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doi: <https://doi.org/10.57709/24408193>

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Stories I Have Always Heard:
The Rhetorical Life of an American Song

by

Jessica Alcorn Rose

Under the Co-Direction of Lynée Gaillet, PhD and Mary Hocks, PhD

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

This dissertation investigates the song “You Are My Sunshine” as a cultural and material artifact, using archival and primary materials and drawing from research in feminist and sonic rhetorics to reconstruct the song’s muddy origins and reveal its rhetorical potential. While scholarship tying these traditions together exists, discussions of songs as rhetorical, historical, and cultural objects are scant, and much research focuses on the material state of sound. This investigation of the song shifts that focus to cultural environments, built across time, set amid the backdrop of emerging sound technologies. Employing Hall and du Gay’s research tool “Circuit of Culture,” I examine evidence of the song and its circulations through these environments, traversing across cultural, historical, and personal boundaries, and taking on a serendipitous rhetorical life of its own. Included in this work is the argument that a tradition of inequity exists in the way authorship and ownership are treated in sound, a tradition that is cultural, rhetorical, and consequential.

INDEX WORDS: Authorship, Music History, Sonic rhetorics, You are my sunshine

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2021

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by

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Georgia State University

December 2021

DEDICATION

For Easter Mandy and Oliver Hood, who lived it. For their children and grandchildren, who repeated the stories. Most importantly, for Noonie and Paula, who sang for me, keeping me rooted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe gratitude and thanks to so many on behalf of this dissertation. It is most literally a lifelong pursuit, beginning with a childhood family tale of creativity and loss and stoked through the generosity of generations of Hood, McWhorter, Crook, and Pappas households. Each has sought to contribute to the legacy of the song “You Are My Sunshine,” either by sharing the song with the next generation or writing about it more formally; most especially, my love and gratitude goes to the tireless research of David Crook, Neal McWhorter, and Julian Hood, all grandsons of Oliver Hood and who have continued to catalog, document, and build projects around Hood’s music and legacy. This is my contribution to that legacy, which would not have been possible without their work, and I thank each of them for paving the way.

This dissertation project and my broader academic scholarship has also been supported by those I consider my academic family, and who have sometimes dragged me through this work, which has happened amid three difficult years that flattened grander plans for archival study and shifted focus from project to a pandemic. Over the course of my PhD, each of these individuals has influenced my pursuits and challenged my thinking. The constant and rigorous conversations with Paige Davis Arrington, my “scholar wife,” kept me focused and thinking and I am in awe of her intellectual tenacity. Archivist and activist Morna Gerrard reminds me that there is joy in the work and has shared coffee, Scottish candies, academics, friendship, and her playground with me and deeply influenced my thoughts on the material, the feminist, and preservational justice.

My committee co-chairs, Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Mary Hocks have generously shared their time, expertise, wisdom, and patience with me throughout this project; they are also incredible women, mentors, and friends without whom I would quite literally be a different

scholar. The countless number of on-the-road calls, early morning emails, and opportunities for collaboration are examples of the kind of feminist academic comradery at work within our field. George Pullman, the third in my committee, offers the valuable gift of distance, letting me experience the dance, sharing thoughts and comments where he sees the gap, and always reminding me to return home to the purpose of the work.

Finally, I want to acknowledge my family, whose patience and support make me feel like the luckiest girl in the world: my partner-in-crime, Jason, who has supported this journey with a sincerity and surety that even I have not always had; my wee beasties, Jemma and Ian who are growing into their own and eating up the world and its wonders with wide eyes and a sense of what is right (go Team Stuff!); Aileen, who is tough, pragmatic, brilliant and hilarious, and whose friendship I have always cherished; my father, who gave me the gift of curiosity; and my mother, Paula, and sister, Meagan, the women who have always stood beside me and continue to point the direction home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS		V
LIST OF FIGURES		X
1 INTRODUCTION		1
1.1 Methodology		5
<i>1.1.1 Feminist Archival Methodology: Critical Imagination and Archives</i>		<i>6</i>
<i>1.1.2 A Note on Archival Work in Times of Crisis</i>		<i>8</i>
1.2 Circulation and the Circuit of Culture		9
1.3 The Layout		13
2 SONIC CULTURAL ARTIFACTS		16
2.1 The Great American Genres and the Cultural Dimensions of Sound		17
2.2 Materiality and Sound		18
2.3 A Physical Model of Sound		21
2.4 Defining Sound as an Artifact		23
2.5 An Object, not a Thing		24
2.6 The Song as a Boundary Object		26
2.7 “You Are My Sunshine” as a Cultural Boundary Object		28
3 EMERGENCE: SOUND IDENTITIES AND THE ROOTS OF AUTHORSHIP ...		30
3.1 Identity		32
<i>3.1.1 Memory, Narrative, and Identity</i>		<i>33</i>

3.1.2	<i>Sound and Identity</i>	35
3.2	The Folk-Country Boundary	40
3.3	Authorship and Identity	46
3.3.1	<i>Oliver Hood</i>	48
3.3.2	<i>Paul Rice</i>	53
3.3.3	<i>Jimmie Davis</i>	56
3.3.4	<i>The Dispute</i>	59
3.4	Conclusion	62
4	STORIES OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION	64
4.1	Technology, Recording, and Power	66
4.2	Stories of Production: “Location Recording”	69
4.3	A-Sides	74
4.3.1	<i>The Pine Ridge Boys and The Rice Brothers Gang, both 1939</i>	75
4.3.2	<i>Jimmy Davis, 1940</i>	76
4.3.3	<i>Ray Charles, 1962</i>	78
4.4	Bootlegs	82
4.5	Conclusion	85
5	REGULATION AND REPRESENTATION	87
5.1	Regulation	87
5.1.1	<i>An Abridged History of Copyright Law</i>	89

5.1.2	<i>Public Domains</i>	95
5.2	Representation	100
5.2.1	<i>“Cultural Initiator”</i>	102
5.2.2	<i>“Speak Themselves into Spaces”</i>	103
5.2.3	<i>Extending Sentimentality</i>	105
5.2.4	<i>Physical Representations of Sentimentality</i>	107
5.3	Conclusion	111
6	CONCLUSION	113
6.1	The Circuit as Recursive	114
6.1.1	<i>Lessons from the Circuit</i>	114
6.1.2	<i>The serendipitous arc of “You Are My Sunshine”</i>	115
6.2	The Consequences of American Song	116
6.3	Implications for Future Research	117
6.3.1	<i>PS: “The archive still promises”</i>	117
6.3.2	<i>Other research opportunities</i>	121
	WORKS CITED	123

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 du Gay et al.'s Circuit of Culture	12
Figure 2 Professors Wayne Daniel and Toru Mitsui in their discussions about the authorship of "You Are My Sunshine," courtesy of the Georgia State University Special Collections. 48	48
Figure 3 Oliver Hood instructing his students in the basement of his home, circa 1954. Courtesy of David Crook.	51
Figure 4 An archived advertisement in The Times (Shreveport) announcing the Rice Brothers' Gang. The Times, Shreveport, digital archives.....	55
Figure 5 "Governor Jimmie Davis on horseback at the Jambalaya Festival in Gonzales Louisiana in 1971," Courtesy of the Louisiana digital library, https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/ ..	57
Figure 6 Sheet Music for "A Precious Little Thing Called Love," 1928 from the film, "The Shopworn Angel." Collection of Jessica Rose	68
Figure 7 The Victor Co. ad placed in Bristol, original image The Bristol News Bulletin, Bristol TN, 25 July 1927, pp. 8. Newspapers.com.	71
Figure 8 Straight Edge Hand, wiki commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Straight_Edge_Hand_X.jpg	103
Figure 9 "Public Domain: Odetta at 1963 March on Washington (NARA)" by pingnews.com is marked with CC PDM 1.0	104
Figure 10 "You Are My Sunshine Kawaii Card." HappyDaddyBits. https://www.etsy.com/listing/78728774/you-are-my-sunshine-card-illustrated-sun.....	108
Figure 11 "You Are My Sunshine" Baby shower invitation, howtonestforless.com	108
Figure 12 "You Are My Sunshine" pendant by Alison Kelley Designs is licensed under CC BY- NC 2.0.....	109

Figure 13 "You Are My Sunshine" sharing token, courtesy of Jessica Rose	109
Figure 14 "You Are My Sunshine" Walmart wall art, walmart.com.....	110
Figure 15 "You are my sunshine..." by KylaBorg is licensed under CC BY 2.0	110
Figure 16 "You Are My Sunshine" sidewalk graffiti, flickr, courtesy of YamiYugi36, https://www.flickr.com/photos/yamiyugi36/3358687384/	111

1 INTRODUCTION

“Everybody knows the song. You know it. I know it...“You Are My Sunshine” is so deeply embedded in the popular culture that most people can’t even remember when they first heard it. They’ve simply lived with it from the time they developed a memory... It’s a remarkably simple tune, especially when you excise the verses and focus exclusively on the chorus — as almost everybody does.”

