ralph S. Peer, the music publisher and former Victor A&R man who discovered and then managed Jimmie Rodgers, asserted that, "Vernon Dalhart was never a hillbilly and never a hillbilly artist. Dalhart had a peculiar ability to adapt hillbilly music to suit the taste of the non-hillbilly population. Perhaps we could characterize him as pseudo-hillbilly. Dalhart was extremely successful as a recording artist because he was a profitable substitute for a real hillbilly." See Peer, "Ralph Peer Sees No Hypo for Late Jimmie Rodgers," 52.

Citybilly is a term coined in 1945 by the eminent American musicologist and folksong scholar Charles Seeger. Originally, he applied the term, as Norm Cohen explains, "to folk [revival] music as performed by non-folk performers in nontraditional styles approaching those of the concert stage." But since at least the early 1960s, country music historians and folklorists have employed the term, in an extension of its original definition and usually in a derisive manner, to describe urban-based singers of commercial hillbilly music, particularly those who worked in the New York area, such as Vernon Dalhart, Carson Robison, Frank Luther, and others who came from outside of the rural southern folk culture that supposedly produced hillbilly music, but who nonetheless interpreted this music on phonograph records, radio programs, and the vaudeville stage. See Charles Seeger's comments in "Conference on the Character and State of Studies in Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore* 59 (October-December 1946): 512-513; Anne Cohen and Norm Cohen, "Folk and Hillbilly Music: Some Further Thoughts on Their Relations," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 13 (Summer 1977), 50-51, reprinted in *Exploring Roots Music: Twenty Years of the* JEMF Quarterly, edited by Nolan Porterfield (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 157-158. See also Charles Seeger, "Reviews," *Journal of American Folklore* 61

(April-June 1948): 216, 217, which is often mistakenly cited as containing the first appearance of Seeger's newly minted term in print. For early examples of the term's application to professional New York recording artists like Vernon Dalhart and Carson Robison, see John Greenway, "For the Folklorists' Basic Library," *Western Folklore* 21 (October 1962): 296; D. K. Wilgus, "Current Hillbilly Recordings: A Review Article," *Journal of American Folklore* 78 (July-September 1965): 268; D. K. Wilgus, "'Field' Recordings," *Journal of American Folklore* 79 (October-December 1966): 633. As will become apparent below, I believe the term *citybilly* is a meaningless and therefore largely useless one, and I employ it here only because of its widespread usage by critics of such professional New York-based studio singers and musicians and because of its utility as a shorthand description of these artists.

[5] Charles K. Wolfe, "Event Songs," in *Readin' Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky Tonk Bars*, edited by Cecelia Tichi, special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (Winter 1995): 225.

[6] To take one example, Murray Kellner, who as Dalhart's regular violinist between 1925 and 1928 backed him on more than five hundred recordings, was the Brooklyn-born son of Russian Jewish émigrés and had studied under the concertmaster of the New York Philharmonic. Besides working as an accompanist for Vernon Dalhart and later Carson Robison, Kellner also made a single hillbilly recording under his own name, a version of the fiddle tune "Hell Broke Loose in Georgia," for Gennett in 1926. On it he was billed as "The Fiddlin' Cowboy." During the 1920s and 1930s, Kellner also recorded hundreds of popular dance numbers and jazz selections, both under his own name and as a session musician. In the mid-1930s, he led one of the regular orchestras featured on the NBC radio program *Let's Dance*, and, after World War II, as a Hollywood session musician, he recorded with such pop stars as Doris Day, Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Bobby Darin, Herb Alpert, and Nat King Cole. See Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920: Kings County, New York, Population Schedule, 3A (microfilm); Russell, *Country Music Records*, 244-270, 278-280, 282, 287-288, 476; Eugene Chadbourne, Murray Kellner," allmusic.com <http://www.allmusic.com/> (accessed October 30, 2009).