Stephen Deusner, “You Are My Sunshine:
How a Maudlin Song Became a Children’s Classic”

Sometime between 1929 and 1937 a song began to wind its way across the American south. Stories about its origins vary: some say it first arrived on the back of a small-town mill worker’s brown paper lunch bag. Others suggest the song spent its early years footloose with two brothers traveling the music circuit from Georgia to Louisiana. Yet, the formal, recorded accounts assign its beginnings to the man who legally owned it, a man whose flash and ambition were intimately tied to the song’s initial success. The song, “You Are My Sunshine,” commonly used to soothe restless children and express affection or hummed absentmindedly during chore time - has long since left the nests of its possible progenitors, finding a rhetorical life beyond its muddy provenance. But the confusion over its origins, and the comfortable spaces it has tucked into, integrating into other peoples’ lives, implies questions about roads not taken, identities shifted, ownership versus authorship, and losses left unresolved.

Like many, I cannot recall the first time I heard this song. It is integral to my family history, for my family contends that my great-grandfather, Oliver Hood, was the mill worker who wrote the song. I come from generations of unofficial musicians, the kind that sit on front

porches and play together as a family and bond through music. The generations of my grandmother and mother included the songs of Daddy Hood, and the story of his life and the theft of this song are ever-present in my childhood memories of those porch sessions.

Given this, it is no surprise that music held a place of prominence in my own household. My mother sang all the time— to herself, to my sister and I, and often with us. I have vague memories of her absentmindedly humming tunes while gardening or crafting. At bedtime, she lulled us to sleep with the songs she heard when she was, herself, a kid. In regular rotation were Patsy Cline’s tragic lament “Your Cheatin’ Heart,” a cheeky, barber shop version of “Down by the Old Mill Stream,” and the hobo-themed Americana classic, “Big Rock Candy Mountain.” But the song we knew best of all was “You Are My Sunshine.”

All of these songs were part of the soundtrack of my childhood, alongside my father’s contributions, which slanted a bit more summer-of-love: Peter, Paul, and Mary, The Mamas and the Papas, and Simon and Garfunkel, among them. After my parents’ divorce, the soundtrack expanded to include modern radio hits, like Chic’s “Le Freak” and Abba’s “Dancing Queen,” the music of my mom exploring her newfound singledom. Every Saturday, she would turn on the record player to coax my sister and I into helping her clean our tiny apartment. We would dance as we worked together, vacuuming, wiping baseboards, cleaning windows, and straightening stacks of magazines. Later, that record player would be stolen during a Christmas-season break-in. I cried hard, salty tears as I learned that my favorite record of the moment, The Commodores’ *Midnight Magic*, had been on the turntable at the time. I had been obsessively binging the songs “Still” and “Sail On” for weeks and to my eight-year-old self, the theft was a betrayal and injustice beyond any I could conceive.

The influence of music on my childhood is part of my story, but it is not a unique story. Music and sound are a part of everyday life, always thrumming in the background, constructing a cohesive soundtrack for the day-to-day. Specifically, music's cultural influence and role in identity formation is continuously demonstrated through anecdote and media in shared songs that inspire action and participate in both specific, personal meaning-making and cultural meaning-making, more broadly.

As an adult, the stories of my great-grandfather, told in those porch sessions continue to shape the ways I think about music's rhetorical and cultural role. I have been writing about "You Are My Sunshine" for some time now and researching the song has generated new ways of thinking for me about the song's rich rhetorical life and its legacy as a cultural artifact, a musical composition, and an identity-maker. Beyond its disputed origination (or, perhaps, because of it), "You Are My Sunshine" presents an example of how some songs participate, evolve, submerge, and circulate and how musical compositions can develop into cultural and social artifacts, and transcend original rhetorical and commercial situations to become instruments through which communities and individuals make new meanings. The path of this transition may be positive and generative, or negative and restrictive, perpetuating or establishing unequitable power structures, in their use or production. Specifically, in the music industry, which has a relatively recent history and intimately connects and influences culture in the digital age, discussions over authorship and ownership offer opportunities for understanding power structures generally, especially involving the creation and use of cultural artifacts.

The circumstances under which "You Are My Sunshine" emerged offer a unique opportunity to investigate the constructive and destructive forces influencing the creation and rhetorical use of cultural artifacts, specifically sonic cultural artifacts. Because it emerged during

the era when music's modern formal technological, industrial, and commercial frameworks were developing, the song's historical arc – which is influenced by both the local traditions of music (the “informal,” if you will) and these emerging, formal, commercial frameworks – can provide some insight into how music is received, consumed, performed, enculturated, and commodified.

This dissertation, a case study of “You Are My Sunshine,” offers a researched narrative of music's place in everyday lives – its serendipitous circulations through environments, its cultural influence and social frameworks, and its commercial iterations that run parallel and sometimes intersect one another. Additionally, the project manifests a definition of rhetoric which references communication and meaning making through texts, but expands the term text to include material culture, such as song, in which rhetorical work is serendipitous and the result of its embedded position within a particular culture or context. To achieve these insights, I examine the song as an object, drawing upon scholarship in materiality, multimodality, and sound studies. The historical nature of this research, and my personal connection with the song, also lead to conversations about recovery as part of primary and archival research and feminist rhetorics. Ultimately, in positioning the song as an agent of temporal context, community, serendipity, and identity, this analysis contemplates roots for sound that connect composition and cultural studies. Overall, my study suggests that equitable systems require us to value authorship, which can differ from ownership. Valuing authorship could inform the legal frameworks shaping the way creative industries account for creative labor. Moreover, understanding the original rhetorical position of a text can help us reasonably differentiate cultural consequences, not just individual ones, that result from either obscuring originators or honoring them.

1.1 Methodology

The methodology for this project employs strategies from primary research and archival research best practices blended with feminist theory and cultural studies frameworks.

Specifically, I apply feminist archival and primary research methods to the cultural studies research instrument the Circuit of Culture in order to dissect and analyze the cultural elements that characterize the song.

My research questions support each of these methods, which tackle the unique circumstance that is “You Are My Sunshine” and include the following:

- What can a study of the serendipitous arc of “You Are My Sunshine” tell us more broadly about sonic texts and meaning making?
- How does this song, which is so iconic, transform over time to become the experience that it is today?
- What can this song’s story teach us about the ways in which we interact with, accept ownership of, identify through, and re-inscribe meaning, in our current context?

In other words, how can this case study help us think about how we value music as sound, cultural text, and commodity?

These questions suggest that any study of this song is more than just an investigation of sound; rather, we must treat it physically and culturally. Despite music’s perceived invisible and disembodied status, the song’s impact can be identified aurally, linguistically, and individually. Because it is performable, the song is also an experience that interacts over time, in different ways, and for different purposes, with varied audiences. As such, “You Are My Sunshine” is iconic and has left its mark over a number of years in different communities and moments. Following Hocks and Comstock (“Composing for Sound 2017), I consider this song as a “sound

object” with physical soundwaves that impact the human body, as well as its aural and linguistic properties that act upon us. In packaging sound this way, I can examine the song as a semiotic, rhetorical object that mediates power, signals meaning, and suggests specific cultural connotations.

1.1.1 Feminist Archival Methodology: Critical Imagination and Archives

Because the song has muddled origins and questionable authorship, engaging in a bit of feminist work vis-à-vis *critical imagination* is integral. Many of the individuals associated with the song’s creation myth are long gone. Their lives were often mobile, with little access to the privileged circumstances that make preservation and archiving possible. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the song’s history is a stew of fact, oral history, community practice, conjecture, and propaganda, requiring the aid of critical imagination to help recover a foundation that has remained obscured for nearly a century.

The term critical imagination, seated in feminist rhetorics and adopted by Jacqueline Jones Royster as part of her own feminist archival work, refers to a strategy for research and inquiry that treats imagination “as a term for a commitment to making connections and seeing possibility” and a skill that questions “a viewpoint, an experience, an event, and so on...remaking interpretive frameworks based on that questioning” (*Traces* 83-84). In *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric, Composition, and Literacy Studies*, Royster and Gesa Kirsch further cement the definition of critical imagination as “an inquiry tool, a mechanism for seeing the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there” (20). Such a practice allows us not only to imagine what is possible, it also allows us to imagine how we might arrive at those possibilities – to discover,

as Royster notes, “the obvious and hidden, what is present and what is absent, as part of understanding meaning-making” (*Traces* 83).

The use of critical imagination appears across rhetorical scholarly projects. The goal of many feminist-archival projects is to both recover and equitably revise the historical record to reflect the breadth and range of social and cultural experiences and contributions more accurately. So often the official historical record is written to reflect the values and lives of those whose circumstances privileged the construction of those records. Boundary communities and individuals are often left out or remembered not by their own membership, but by those who governed or found interest in them. What results is an erasure or silencing of certain voices and communities who do not have the resources to engage in the custom of saving.

One example of this practice can be found in Anjali Arondekar’s book, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Arondekar attempts to reconcile the dichotomous relationship between the deep oral histories and word-of-mouth that suggests a richly diverse community and the conspicuously absent evidence of these communities in numerous colonial archives. Arondekar opens her introduction, “Without a Trace,” with the statement that “[the] archive still promises,” followed by a contemplation of how promise is possible despite the overwhelming absence of evidence she is confronted with (1). Arondekar notes that “the critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates,” and asks “How then does one restore absence to itself? Put simply, can an empty archive also be full?” For Arondekar, the solution is to shift lenses and follow questions that ask how her subjects may be made visible in the colonial archive and “how this process paradoxically

discloses the very limits of that visibility” (3). In doing so, she uses the archives as locations that highlight absences that clearly should be addressed.

For feminist archivists and researchers, these silences and ephemeral absences result in a need to speculate and stitch together the gaps that traditional Western archiving practices have accrued. Feminist rhetorician Cheryl Glenn uses the metaphor of the map to describe what this means for the archival turn in rhetoric, noting a shift away from the exclusive use of canonical maps built with literary, poetic, scientific, historical, and political foci, and towards a map that more honestly coordinates to the directions that our fields are travelling. This new map considers “current institutional, intellectual, political, and personal values, all of which have become markedly more diverse and elastic in terms of gender, race, and class” (287). Again, this turn directs back to feminist rhetorical practices that need flexibility and imagination to deviate from once-canonical directions. When following this map, and through the use of critical imagination and materialist feminist approaches to both sound objects and archival collections, archival research can make equal use of the serendipitously saved ephemera that was meant to be tossed and the things lost on conspicuous stretches of unpaved road left by the absent voices who might have lighted the way.

1.1.2 A Note on Archival Work in Times of Crisis

Critical imagination is both a philosophy and an essential strategy, particularly for when research circumstances are less than ideal. While the term traditionally identifies circumstances surrounding a lack of identification, preservation, or documentation of evidence, this particular project added access to the list.¹ My initial plan to complete this research included travel to several archives to wade through the papers and ephemera connected with the song. However,

¹ See the dissertation Conclusion for more on this.

the entrance of the pandemic forced a reevaluation that shifted plans: in-person visits to dig through boxes of political ephemera, musical ephemera, and newspaper clippings became visits to the URLs of digitized collections. I am grateful for these collections but cannot discount that despite living in a digital age and have expanded access to a broad range of knowledge and materials, archival collections are rarely fully digitized or even fully processed. While archives are preservation spaces, they are not tombs of dead ephemera and retired materials. They are places of movement where new materials and new technologies can initiate changes to the shape of or scope of their collections, and always in a state of becoming. The result of this becoming is a gap in what is preserved and what is accessible. So, while I fold in archival practices, the most abundant primary research for this project shifted to the (amazing) oral histories and privately held papers that I am fortunate to have been able to use.

1.2 Circulation and the Circuit of Culture

While the dubious authorship and socio-cultural differences between potential authors suggest that an investigation of this song participates in a sort of feminist recovery, the song's history does not end with its conception. It has a social and historical life, one that teeters on the edge of contemporary popularity and a folk-like status, that rhetorically circulates and shifts as it becomes ubiquitous with American cultural memory. This description of the song's nature and behavior conjures two useful mechanisms for thinking about "You Are My Sunshine's" historical arc as well as its rhetorical behavior. The first is the concept of rhetorical circulation, which assists in tracing the movements and variations in texts and media and is useful for contemplating rhetoric, communication, and cultural production. The second is the Circuit of Culture, a framework and research instrument used to study cultural artifacts.

Laurie E. Gries, in her introduction to the edited collection *Circulation, Writing, and Rhetoric*, considers circulation as it is described here as a “cultural-rhetorical process,” through which “people, ideas, images, and discourse become persuasive as they move through the world and enter into various associations” (3, 12). Rhetorical circulation, Gries notes, emerges from scholarship on postmodernism (Heidt), text and identity (Charland), as well as in meta discussions of Rhetoric and Composition field itself (3). In “Heritage Claims as a Civic Art for Rhetorical Circulation,” Jonathan L. Bradshaw furthers that rhetorical circulation, when applied to cultural rhetorics, can illuminate “the cultural dynamics of rhetorical action” and “the civic consequence of material traditions” (para. 3, 4). Bradshaw additionally clarifies that rhetorical circulation can also “account for the materiality and “consequentiality” of rhetorical productions” (para. 5). Rhetorical circulation, therefore, can be framed as a conceptual, “interdisciplinary approach to studying discourse in motion,” where artifacts are viewed from emergence, across production, to reiteration, affecting “change through its material encounters” (Gries “Iconographic” 333). Following Bradshaw, I further expand his application of rhetorical circulation to sound as an object and artifact, in order to further illuminate these “civic” consequences.

Given “You Are My Sunshine’s” own circulation and status, it is most appropriate to set the song’s recovery upon the framework of Du Gay and Hall’s Circuit of Culture, to analyze the song from a number of different angles. The Circuit of Culture (see fig. 1) is a research instrument used by cultural studies scholars to analyze the tangible and intangible creations of a particular society. First imagined by Stuart Hall and further developed by British cultural studies theorists in Du Gay et al.’s *Doing Cultural Studies: The story of the Sony Walkman* (1997), the Circuit of Culture is an investigative framework for the analysis of cultural artifacts, texts,

events, etc. and takes a semiotic approach to cultural meaning-making. The Circuit is a recursive loop, composed of five major cultural processes, or contexts, which are identified as the locations where cultural meaning is encoded: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (du Gay et al.). As an analytical instrument, the Circuit looks not only for the physical manifestation of the artifact, but also its cultural manifestation – how it becomes encoded and attains cultural meaning and status.

The cultural part of the circuit refers to Raymond William’s midcentury definition of culture, which du Gay et al. recite as “a description of a particular way of life which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (cited in Du Gay et al. 5). Hall, in the introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (1997), simplifies this idea further, stating that “culture is about ‘shared meanings’” (1). These shared meanings transfer via various “systems of representation,” including communication practices, texts, materials, and folkways; analyzing culture, then, inspects “the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life” (du Gay et al. 7).

Each of the processes, or nodes, on the circuit fall within two divisions: what is typically visible and what often remains obscured. Traditionally visible aspects include representation and identity – those elements that respond to individual stakeholders, relationships, and expressions of signification. Hidden aspects include regulation, production, and consumption -things that occur outside the public eye or with the everyday participation of the public. As a complete unit, the Circuit looks at material artifacts, particularly technologies, that are consequential or demonstrate significant shifting social and cultural boundaries.

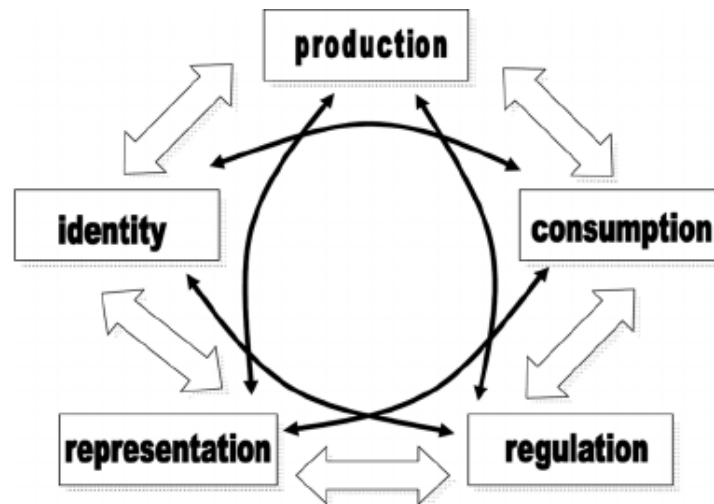


Figure 1 du Gay et al.'s Circuit of Culture

In the first edition of *Doing Cultural Studies* (1997), Du Gay et al. initially demonstrate the circuit with an analysis of the Sony Walkman and its role in the controversy over the mediation of private and public space. In the introduction to the second edition (2013), Du Gay and Madsen explain that the Walkman was significant because it “shift[ed] the boundaries between the public and the private, and it helped spark new consumption patterns that challenged some of the traditional practices in the music industry” and “for a time was regarded as a crucial new development in modern culture” (xi). In their updated edition, they return to the music industry, looking this time at the iPod and its effect on a partially mobile context. Other scholars have continued to look strictly at modern, digital technologies, such as the iPhone (Rose, Goggins, Vincent and Hadden) and apps like Tinder (Oishi). Other scholars, however, have expanded the use of the model to include additional cultural phenomena, including the Starbucks brand (Han and Zhang), sneaker culture (Scherer and Jackson), the commodification of race identity (Boulton), and wildland fires (Champ and Brooks).