[7] For two exceptions who do stress the accomplishments of citybillies, see Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 61-62, 64; Charles K. Wolfe, "Vernon Dalhart," *American National Biography Online* <http://www.anb.org> (accessed October 30, 2009); Wolfe, "Event Songs," esp. pp. 221-225, 229. Wolfe, for example, has credited Dalhart as "a major force in the popularization of rural vernacular music" in his entry for *American National Biography Online*, and, elsewhere has noted that Dalhart's commercial success as an interpreter of event songs "[p]robably more than any other single factor, . . . encouraged the big record companies to seriously pursue the country music market and thus to help define and promote a major new commercial art form." See Wolfe, "Vernon Dalhart"; Wolfe, "Event Songs," 229. While Dalhart's accomplishment as the first recording artist to make a million-selling hillbilly

record often merits a brief acknowledgement in country music histories, it usually only serves as a narrative set-up to the discussion of a supposedly more "authentic" hillbilly singing star, Jimmie Rodgers, whom the Nashville establishment has enshrined as "The Father of Country Music."

[8] Patrick Huber, comp., "New York City-Area Recording Sessions of Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932," unpublished list (a copy of which remains in the author's possession), compiled in 2009 from Russell, *Country Music Records*. Prior to 1927, approximately eighty percent of hillbilly releases were recorded in New York City or, in the case of Victor and Edison, in nearby Camden, New Jersey, and Orange, New Jersey, respectively. By the late 1920s, however, the late Charles K. Wolfe argued, most hillbilly records ("80 or even 90 percent," he estimated) were actually recorded at field sessions in southern cities. It is true that the total percentage of hillbilly selections produced in New York City declined after 1927, when talking-machine firms began to make regular recording trips to the South and record a greater number of selections there. But even then, most hillbilly records still originated in permanent studios outside of the South: in New York City, Chicago, Hollywood, and, in the case of Gennett records, Richmond, Indiana. Wolfe's claim rested on quantitative data he compiled, but his research included only a small sampling of record companies (three) and, moreover, counted only the hillbilly releases on their flagship labels and only for selected years. These three methodological decisions significantly reduced the number of New York City-area recordings in his sample and thus skewed his conclusions about the dominance of southern field sessions within the late 1920s hillbilly recording industry. See Charles K. Wolfe, "The Bristol Syndrome: Field Recordings of Early Country Music," in Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, eds., *Country Music Annual 2002* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 204-205.

The best overviews of talking-machine companies' practice of staging field-recording sessions in the South are Wolfe, "The Bristol Syndrome," 202-221, and Tony Russell, "Country Music on Location: 'Field Recording' Before Bristol," *Popular Music* 26 (January 2007): 23-31. But see also Charles K. Wolfe, "Ralph Peer at Work: The Victor 1927 Bristol Sessions," *Old Time Music* no. 5 (Summer 1972): 10-15; Charles Wolfe, "Early Country Music in Knoxville: The Brunswick Sessions and the End of an Era," *Old Time Music* no. 12 (Spring 1974): 19-31; Charles Wolfe and Tony Russell, "The Asheville Session," *Old Time Music* no. 31 (Winter 1978/1979): 5-12; Kip Lornell and Ted Mealor, "A & R Men and the Geography of Piedmont Blues Recordings From 1924-1941," *ARSC Journal* 26 (Spring 1995): 1-22; Christopher Lornell, "Spatial Perspectives on the Field Recording of Traditional American Music: A Case Study from Tennessee in 1928," *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 47 (1981): 153-159 (reprinted in George O. Carney, ed., *The Sounds of People and Places: A Geography of American Folk and Popular Music* [Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994], 77-84); Charles K. Wolfe, "The Legend That Peer

Built: Reappraising the Bristol Sessions," in Charles K. Wolfe and Ted Olson, eds., *The Bristol Sessions: Writings About the Big Bang of Country Music* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2005), 17-39; Charles K. Wolfe, "The Rest of the Story: Other Early Recordings Sessions in the Tri-Cities Area," in Wolfe and Olson, eds., *The Bristol* Sessions, 235-256.

[9] Huber, comp., "New York Studio Singers and Musicians on Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932." Although my paper focuses on the New York City area, it is worth noting that record companies were also employing veteran studio singers and musicians to produce hillbilly recordings in Chicago, Hollywood, and Atlanta. For example, several dozen of the hillbilly records that Columbia recorded in Atlanta, where the firm maintained a permanent studio on Peachtree Street in the late 1920s, featured the singer, trumpeter, and bandleader Dan Hornsby (who also worked for the label as a talent scout and A&R man) recording under his own name, with a popular dance band that often included banjoist and guitarist Perry Bechtel (billed as "The Man with a Thousand Fingers"), pianist Taylor Flanagan, guitarist Sterling "Pops" Melvin, cornetist Pete Underwood, and drummer Stanley Hazeltine (sometimes spelled "Hasseltine"). Several of these musicians also recorded under their own names as band leaders as well as performed as session musicians on the Atlanta recordings of both blues and hillbilly artists. Even local hillbilly musicians such as guitarist Hoke Rice and a few members of the Skillet Lickers—fiddlers Clayton McMichen and Bert Layne, and guitarist and singer Riley Puckett—appear to have occasionally worked in Columbia's Atlanta studio as session players on the race and hillbilly recordings of other artists. See Wolfe, "Columbia Records and Old-Time Music," 120; Joe DePriest, "Dan Hornsby," *Bluegrass Unlimited* 24 (August 1989): 32-35; *Atlanta Constitution*, September 9, 1928, April 4, 1929; *Atlanta Journal*, April 18, 1929; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 98, 131, 141, 208, 211-212, 317, 318, 345, 366, 441-442, 517, 567-570, 870-871; Robert M. W. Dixon, John Godrich, and Howard Rye, comps., *Blues and Gospel Records, 1890-1943*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997 [1964]), 156, 303, 735.

[10] Russell, *Country Music Records*, 100-101, 238, 242-292, 322, 337-345, 472, 605-607, 761, 819; Norm Cohen, "Robert W. Gordon and the Second Wreck of the 'Old 97,'" *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (January 1974): 20-21; Norm Cohen, "Commercial Music Documents: Number Six," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1970): 171-173; Jack Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart: First Star of Country Music* (Denver: Mainspring Press, 2005), 126-129, 267. The best single source on Dalhart is Jack Palmer's biography, *Vernon Dalhart*, upon which I relied heavily for this brief biographical sketch. But also extremely useful are Jim Walsh, Favorite Pioneer Record Artists: Vernon Dalhart," a seven-part series originally published in *Hobbies* (May-December 1960), reprinted in full in *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 18 (Fall/Winter 1982): 131-145; Wolfe, "Vernon Dalhart," Tony Russell, "Vernon Dalhart," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*,

edited by Paul Kingsbury (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131-132; Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 14-15; and particularly the published articles and essays by the other major Dalhart biographer, Walter Darrell Haden: "Vernon Dalhart (1883-1948) and 'The Prisoner's Song,'" *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 6 (Winter 1970): 152-158; "If I Had Wings Like an Angel: The Life of Vernon Dalhart," in *Pictorial History of Country Music, Vol. 3*, edited by Thurston Moore (Denver, Colo.: Heather Enterprises, 1970), 3-7; "Vernon Dalhart: His Rural Roots and the Beginning of Commercial Country Music," *ARSC Journal* 3 (Winter 1970-1971): 19-32; "Vernon Dalhart," in *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnnie Rodriguez*, edited by Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 64-85; "Vernon Dalhart: Commercial Country Music's First International Star," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* aa (Summer 1975): 95-103.

[11] Robert Coltman, "Carson Robison: First of the Rural Professionals," *Old Time Music* no. 29 (Summer 1978): 7; Wayne W. Daniel, "Carson J. Robison: Granddaddy of the Hillbillies," *Journal of Country Music* 23 (2004): 30-31. Prior to 1924, to cite another example, the versatile Vernon Dalhart built his recording career on a wide variety of material, including operettas, light classical, Tin Pan Alley, novelty numbers, Victorian sentimental ballads, religious hymns, minstrel songs, and children's songs. But he was best known for his interpretation of "negro dialect" songs, with a 1916 Edison brochure praising his vocal ability to affect what it called "the real darky whine." See Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, esp. p. 42.