Employing these terms and the Circuit as part of feminist recovery work also assists in reframing cultural contexts. Royster and Kirsch identify cultural studies as a distinctly feminist practice, especially in relation to Hall's view of language as a representation system that builds "circles of meaning that are shareable and usable in social interactions" (102). These circles of meaning operate telescopically, allowing scholars to examine several aspects of a singular point of study. These feminist practices can micro-historically telescope in to take a closer look at the elements that construct conditions, in order to recover lost voices and overlooked communities, identify emerging trends, and contextualize singular events. However, the circuit also allows scholars to pan out—to "take on much larger cultural, social, and historical dimensions" (105). Employing the Circuit as part of this dissertation merges both the cultural and the technological, addressing the song as a material artifact and revealing the impact of the emerging technologies that sparked the modern music industry and magnified the song's stickiness. Through the Circuit, I can shift focus, using history, archive, and interviews along the framework.

1.3 The Layout

Over the course of the dissertation, I will telescope in to examine the song through each of the nodes on the Circuit, with each chapter tackling a cultural node on the Circuit. Chapter two, "Sonic Cultural Artifacts," explores sound and music as objects and cultural artifacts. I offer the theoretical foundations for defining songs as artifacts and draw upon ideas emerging from conversations in sound studies, sonic rhetorics, cultural studies, paying special attention to Susan Leigh Star's notion of "boundary objects." Underpinning these conversations seems to be Heidegger's philosophical perspective regarding objects, so I touch upon that as well.

Chapter three, "Emergence: Sound Identities and the Roots of Authorship," steps into the Circuit of Culture, focusing on the first node, Identity, and outlining the term cultural identity

and its connections with memory, narrative, and sound. Over the course of the chapter, archival materials, interviews, and historical research help to reconstruct the circumstances and communities within which “You Are My Sunshine” was created and began to flourish; it also shows the overlapping cast of characters that were both defined by and helped to redefine the south, geospatially and culturally, at the open of the twentieth century. Focusing further in, the chapter details the histories of the three men with claims to the song, in an effort to provide further detail about the song’s early origins and its seemingly sudden velocity into American culture.

Chapter four, “Stories of Production and Consumption,” tracks the production and consumption of the song as part of social and rhetorical circulation. This chapter revisits the changes in technology that sparked the modern recording industry in more depth and examines the production of music “production” at the outset of the golden era of radio. Included in this examination is a longer look at Ralph Peer, one of the first and most successful “A&R men” recording musicians in the South, who was responsible for several early recordings of “You Are My Sunshine.” Telescoping in on Peer and the commercial reception of the early recordings of “You Are My Sunshine” offers insights into how the technologies and early practices of those in the industry shaped the futures of artists and the practice of music making for the twentieth century.

Chapter five, “Regulation and Representation,” uses “You Are My Sunshine” as a case study to consider dimensions that assist in shaping music as a socio-cultural phenomenon that can sometimes extend beyond sound. This chapter includes a chronological timeline of the historical legal changes codifying music as intellectual property. Additionally, the chapter

considers the differences in the way music is commercially valued and socially used to make or enhance meaning.

I conclude by panning back out to consider a larger view. As part of this conclusion, I suggest that our understanding of the impact of an object/artifact upon a community or author can help us think about the ways creative, cultural output is addressed, especially as we move towards more inclusive public and commercial contexts. Songs do rhetorical work. When we ignore where they come from, how they are accepted and remembered, we are making choices – to claim or recast ownership, to craft identities, to empower and disempower communities.

2 SONIC CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

“The realm of things can include an unlimited manifold, encompassing iPods, space shuttles, high-tech running shoes, airports or even corporations... What matters, ultimately, is how a particular object fits with other objects into a pattern of life, that is, the characteristics marking a particular culture or dwelling practices of a community.”

Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric*, 23

“[Our] artifacts have not been patiently waiting only for us. Rather, we should attune ourselves to the potential of their varied circulations and investigate how they have *moved* across time and space, functioning as different kinds of evidence and supporting different kinds of arguments.”

Jessica Enoch, “Archival Problems, Circulation Solutions,” 298

Material culture refers to the phenomenal objects that cultures invent, construct, use, keep and discard and they serve as evidence of what was and is. These artifacts may be intentionally or serendipitously preserved; how they are treated over time depends upon their value, use, placement, and, as Rickert and Enoch note in this chapters’ epigraph, the ways in which the artifacts fit in and circulate. Moreover, though this material culture “can include an unlimited manifold,” moving beyond iPods and other manufactured goods, it also can also include other artifacts that are just as substantial, although they are less tangible. In this chapter, I posit that the song “You Are My Sunshine” is part of this realm and offer theoretical foundations for understanding sound and song as object and cultural artifact. I draw upon ideas emerging from

conversations in sound studies, sonic rhetorics, and cultural studies, paying special attention to Star's notion of "boundary objects." Underpinning these conversations is Heidegger's philosophical perspective regarding objects, so I touch upon that as well.

2.1 The Great American Genres and the Cultural Dimensions of Sound

When evaluating music broadly, the tendency is to categorize it by genre. In placing songs into genres, other elements begin to fall into place that respond to potential questions: what technologies are used; what does the song sound like; who listens to it; where does it come from; what is its' cultural or commercial value? The older the song (or body of songs) is, the more institutional those genres become, accreting a sort of heritage status, as in the case of the genre called the *Great American Songbook*. The Great American Songbook formally refers to the canonical body of songs written and performed in the early twentieth century, amid the rise of modern sound technologies. Sometimes referred to as the "American Standards," this songbook defined American popular music of the radio era and includes heavy hitters like Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust," George Gershwin's "Summertime," and Henry Mancini's "Moon River."

Yet another, unofficial, American songbook also exists, comprised not of songs built for commercial audiences and modernizing media, but of vernacular songs written *in situ*, within the same era, and referencing specific cultures and community contexts. Entries in this second songbook have become so ubiquitous that they are accepted as part of the American legacy - "timeless" and "classic" with no apparent origin point but imbued with an American folkness: Appalachian folk songs, blues of the Mississippi Delta, and old-timey Americana were all written in the communities that forged and repeated them and influenced the more commercial genres that sprang from them. Such songs are not recognized by their decade, the first place they

were performed, or even by their authors. Instead, they are remembered and passed on in unofficial spaces, like dining room tables and school yards. “You Are My Sunshine” is a part of this unofficial American songbook, alongside favorites like Mildred J. Hill’s ditty “Happy Birthday,” and Woody Guthrie’s protest song “This Land is Your Land,” each of which serves a role in many American childhood experiences, from the home to the kindergarten classroom. Their status and role suggest we might “attune ourselves to the potential of their varied circulations” as possible rhetorical objects that reinforce certain American ideals (Enoch 298).

Yet, the question still lingers: why this song, and why treat it as a sound object and not an experience? The answer to the first part of this question is that “You Are My Sunshine” holds a comparatively unique position. “Happy Birthday” has not appreciably changed and is sung for a specific occasion and derives its popularity from the tradition of that occasion; “This Land is Your Land,” though also sung on kindergarten carpets and in long car rides, remains somewhat socio-politically charged through the protest and folk revival movements. “You Are My Sunshine,” on the other hand, has more seamlessly shapeshifted, breaching the boundaries of genre, purpose, and audience, passing in and out of formal media, all while continuing to appear stable.

2.2 Materiality and Sound

In treating the song as an object, this analysis takes a feminist approach, drawing from scholars across disciplines to inspect its sonic, material, and cultural aspects. Such an approach is strongly represented in research within cultural studies, which is naturally interdisciplinary and attends to agency, embodiment, and semiotics. Early research that merges feminist theory and cultural studies hails from Stuart Hall’s own Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (known as the Birmingham school) and looked to connect gender and class within political and

intellectual conversations (see Hall; Franklin et al.). Output from Birmingham School scholars included the CCCs Women's Studies Group's collection of essays *Women Take Issue: Aspects of Women's Subordination*, originally released in 1978, and which included both case studies (Angela McRobbie's "Working class girls and the culture of femininity") and theory (Janice Winship's "A Women's World: "Woman" - an ideology of femininity"). Contemporary examples beyond the Birmingham school include Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's *Material Feminisms* (2008), which employs a feminist material lens to investigate facets of science and technology, the natural world, trauma and history, and embodiment in order to, as they state from the outset, "jointly construct the parameters of our common world." (6).

Alternately, feminist work in sonic rhetorics is limited. As an interdisciplinary field, sonic rhetorics is young and still developing. Some work has emerged with specifically feminist and material approaches to sound (see Comstock and Hocks, Ceraso, Ahern, and Goggins) that focus on interactions between sound, space, and human and instrumental bodies, and whereby sound is treated as having agency, power, and consequences (see Sterne, Schafer, Attali, and Ihde for more). Comstock and Hocks, in their 2016 article "The Sounds of Climate Change: Sonic Rhetoric in the Anthropocene, the Age of Human Impact" draws explicit connections between Alaimo's cultural-material work and their own investigations of sound as "rhetorical material." Their argument centers around a de-privileging of image over sound, particularly in rhetoric and composition studies, noting that "the material turn in rhetorical studies has prompted [the inclusion of] a wider range of rhetorical conditions, artifacts, and tools beyond the 'text,'" but continues to maintain the visual's privilege over sound. They further claim that this dichotomy is both the result of image's easy reduction to "linguistic descriptions [over]

describing the persuasion of visibility on its own terms” and sound’s slippery status as rhetorical material text and rhetorical performance (167).