[12] Allan Sutton, *Recording the 'Twenties: The Evolution of the American Recording Industry, 1920-29* (Denver, Colo.: Mainspring Press, 2008), 11-12, 15. Several of the studio singers who made hillbilly recordings during the 1920s had worked as freelance singers in the popular field as far back as World War I, including Al Bernard, Arthur Fields, Ernest Hare, and Jack and Irving Kaufman, and Steve Porter. The recording career of Steve Porter, who called the figures on a pair of 1926 square-dance recordings for both Vocalion and OKeh's hillbilly series, stretched back even further. One of the true pioneers of the talking-machine industry, Porter began his recording career in 1897 as a specialist in humorous Irish songs and dialect skits. See Tim Gracyk, with Frank Hoffman, *Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925* (New York: Haworth Press, 2000), 42-46, 127-136, 156-159, 206-216, 272-276.

[13] Charles K. Wolfe, *Kentucky Country: Folk and Country Music of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 25. As Frank Walker, Columbia's A&R man who supervised the recording of the label's hillbilly records, noted, the repertoire of most of the southern hillbilly artists he encountered "would consist of maybe eight or ten or twelve things that they did well and that was all they knew." Few of these artists were able to read music, and thus they generally proved incapable of learning new songs

supplied to them by A&R men. Nor could A&R men ordinarily afford to spend what limited time and resources they had cultivating such artists and helping them to develop a larger repertoire. "It was a culling job," Walker explained in a 1962 interview, "taking the best of what they had. You might come out with only two selections or you might come out with six or eight, but you did it at that time. You got everything that you thought they were capable of doing well and would be salable, and that was it." As a result, most of these artists recorded few selections. Of the more than three hundred hillbilly acts who appeared in Columbia's 15000-D "Familiar Tunes-Old and New" series between 1925 and 1932, Charles K. Wolfe estimates that "well over half" of these made "only one record" (two selections). Thus, in order to expand their hillbilly catalogs, record companies constantly sought new talent to record. See Frank Walker interview by Mike Seeger, unknown location, probably New York City, June 19, 1962, in Southern Folklife Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; transciption of this interview published as "Who Chose These Records? A Look into the Life, Tastes, and Procedures of Frank Walker," in *Anthology of American Folk Music*, edited by Josh Dunson and Ethel Raim (New York: Oak Publications, 1973), 8-17; Charles Wolfe, "Columbia Records and Old-Time Music," *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Quarterly* 14 (Autumn 1978): 120.

[14] Russell, *Country Music Records*, 4, 6; Gracyk, with Hoffman, *Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925*, 15-17, 20-22. Perhaps nowhere was speed more important than in the production of so-called event songs, topical ballads about highly publicized disasters, tragedies, murders, and current news events, which had a limited sales appeal once the commemorated incident had faded from the front-page headlines. Usually, it took between two to three months from the time a master recordings was waxed to the time the finished records were ready for national distribution, and in the case of hit songs enjoying a current vogue or of event songs about incidents quickly forgotten, even this short amount of time could spell the difference between a hit record and a disappointing flop. See Wolfe, "Event Songs," 217-230; "Speed in Making OKeh Record," *Talking Machine World* 21 (October 15, 1925): 200; Gracyk, with Hoffman, *Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925*, 20-21.

[15] Gracyk, with Hoffman, *Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925*, 20; Sutton, *Recording the 'Twenties*, 12; Patrick Huber, comp., "Commercial Hillbilly Recordings of New York Studio Singers and Musicians, 1924-1932," unpublished list (a copy of which remains in the author's possession), compiled in 2009 from Russell, *Country Music Records*.

[16] Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 133; Huber, "Commercial Hillbilly Recordings of New York Studio Singers and Musicians, 1924-1932." This figure represents the minimum. Perhaps as many as a dozen or so more New York session musicians supplied the instrumental accompaniment on commercial hillbilly records by citybilly or southern recording artists, but because of shoddy record keeping and gaps within

the personnel listings of recording sessions, they remain unidentified in surviving studio files and ledgers. For example, Frank and James McCravy, a brother vocal duo from South Carolina, relied heavily on the instrumental support of New York studio musicians on the recordings they made. Of the McCravys' fifty recording sessions between 1925 and 1931, however, the identities of even some of their studio accompanists can be determined in only fourteen. See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 531-538. If it were possible to identify all of the anonymous studio musicians who participated in the recording of hillbilly records before 1933, the percentage of total records would actually be far higher, probably approaching, if not exceeding, 40 percent of all U.S. hillbilly releases for this period.