Despite this slippery status, Comstock and Hocks join other scholars in the field (see Ceraso, Ahern, Rickert, Hawk, to name a few) in the assertion that sound is rhetorical material created by rhetorical agents, specifying a shift towards the idea that “musicians, composers, audio engineers, and sound artists [can be characterized] as longtime rhetors of sound, engaged in the conscious process of making ambient noise matter and the human voice material” (168). By way of example, Comstock and Hocks cite the work of soundscape artists whose projects demonstrate the interconnectedness of sound to environment. One such artist, Philipsz, builds installations that interrogate the mind’s ability to push certain sounds into the background (called backgrounding) and plays with the layers of public and private sonic space as they simultaneously occur. One Philipsz installation features a woman’s recorded voice set against other sounds that build a sonic environment. Comstock and Hocks observe that, through this installation, a listener’s perspective shifts from an awareness of a disembodied voice to one in which the sound’s source is merely “an absent body,” with physical awareness, interrupting the listener’s expected relationship with their surroundings. Through this disruption:

Philipsz is doing more than simply asserting the power of sound: She is actually asserting the power of objects to manipulate our attention, including the power of untrained human voice to reflect our own vulnerability. It’s not the ‘backgrounding’ of sound that Philipsz mourns – it’s that we’re not even aware of the process. (172)

Philipsz’ example of environment and its constructed sonic layers, focus on the physical rhetorical and material aspects of sound and prompts questions not only about immediate environments that exist “in the now,” but also about cultural environments that develop and exist

over time (and across space). How do sounds - both environmental, like train whistles and traffic, and composed, like songs, or calls to prayer – help construct and reinforce socio-cultural environments?

2.3 A Physical Model of Sound

Sound as material and interactive begins in earnest with R. Murray Schafer's 1977 book, *The Tuning of the World*. Schafer, a sound studies scholar, composer, and an environmentalist, explores the connections between sound and ecology, focusing on changing sound cultures and sonic landscapes – which Schafer called “soundscapes,” the term commonly used today – to demonstrate how sound seeps into every part of life, rather than existing as a discrete event or sector of humanity. In viewing sound as culturally significant and with a social life, Schafer and other researchers asked: “what is the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change?” (“The Soundscape” 3-4). The soundscape, which supplies one answer to this question, places sound within a physical and cultural context and allows it to also mediate that context, tying those mediations to the natural world, noise pollution, and environmental health.

Although Schafer's interest was in the sonic intersection of the natural and manmade worlds, and how changes and disruptions changed those worlds, his ecological model can be more broadly applied. Don Ihde identifies that “auditory dimension” beyond the visual and that acknowledging it requires “deliberate decentering...of vision as the main variable;” scholar Cindy Selfe who, in her own work regarding aurality and multimodal composition in the classroom, notes that “sound is often undervalued as a compositional mode,” calls for a resituating of sound (Ihde 13, Selfe 616). Others, like Comstock and Hocks, regularly interrogate sound's embodiment, impact, and materiality. Steph Ceraso (“(Re)Educating the Senses:

Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences”), Erin Anderson (“Toward a Resonant Material Vocality for Digital Composition”), and Jonathan Sterne (*The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*) also recognize the physical manifestations of sound – the vibrations that impact the ears and body, the way sound disrupts physical space, and the roles sound plays, historically and culturally.

But how does embodiment square with the sound as an object? Pierre Schaeffer, whose work as a sound engineer also led him to view sound as material and concrete, vis-a-vis recording devices, tape, phonographs, etc. terms this as an *objet sonore*. Schaeffer, often cited as a founder of modern experimental music, defined his sound-object not as the sound itself, necessarily, but as sound-as-it-is-materially-captured (see Kannenberg). Schaeffer’s notion of sound as an object through its capture-material suggests that sound has rhetorical purpose, but also raises questions about how sound physically affects the entities it impacts. As a tool, sound can be manipulated in media, through digitization, sampling, mashups, and as digital markers (see Sterne, Gunkel, Goodale for more).

Steph Ceraso, in the *College English* article entitled, “(Re)Educating the Senses: Multimodal Listening, Bodily Learning, and the Composition of Sonic Experiences” (2014) contends that listening is not just an aural experience, but rather it is “a multisensory act” and an “embodied experience” (102-103). Here Ceraso draws attention to the fact that although the sonic is invisible, it can still be considered concrete, arguing for a new method of teaching sonic rhetoric and sound experience where the ears are not privileged over the body, and suggesting “an expansive approach to listening” that is more fully multimodal (104). Like Schafer, Ceraso is looking at the effects sound has on ecologies, though her situated, explicitly feminist approach accounts for all forms of the body. Sound, Ceraso contends, is uniquely multisensory and “can be

seen, heard, and felt” (104). In other words, sound can and should be considered beyond environmental infrastructures, vis-à-vis Schafer’s soundscape, and extended to human-centered infrastructures, both intimate and personal, and shared and communal.

But more than actively engaging within and across infrastructures, sound rhetorically circulates, becoming part of the spaces it inhabits. It works to generate, reshape, and breach physical, socio-cultural, and temporal boundaries. The sounds of Schafer’s soundscapes were in transition, being both natural and intrusive and juxtaposed against one another. His work focused on the effects of an encroaching manmade world on the natural landscape, where birdsongs were ousted by jackhammers. Ceraso’s pedagogical research draws attention to the full experience of sound, both natural and constructed, especially as part of a rhetorical, communicative landscape.

2.4 Defining Sound as an Artifact

The various perspectives offered above all argue that there is value in accounting for sound in our physical, social, and cultural environments. But there is less scholarship addressing how to define and clearly account for sound’s influence on human behavior and systems over time. Each of these sonic scholars takes up Schafer’s tying of sound to the physical environment and extends his ecological model to specify sound’s impacts on the physical body, the physical space, and through sense privileging. Through their work, they hope to refine parameters and identify the real impact of sound, while also clarifying the rhetorical interactions that occur between sound, humans, and multiple environments. This physical model of sound can, however, also be extended to social and cultural environments, as well, through investigations of how sound – particularly as song – circulates, crosses boundaries, and builds connections as part of personal soundtracks, familial practices, and serving as sonic rhetorical communications.

For this dissertation's purposes, I restrict the song and its materiality to being a cultural and material artifact, a status that treats the song as part of both the physical and the cultural environment, recalling a materiality reminiscent of that addressed by Comstock and Hocks. Yet, analyzing the song through the Circuit of Culture also suggests the song holds an object-like status a la Schafer, a word I employ intentionally, and which considers a specific set of parameters.

2.5 An Object, not a Thing

Of course, discussions encompassing the material, environments, and paradigms are well established and can be mapped back to Plato himself (according to Heidegger). Part of these discussions includes the separation of the word "object" from "thing." Across disciplines and among scholars the definition of the word 'thing' (especially as it contrasts the term 'object') varies, although definitions appear to share the notion that things and objects both encode and are encoded with meanings and concentrate on the socio-cultural relationships between matter and the body. Investigation of these relationships allow us to think about rhetorical acts of meaning-making, flows of communication, technological evolutions, and the identity constructions across multiple fields in the humanities. Sonic rhetorician Byron Hawk addresses sound's objectivity in *Resounding the Rhetorical*, identifying sound as a quasi-object, a term meant to wrestle with sound's lack of "temporary stability" and its elastic nature as "partially moving, emergent, composed events" (6). While his term presents an elegant solution for sound's mutable nature, I retain the term object as *state* of sound, which enfolds performance and composition as properties of that state.

Heidegger famously picks apart his own definitions for 'object' and 'thing' in *What is a Thing?* (1967), tracing discussions of the material from Plato and metaphysics to his title query,

a question that he determines is less about definition and more about history (54). To answer this question – “[What] are we thinking about when we say ‘a thing’” — Heidegger creates a layering of definitions that begins with elementary concrete examples that play with size, origin, and location: a piece of wood, a rock, a knife, a huge building, grasses, butterflies, and “the thing there on the wall – the painting –we also call it a thing,” solidifying the default understanding of the word (4). He then moves into the less concrete, into the world of events, ideas, and concepts identified via language:

By contrast, we hesitate to call the number five a thing, because one cannot reach for the number –one cannot hear it or see it. In the same way a sentence ‘The weather is bad’ is not a thing any more than is a single word ‘house.’ We precisely distinguish the thing ‘house’ and the word which names this thing. (4)

He further abstracts the idea of thing through reference:

If, however, a betrayal is in the air we say, ‘There are uncanny things going on.’ Here we do not refer to pieces of wood, utensils, or similar items. When, in making a decision it depends ‘above all things’ on this or that consideration, the other things which have been omitted are not rocks or similar items but other considerations and decisions. (4)

Through his description, Heidegger hopes to expand his reader’s understanding, noting that our perception of the term “thing” is both narrow and broad, with the narrow meaning referring to “that which can be touched, reached, or seen, i.e., what is present-at-hand,” and with the broader meaning being “every affair or transaction, something that is in this or that condition, the things that happen in the world –occurrences, events” (5). Finally, Heidegger takes up Kant as he claims an even broader, philosophically focused definition, which he identifies as *phenomenal*: “all these and anything else that is a something and not nothing” (6).

Heidegger's expansive definitions of things are also useful for thinking about objects. Both are considered phenomenal and are often used interchangeably but, definitionally, they differ. According to cultural theorist Bill Brown in his article, *Thing Theory*, the differences lie in their usefulness and the way in which they interact with other agents: "we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things" clarifying that objects contain "codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful" (4). Furthermore, he contends that objects only become things when they stop functioning and cease to be useful.

In this study, these small nuances become helpful and relevant for identifying "You Are My Sunshine" as an object because while the song's materiality is elastic, it can be considered part of the realm of objects, given these evolving and expanded definitions. Considering the song an object enables me to understand it as a cultural influence. The song is phenomenal, and, in its use, it contains those codes that capture "our interpretive attention" and make meaning. Examining the song through the Circuit emphasizes its' materiality and object-ness, allowing us the opportunity to "look through" the song to see what relationships it discloses between environments, history, culture, and us.

2.6 The Song as a Boundary Object

Formalized sounds, like songs, are particularly dynamic, especially in the ways they are constructed and investigated across disciplines, sharing characteristics of both sound and language, able to be read and heard, and re-enacted repeatedly. Songs freely engage with infrastructures and boundaries in uniquely rhetorical and socio-cultural ways, manifesting as shifts across genres, remixes, cultural adoption, adaptations, and communication shorthands. Their specific, elastic nature suggests an affinity with Susan Leigh Star's *boundary object*,

defined as an object that is “both plastic enough to adapt to the local needs and constraints of several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star and Griesemer “Institutional Ecology” 393). Star, who cites a series of research tools and locations as examples of boundary objects, contends these objects could be material or abstract, but abide by a certain set of characteristics, including “interpretive flexibility,” meaning that they are loosely or “weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use,” and holding “different meanings in different social worlds [with common structures that] ...make them recognizable” (393). Thus, a boundary object is rhetorical, can be mapped, and shares borders with multiple communities, uses, definitions, and purposes.

Still, Star’s definitional parameters of a boundary object are often stretched by scholars, something she warns against, noting that while there are multiple structures that help to define a boundary object, many heavily focus on the interpretive flexibility (“Not a Boundary Object” 602). She even admits that the use of the term “boundary object” has been extended, as it has found favor in feminist studies, new information sciences, and even medicine (“Not a Boundary Object” 603). However, one clarification Star makes cements the notion of the boundary object as a lens or a metaphor, especially in relationship to the shifts a song like “You Are My Sunshine” might undergo. This clarification is in her use of the word “object,” of which she notes:

In common parlance an object is a thing, a material entity composed of more or less well-structured stuff. In the term ‘boundary object,’ I use the term object in both its computer science and pragmatist senses...An object is something people (or, in computer science, other objects and programs) act toward and with. Its materiality derives from action, not from a sense of prefabricated stuff or “thing”-

ness. So, a theory may be a powerful object. Although it is embodied, voiced, printed, danced, and named, it is not exactly like a car that sits on four wheels. A car may be a boundary object but only when it is used between groups in the ways described. (603)

This clarification of the boundary object makes room for considering sound and song as possible boundary objects, where song derives its object-ness from its action and interaction. The song generates layers of meaning reminiscent of Star's example of theory, being "voiced, printed, danced, and named" and having affect and consequence. Additionally, songs can be sticky, using the pathos of familiarity and sentimentality like a glue, especially in relation to time.

Sociomusicologist and music critic Simon Frith refers to this stickiness in "Rock and the Politics of Memory" (1984) in which he begins to unravel the complex connections between British sixties counterculture movements and the post-sixties socio-political fallout connected with the punk movement, noting that "nostalgia works on feelings, not arguments and what I suddenly remember is the feeling that music matters, that records, sounds, songs, rhythms can have [social and political] consequences" (59-60). For Frith, the music and the musicians who made them famous were metonymic, serving as symbols of countercultural ideologies and principles. Frith's identification of songs as objects that take an active role in the social and cultural landscapes they inhabit, examines sound in both rhetorical and cultural contexts.

2.7 "You Are My Sunshine" as a Cultural Boundary Object

Over the course of this chapter, I have made the particular case for treating "You Are My Sunshine," as a material, cultural artifact with object status and, generally, that conversations about the materiality and culture of sound are already established. As the chapter's epigraphs

suggest, I also assert that, as an object, sound marks particular cultures and communities and circulates through them, moving across time and space, with specific purposes and ends. My assertion participates in other interdisciplinary, feminist work that examines the facets of human culture and materiality with the aim of constructing “the parameters of our common world” (Alaimo and Hekman 6). Some of the scholarship I draw upon, including Comstock and Hocks, Ceraso, Star, and Gries, identifies intersections that specifically inform the parameters of this study by supporting a model of sound that emphasizes its materiality and cultural potential. Other contemporary sound scholarship’s engagement with Heidegger’s distinction between object and thing helps my research establish and maintain a clear definition for the song “You Are My Sunshine.” By treating the song as a boundary object, I can begin to apprehend the connections that reveal the songs impact upon and within systems of culture – a cultural artifact.

Now that I have established the basis for treating the song “You Are My Sunshine” as a sonic and cultural artifact, I can utilize Hall and du Gay et al.’s Circuit of Culture to better understand not only what the song-as-object says about our cultures and systems, but, perhaps even more interesting, also how the song as object has shaped those cultures and systems. Chapter two begins this study, closely examining the Circuit’s Identity node and injecting “You Are My Sunshine” into the Circuit’s framework.

3 EMERGENCE: SOUND IDENTITIES AND THE ROOTS OF AUTHORSHIP

[I]dentities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting, and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization and are constantly in the process of change and transformation.

Stuart Hall, “Who Needs Identity?”

The past which is not recoverable in any other way [is] embedded, as if in amber, in the music, and people can regain a sense of identity.

Oliver Sacks, “Alzheimer’s and the Power of
Music”

“Often a song is a role. The singer acts a part. He or she is a storyteller of a piece of action. Characters or atmosphere are to be delivered ... No two artists deliver a role in the same way. Yet all good artists study a song and live with it before performing it. ... There is something authentic about any person's way of giving a song which has been known, lived with and loved, for many years, by the singer.”

Carl Sandburg, “Introduction,” *The American Songbag*

The Circuit of Culture does not have a specific starting point and the nodes are often intertwined, revealing “multi-relational and dynamic relationships among various points of reference” that underscore how meaning-making functions (Royster and Kirsch 102). One could begin at any particular node and be able to weave in those relationships and connections even as

they isolate the specific node. I begin with identity, of which the Circuit of Culture asks: how do individuals, consumers, communities, cultures, and other stakeholders ascribe with and through the object in question? Our object is complicated in that it is both manufactured and performed, commercial and private, unique, and reiterated, suggesting that an answer to this question lies in picking the song apart through all of the points on the Circuit, rather than isolating it to just this node. Thus, I begin with Identity, knowing that I will return back to it in other chapters because, at its core, this project centers around identity and memory. Though the Circuit is a recursive instrument, the song exists on a linear timeline, from conception to present, and focusing on multiple points of that timeline in relation to Identity can help us understand its coming-of-age. Finally, although the Identity node addresses all stakeholders, this investigation will focus first on those most connected with the origins of the song: it's possible authors, as "You Are My Sunshine's" backstory and its muddled origins are responsible for its boundary-hopping status and the relationships it has conducted along the way.

To begin, though, I want to establish a working definition of the term *identity* and its connection to sound. As self-concept, identity is formed through socio-cultural connections, attachments, material artifacts, and belief systems – those "different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" that Stuart Hall mentions (4). When discussing the identity boundaries of "You Are My Sunshine", the identities of the individuals claiming authorship, as well as the temporal context, are also all important to this construction, as their ancestors and communities have lobbied to tie the song to their geospatial origins as much as the authors themselves.

3.1 Identity

The term identity has its own extensive body of multidisciplinary research and theory. For the purposes of this dissertation, I constrain the term to Hall's definition of identity, which he frames as "a matter of becoming as well as being" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 225). Across his impressive body of work as a cultural theorist and sociologist, Hall wrote extensively about identity, establishing it as "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" ("Who Needs Identity?" 222). The foundational essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," explains that:

cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (225)

Thus, for Hall, there is no such thing as an essential or pre-social identity; rather, identity is always emerging, constructed through interaction and performance, and developed vis-à-vis language and other cultural codes. Identity is both time-bound and shifts with time, able to alternately ground subjects and propel them in specific directions. In the tracing of "You Are My Sunshine" across the Circuit, I adhere to Hall's perspective and employs his definition of identity (specifically cultural identity) as being in a perpetual state of becoming, developed across time and space, and constructed through interactions.