[17] Huber, comp., "New York Studio Singers and Musicians on Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932." The total number of sides for each of these artists, in descending order, is: Vernon Dalhart (3,156), Carson Robison (1,696, exclusive of his collaborations with Dalhart), Frankie Marvin (672), Arthur Fields (434), Bob Miller (323), and Frank Luther (111, exclusive of his collaborations with Robison). The entry for Dalhart's recordings in Tony Russell's *Country Music Records* discography is the longest in the book—almost fifty-one pages; the second greatest number of pages, thirty-six and a half, is devoted to the recordings of another citybilly performer, Dalhart's longtime singing partner, guitarist, and songwriter, Carson J. Robison. See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 242-292, 761-797.

[18] Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 388; Victor *Olde Time Fiddlin' Tunes* catalog (October 1924). See also Victor Records advertisement, *New York Times*, October 3, 1924.

[19] Patrick Huber, comp., "New York Session Musicians Who Provided Accompaniment on Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932," unpublished list (a copy of which remains in the author's possession), compiled in 2009 from Russell, *Country Music Records*. All of these studio musicians were card-carrying members of the New York City chapter or nearby chapters of the American Federation of Musicians union, and would have earned the standard union scale of $15 for a three-hour session. See "Echoes from the OKeh Recording Studio," *Phonograph Monthly Review* 2 (December 1927): 36. Not only did New York citybilly singer record with session musicians in the United States, but at least two of them recorded in England, accompanied by London studio musicians. In April 1931, during a tour of England, Vernon Dalhart, along with his regular violinist Adelyne Hood, made eight recordings in London, accompanied by Len Fillis and several members of his orchestra, for the British Regal label. The following year, Carson J. Robison and His Pioneers waxed more than fifty cowboy and western selections, over the course of five months in London, accompanied by Ray Noble's orchestra. See Palmer, *Vernon Dalhart*, 223; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 291-292, 791-794.

[20] Huber, "New York Session Musicians Who Provided Accompaniment on Commercial Hillbilly Records, 1924-1932"; see also "Index to Performers," in Russell, *Country Music Records*, 985-1011. For

instance, jazz trumpeter Phil Napoleon, one of the founding members of the Original Memphis Five, played on a pair of Frank Luther sides for Victor in 1929. Napoleon also provided instrumental accompaniment on several Paramount race records for classic blues singers, including Alberta Hunter in 1923 and Trixie Smith in 1925. To cite another example, tenor banjo virtuoso Harry Reser, the leader of the Cliquot Club Eskimos, a popular NBC radio band, recorded two dance instrumental sides with violinist Joseph Samuels and caller Steve Porter, under the billing of Three Old Cronies, for Vocalion in 1926. The next year, he backed Al Bernard on recordings of "Steamboat Bill" and "Casey Jones" for Brunswick. Earlier, in 1924, Reser had played guitar on Bessie Smith's Columbia recording of "Easy Come Easy Go Blues." See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 100, 771, 819; Dixon et al., *Blues and Gospel Records*, 413, 804, 838. Another studio musician who performed on 1920s hillbilly recordings was pianist, arranger, and composer Rube Bloom. Later, between 1936 and 1962, Bloom collaborated on at least sixteen songs with lyricist Johnny Mercer. See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 100; Daniel I. McNamara, ed., *ASCAP Biographical Dictionary of Composers, Authors, and Publishers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1948), 32-33; "Rube Bloom," *Songwriters Hall of Fame* web site <http://www.songwritershalloffame.org> (accessed October 30, 2009); University Library, Georgia State University, "Song Database," *100 Years of Johnny Mercer* web site <http://www.library.gsu.edu/spcoll/mercer/songs.asp.> (accessed October 30, 2009).

[21] Robert Armstrong, liner notes to *King Bennie Nawahi: Hawaiian String Virtuoso* (Yazoo Records 2055), 2-6; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 842; Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 144-145; on the Nashville Sound, see, for example, Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 254, 256-258; Bill Ivey, "Commercialization and Tradition in the Nashville Sound," in *Folk Music and Modern Sound*, edited by William Ferris and Mary L. Hart (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 129-138; Bill Ivey, "Nashville Sound," in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 371-372; Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville, Tenn.: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 76-88.

[22] Coltman, "Carson Robison," 6, 10-11; Daniel, "Carson J. Robison," 32, 34-35; Wolfe, "Event Songs," 222, 226; Bob Dumm, "Two Men Who Sell New Songs for Old," *Farm & Fireside* 51 (May 1927): 19, 65-66; Hugh Leamy, "Now Come All You Good People," *Collier's* 84 (November 2, 1929): 20, 58-59.

[23] See, for example, Russell, *Country Music Records*, 242, 245, 288, 604, 668-669, as well as "Abbreviations: Instruments and Frequently Used Terms," 43-44, and the instrumentation listed in the discographies for the various citybilly singers and musicians mentioned above, particularly Vernon Dalhart, Carson Robison, and Frank Luther. In addition, studio singers were occasionally employed to

supply background vocals on hillbilly recordings, as in the case of Vernon Dalhart's "In the Baggage Coach Ahead," recorded for Victor in March 1925. On this record, he was accompanied by a vocal trio consisting of Elliott Shaw, Franklyn Bauer, and Wilfred Glenn, all three of whom were members of Victor's vocal group, the Shannon Quartet, soon to be renamed the Revelers, when the group began to record in a more contemporary, jazzy style. See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 245; Gracyk, with Hoffman, *Popular American Recording Pioneers, 1895-1925*, 287-293.

[24] Gene Austin's lead vocals on both George Reneau and Uncle Am Stuart's records are prime examples of this, but far more common than ghost singing was the use of studio musicians to provide the instrumental accompaniment for southern hillbilly singers at New York studio sessions, either by creating an entire studio ensemble or by augmenting the regular personnel of a self-contained band. Before 1933, New York studio musicians accompanied "traditional" southern hillbilly artists on more than 350 master recordings, released on more than 660 sides. In 1924, for example, Carson Robison replaced the regular singer in Fiddlin' Cowan Powers's stringband, the first Appalachian family stringband to make commercial hillbilly recordings, to provide the uncredited vocals on four titles at Victor's New York City studios. Robison, who actually began his recording career as a Victor contract session guitarist and expert whistler, also provided musical accompaniment for the commercial recordings of other southern hillbilly artists, including Kelly Harrell, the Hill Billies, Andrew Jenkins, and Buell Kazee, during the 1920s. See Charles K. Wolfe, "Fiddlin' Powers and His Family," *Old Time Music* no. 42 (Winter 1985/1986): 8; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 403, 424, 454, 472-473, 703.

[25] Much of my discussion of the New York studio system here and in the next paragraph has been deeply influenced by the essays in the *Journal of Country Music*'s 1984 special issue, "The Unseen Hand: How Producers Shape the Country Sound" (vol. 12), particularly the unsigned introduction (pp. 2-3) and John Morthland's "Changing Methods, Changing Sounds: An Overview" (pp. 4-8).

[26] Russell, *Country Music Records*, 343.

[27] See, for example, Coltman, "Carson Robison," 7-10. The Great Depression hit the U.S. talking-machine industry with a punishing force, leading to a sharp decline in record sales and the bankruptcy or merger of many of the nation's record companies. As a result, several of these studio singers and musicians' recording careers collapsed, most notably that of Dalhart, who after 1932 participated in only three recording sessions at which he recorded a total of only ten issued sides. Others, however, continued to flourish, despite the economic crisis plaguing the sound-recording industry, by successfully adapting to evolving musical trends and changing public tastes. For example, Carson Robison, Dalhart's old singer partner and songwriter, switched to specializing almost exclusively in cowboy and western music. In 1932, Robison formed a western-themed band called the Buckaroos, and launched a nationwide tour of

the United States and then a six-month tour of England, becoming one of the first American hillbilly groups to do so. Russell, *Country Music Records*, 292; Coltman, "Carson Robison," 7-10; Daniel, "Carson J. Robison," 29, 31-32; Douglas B. Green, *Singing in the Saddle: The History of the Singing Cowboy* (Nashville, Tenn.: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), 31-34.