3.1.1 Memory, Narrative, and Identity

Folded into these interactions is an essential part of the human experience: word of mouth and its cousins, oral history, and narration. Before the technologies that enabled print media, knowledge was formally held in the memories of elders, passed down along generations and among communities, and included everything from creation myths and early medical practices to family trees. Children learned about their ancestors, communities, and traditions through family stories; apprentices gained skills and knowledge serving alongside their mentors; laws were codified through public decree and memorable spectacle; and common knowledge developed across tribes, communities, and regions through word of mouth.

Even today, in the height of the digital age where everything is captured in hyper-real time by pen and image and broadcast across multiple platforms, we still informally rely on the memories of our trusted elders for the experiences and knowledge they have accrued over their lives: the closely guarded family recipe; stories about the civil rights activist aunt; or the legend of the many-greats grandfather who rode with George Washington. These experiences are shared among generations and become part of the family lore and part of identity.

That lore, orally passed down through storytelling, preserves a critical function in identity-formation, as Danielle McGeough highlights in “Family Stories: Fragments and identity”(2012). She notes that individual identity and cultural identity are both affected by shared family tales, where “each generation communicates what it feels is important to pass on to younger generations, and family storytelling is one way in which family cultural rituals, roles, and histories are preserved” (19). These stories generate a “collective understanding of “who we are,” [where] individual family members locate their place in the world, and societal definitions of family are shaped” (19).

These stories may be divided into two types: big stories, which are well known, recursively told with uniformity, and spark meaning making; and small stories, which are “spontaneously” told and without regularity, focus on the performance of the telling, and can shift in nuance over time. Both types of stories are important to familial and cultural identity, though big stories tend to weather the recursive process of generational telling to become part of a historical narrative and require reflection on the part of each teller about the place and purpose of the stories being told. Like the small stories, however, the nuances of big stories, can be lost across tellings. In either case, there is significance in how familial stories are remembered and shared – not in precise timelines, but as singular events, framed through a particular point of view. These tellings stress elements considered essential while minimizing or erasing others considered optional as the narrative is shaped to highlight important relationships or solidify “the point of the story.” Moreover, with temporal and generational distance comes reflection and a growing chorus of voices, each of which help to recursively reconstruct the narrative for the next generation of storytellers. These stories may be told slightly differently by each storyteller using the same set of facts, especially in relation to their temporal connection with the tale. For instance, someone who “saw it happen” will have a stronger sense of immediate detail than someone several generations removed, who has been influenced by other storytellers’ reflections and is drawn to larger concepts, like lessons, morals, and socio-cultural identities.

Over time, these constructed narratives gain importance and power over the direction of family and cultural identity and help people make sense of the world by placing the storyteller and listener within it. Social theorist Margaret Somers explains this phenomenon in her argument for narrative’s place in historical scholarship, explaining that “[s]ocial life itself is *storied*, and that narrative is an *ontological condition of social life*” (614). She goes on to clarify that “people

construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives” and that “people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social public and cultural narratives” (614). Hence, while these recounted stories act as deposits in the family memory bank, they may also be considered narrations of the self, constructing significant connections, and making meaning that is both personal and socio-cultural.

3.1.2 Sound and Identity

Though Somers and McGeough focus on the narrative traditions of oral storytelling as part of socio-cultural identity formation, the notion of the narrative can also be applied to other modes of socio-cultural meaning-making. Scholarship in communication, the arts, and visual rhetoric touches on how imagery creates culture-normalizing narratives and similar conversations circulate in scholarship on film and media.² I contend that connections between narrative and identity can also usefully be applied to music; while visual representations can reiterate or reinforce what social and cultural identities are possible and how those identities should look, soundscapes and music address identity not only as it might sound, but also as it is remembered. Somers juxtaposition of narrative and identity essentially speaks to the rhetorical value of “emplotted” stories. When embedded within one’s personal or cultural space, narratives told through music help to co-create identities connected with those spaces. Examples of this

² notably within Roland Barthes “Rhetoric of the Image,” John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*, and Sturken and Cartwright’s *Practices of Looking*

may be as blatant as commercial pressure applied via the spate of Christmas music that arrives with Thanksgiving, or as subtle as one's momentary reaction to hearing a particular song.

Sociomusicologist and rock critic Simon Frith, in his article on nostalgia and the frictions between experience and theory, "Rock and the Politics of Memory," notes that, like identity, music is not fixed in meaning or value, but rather "depends for its effects on its context, the response of active audiences, and more obviously than the other media, it also depends on memory" (68). He explains that music is a trigger tied not only to memory, but also to emotion, using nostalgia to make connections. Yet, this also means that music can take on vastly different identities, depending upon how sounds are experienced or remembered. He recounts his own realization of this sound-memory phenomenon, nostalgically tying the sound of a Beatles album to both a time and a place of cultural significance:

Sgt. Pepper, for example, gives me pleasure not because it was the first hippie artwork but because it was the final triumph of mod. It is Swinging London music, a shopping style, the sound of consumption (male boutiques, sitar echoes and incense blurring in the traffic noises of Carnaby Street, the Kings Road, Saturday afternoons in the shopping center). (63)

This sound-memory connection with nostalgia and the self extends beyond genres of music to soundscapes that can combine with other factors to encourage similar responses. Consider, for instance, the multimodal work of experimental chef Heston Blumenthal, known for his mad scientist aesthetic and multi-sensory meals. One iconic dish, entitled *Sound of The Sea*, debuted in Blumenthal's restaurant, The Fat Duck, in 2007, amid a rise in technologies that made the mobility of sound easier and more compact. The dish is a multisensory feast, described as "presented on a glass-topped wooden box containing sand and seashells and [consisting] of what

looks like sand but is in fact a mixture of tapioca, fried breadcrumbs, crushed fried baby eels, cod liver oil and langoustine oil topped with abalone, razor clams, shrimps and oysters and three kinds of edible seaweed” all served beneath a briny foam (“Seafood served with an iPod”). The *pièce-de-resistance*, however, is the dish’s accompaniment: a conch shell concealing an iPod and tiny headphones that plays a seaside soundscape.

In an interview with *Olive Magazine*, Blumenthal explains sounds can amplify context within the dining experience; for “Sound of the Sea,” his goal was to develop a soundscape that might “nudge” out an immersive experience that allows someone to “lose [themselves] in a memory that’s triggered by food” (“Heston Blumenthal – Sound and Food”). To do this, Blumenthal worked with sound designers The-Dots to develop sounds of the English coast that “[evoke] sensorial memories of the seaside, which cross the threshold of consciousness and combine to strengthen the experience and heighten perception” (“Sounds of the Sea – The Fat Duck”). Some patrons found the experience intellectually interesting, while others found themselves inexplicably reacting with tears and a flood of childhood memories driven by the combination of familiar sounds, smells, and tastes.

Whether drawn backward in time through soundscapes as with Blumenthal’s customers, or through music as with Frith, there is a physical explanation for this phenomenon which has to do with how music is stored in the memory. Decades of medical research around cognition, dementia, music, and memory feature strong positive results that explain these kinds of experiences, including the ability of music to reengage individuals experiencing later stages of dementia and Alzheimers³. By way of example, prominent neurologist and author Oliver Sacks, whose oeuvre of scholarship on memory and cognition highlights the connections between the

³ for a review of research, see Munro; Brotons & Pickett-Cooper; Crystal et al.; Gerdner

self and music, details the marked changes in patients whose personalities and identities have been affected by dementia as they engage with music that they have known for a majority of their lives: “these seem to touch springs of memory and emotion which may be completely inaccessible to them” so that they “sort of regain that part, that time of their lives and that identity they had when they first heard the song” (“Alzheimer’s and the Power of Music” 00:58 – 1:05).

In his 2008 Linus Pauling Memorial lecture, “Why the Brain Loves Music,” Sacks asserts that “music seems to be a central part of the human condition” and has “great cultural utility” (16:56 – 17:05). He explains that, especially for musicians and composers, the connection with music is significant, citing decades of research on music and cognition that reveals “the enormous effect that music can have even on the growth of various parts of the brain” whereby the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that connects the brain’s halves, becomes enlarged in professional musicians (26:35 – 26:43).⁴ “Although you can’t say ‘he’s an Einstein, this is a theoretical physicist, this is a visual artist, that’s a writer, this is a politician, this is a university chancellor,’ you *can* say ‘this is a musician.’ The brains of musicians, especially performing musicians show changes that are visible even to the naked eye [and demonstrate] the plasticity of the brain and the power of music.” (26:59 – 27:58)

These physical connections between music, memory, and identity translate socioculturally as “symbolic [identifiers] of a social group, both by the group’s members but also by the surroundings (its non-members)” functioning not only to express established identities, but also to “[provide] resources for contesting and negotiating identities and constructing new ones” (Lidskog 25). Particularly for vernacular folk music, as a folkway that is colloquially

⁴ See Gaab and Schlaug for details on their projects with cognition, memory, and music in patients experiencing dementia

shared across generations and among community members, music becomes a marker of familiarity, sentimentality, and meaning. It can bridge generations, recount stories and legends, embrace unique instruments, and provide a common sound that transmits deeper meaning. Rhetorically, it also signals kinship, becoming part of the cultural soundscape, and evoking a certain way of life.