Although the New York Sound declined after 1932, it never ended entirely. More polished, urban, jazz- and pop-oriented styles of hillbilly music, similar to those citybilly singers and musicians had pioneered in the mid- to late 1920s, rose to even greater national prominence during the Great Depression. In many respects, the Hollywood singing cowboy was an extension of the New York studio-system sound pioneered by the citybilly singers and the 1920s and early 1930s. Besides Carson Robison, two of the leading forces in the new cowboy music were the former New York studio singers, Frankie Marvin and his brother, Johnny Marvin, who had risen to fame during the mid- to late 1920s as a ukulele-playing vaudeville entertainer and popular recording artist. In October 1929, the Marvin brothers had provided guitar accompaniment and vocal harmonies on the first recordings of their friend and fellow Oklahoman, Gene Autry, for Victor. And in 1934, after both of their solo recording careers had, for all intents and purposes, ended, the Marvins relocated to Hollywood, California, to join Autry. There, Frankie played the steel guitar on many of Autry's classic recordings of the 1930s and appeared in many of his western movies until 1955. Meanwhile, Johnny became a producer for Autry's *Melody Ranch* radio program, which went on the air in 1940. He also wrote or co-wrote more than eighty songs for Autry's Hollywood westerns, including such classics as "Dust" and "Goodbye Little Darlin'." See Russell, *Country Music Records*, 71-72, 74-76, 79, 81-87; Green, *Singing in the Saddle*, 119, 121-122, 137, 146; Holly George-Warren, *Public Cowboy No. 1: The Life and Times of Gene Autry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 46-47, 51-52, 67-69, 73-75, 142, 163, 167, 184, 189, 190, 192, 219, 223.

[28] Not only did these citybilly singers create a national market for hillbilly records that benefitted Rodgers, they also acclimated record-buyers to the uptown arrangements and musical instrumentation found on many of Rodgers's more blues and jazz-influenced selections. In many respects, A&R man and manager Ralph Peer's development of Rodgers as a recording artist represents a modification of the New York studio system of hillbilly record production. Of the 111 commercial releases Rodgers produced before his untimely death in 1933, for example, some 70 percent of them featured accompaniment provided by jazz, dance, Hawaiian, and stringband musicians, most notably jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong and his wife, pianist Lil Hardin Armstrong, who seconded him on the classic "Blue Yodel No. 9," now one of the most famous recordings in the annals of jazz and country music history. Unlike citybilly singers, however, Rodgers recorded with a far greater variety of studio bands and musicians, and

he recorded chiefly at studios, both temporary and permanent, located outside of the New York City area. At his last final session at Victor's New York City studios in May 1933, only two days before his death, Rodgers even used two veteran New York session musicians, guitarist Tony Colicchio and steel guitarist and banjoist John Cali. Cali had been one of Vernon Dalhart's favorite accompanists during his heyday. See Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 186-187; Russell, *Country Music Records*, 799-809. In his introduction to Johnny Bond's *The Recordings of Jimmie Rodgers: An Annotated Discography*, Norm Cohen credits Jimmie Rodgers with six major contributions to country music, but at least two of them, "Increased reliance on new compositions by contemporary writers and composers" and "Increased reliance on studio musicians," were already well-established practices of Dalhart and other citybilly singers before Rodgers made his first recording. See Norm Cohen, introduction to *The Recordings of Jimmie Rodgers: An Annotated Discography*, by Johnny Bond, JEMF Special Series, No. 11 (Los Angeles: John Edward Memorial Foundation, Inc., 1978); John Lilly, "Legends—No. 4: Jimmie Rodgers," *Old-Time Herald* 3 (Spring 1992): 9.