Ethnomusicologist Siv B. Lie demonstrates the cultural power of music through her research on Jazz Manouche, a specific style of guitar-centric jazz derived from the works of 1920s jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt and developed and maintained within France's Manouche communities⁵. Though not what most might consider folk music, and having a broader, secondary audience, jazz manouche demonstrates many of the characteristics of vernacular music and shows how music can rhetorically act as a cultural essence. In her article, "Music That Tears You Apart: *Jazz Manouche* and the Qualia of Ethnorace," Lie details the Manouche community's unique socio-cultural circumstances and how, through music, voice, and performance, generations of Manouche reiterate and reconstruct their cultural identity. The Manouche, an ethnoracial subgroup of Romany who have inhabited France since roughly the eighteenth century, are a social and legal anomaly in contemporary France, which does not officially recognize the existence of discrete racial categories, instead taking a national stance that all citizens are simply French. Yet, France equally does not recognize the Manouche as French, relegating them to the official term "nomad," legally adopted in the early twentieth century as part of a series of laws that subtly targeted Romany communities, and have generationally restricted their ability to thrive socially, culturally, and economically.

⁵ Reinhardt was, himself, Manouche and part of a family of Romani musicians learned to play music as a child, adapting it to Jazz later as an adult. For more on Reinhardt, see Dregni et al.'s, *Django Reinhardt and the Illustrated History of Gypsy Jazz* (2007)

Despite their unique position, Manouche communities persist through their everyday traditions, their dialect, and specifically their music, instilling an internal sense of cultural self across generations. Though the popularity of Jazz Manouche extends beyond their cultural boundaries, in some ways flattening or fetishizing the Manouche culture, for those musicians and students within the Manouche community, the practice of Jazz Manouche imparts a sense of cultural identity dispensed through practice, language, performance, and style, all operating as a distinct set of cultural qualia – “qualities instantiated or embodied in entities or events” (374). What results is a narrative of generational identity that comes from within, taking sensory and sonic shape outside of French official frameworks, and representing “the historical continuity of a particular Manouche sonic identity [portrayed] as a sign of enduring, place-oriented Manouche authenticity” (380).

Like Frith’s recollection of music embodying a specific time and feeling, and Blumenthal’s application of sound that results in vivid memories of place, Lie’s investigation of the Manouche community reinforces Sack’s assertion of music as “a great cultural utility,” and that sound and song can carry meaning across generations, serving as soundscapes and cultural narratives. However, though these studies help to broadly clarify the role of identity within community partners and stakeholders, what is perhaps more interesting for this project, is the relationship between songs as cultural constructions and their creators – those big-brained vernacular musicians and composers whose own cultural identities and histories are part of the songs they compose and perform.

3.2 The Folk-Country Boundary

The first few decades of the twentieth century straddle the boundaries between older folk music traditions, sometimes referred to as “old-time music,” and the emerging genre first called

“hillbilly music” and, later, Country. It is from this era and these contexts of the American south that the song, “You Are My Sunshine” emerges, and from the pen of a musician who, like others during the 1920s and 1930s, was experiencing a shift in the way music was accounted for and used. As narrators, songwriters and performers of this era wrote songs that not only reflected their cultural identities, but also reflected the shift occurring in their moment in history. For musicians whose music tread more closely to the vernacular in both sound and performance, their songs continued to act as folkways that sonically delivered, those “emplotted stories” of shared experience and cultural ideals. Examining this moment not only provides some relevant information about the song’s emergence, but also shares insight into the cultural interplay of identity and music.

Prior to this moment, traditional American vernacular music was still taking form and, like other emerging American folkways, reflecting the interactions between regions and cultures, using available sounds that predominantly included folk songs from the seventeenth century European settlers and the oral and musical traditions of slaves. In the eighteenth century, these folkways continued within local, rural communities although, according to the Library of Congress digital collections notes on the development of Country music, more formally constructed genres of White European music, including opera, orchestra, and vocal music, became the more prevalent forms within larger cities (“Country Music Timeline”)⁶. By the nineteenth century, while these formal European genres remained popular in cities and among social elites, westward expansion restricted their performance and popularity beyond the Mississippi, as only the lightest instruments – guitars, banjos, harmonicas, etc. – were fit for

⁶ The timeline helps to organize the large body of materials found in the *Dolly Parton and the Roots of Country Music collection* found in the Library of Congress

travel.⁷ Meanwhile, within immigrant enclaves, community members continued to primarily practice and share their existing cultural music traditions, preserving the sounds of their culture and homeland. Thus, as the country expanded and settled throughout the nineteenth century, the rift between formal genres and vernacular genres of music became more apparent.

Although music was integral to nineteenth century American life, most practitioners and players were learning in the home – theirs or a neighbor’s – gaining experience via listening, imitation, and practice, rather than by sheet music⁸. Paper and books were expensive and literacy rates were still unstable, especially within those immigrant enclaves whose first languages were not English, and among impoverished families for whom reading, and school were either not a priority or a possibility. As a result, “musicians, especially those who learn by listening and imitating, not by reading from a printed score, subtly [incorporated] sounds from surrounding cultures,” signaling the emergence of what was known as a ‘hillbilly’ sound (“Country Music Timeline”). Early secular proto-country songs recounted tales of the everyday, loves found and lost, larger-than-life figures, and humorous absurdities, while religious proto-country songs nurtured the old traditions of shape note signing, signaled regional fractures within branches (such as the split between the Southern Baptists from northern American Baptists), and shared bible stories whose lyrics reflected regional dialects, especially as part of emerging revival meetings.⁹

The turn of the century’s social and industrial paradigm shift sets the context for how “You Are My Sunshine” evolved. The first thirty years experienced a boom in music, from

⁷ The saloon piano arrives later, with “polite culture” as the West is more firmly settled (“Country Music Timeline”)

⁸ Learning music as a family or community practice continued to be common in the twentieth century, as stories in this chapter will demonstrate.

⁹ For example, songs like “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” both use localized dialects and popular on the revival circuit.

technology and recording, to writing and performing, topics I will take up in Chapter 4, and which made possible the full realization of popular music as something to be produced and consumed. In the process, vernacular music moved from more localized, place-bound contexts to those where songs and performances could be shared more broadly; moreover, vernacular musicians and composers suddenly had broader possible audiences and opportunities to succeed, professionally. In 1922, Fiddler Eck Robertson became “the first pure country music artist to make a recording,” with his tunes “Arkansas Traveler” and “Sallie Gooden;” and in 1924, capitalizing on the rising popularity of these folksy genres, Chicago’s WLS Radio aired one of the earliest American Country radio programs, “National Barn Dance,” which became the iconic “Grand Ole’ Opry” when it made its’ debut in Nashville a mere year later, in 1925 (Glanton).

The next decade would solidify America’s modern music industry and the frame the early boundaries of the Country music genre. Budding recording and publishing execs began to search for unknown musicians and artists to record, while ethnomusicologists and folklorists were undertaking expeditions to catalog, record, and preserve folk music. Notably, in 1927, A&R pioneer Ralph Peer, who had already been making onsite recordings of musical artists for Okeh, Columbia, and Victor records, held recording sessions in Bristol, a town bordering the Tennessee/Virginia line, where he discovered hillbilly artist Jimmie Rodgers and The Carter Family (Palmer). These “Bristol Sessions” sparked a prolific fourteen-year partnership with The Carter Family, recording in excess of 250 records – some traditional, some self-penned, but with a large number collected from other musicians and re-attributed to A.C. Carter (Palmer, “Country Music Timeline”). In 1934, Decca Records, a British label known for their pioneering work in early recording, opened its American Decca label with the express goal of capitalizing on the rising genre of Country music. And, in 1939, John Lomax, curator for the Library of

Congress' Archive of American Folk Song, and his wife Ruby began their trek across the South, recording a diverse body of Southern vernacular songs that spanned "ballads, blues, children's songs, cowboy songs, fiddle tunes, field hollers, lullabies, play-party songs, religious dramas, spirituals, and work songs" ("Southern Mosaic").¹⁰ Lomax' fascinating field notes detail the depth of music within families, communities, and cultures, sharing notes not only on arrangements and lyrics for each song, but also on how the music was passed along. Some comments featured long, involved stories, while others offered the briefest of explanations that still managed to provide important familial and cultural context. For instance, one hand-written note introducing the captured song "All the Pretty Little Horses," shared by Shirley Mansell in 1939, reads simply: "Mrs. Mansell learned this song from her mother, who learned it from her mother, a Virginian" (*Southern Recording Trip Fieldnotes*).¹¹

For both Lomax and Peer, Appalachia offered a hotbed of folk and vernacular music, but it was not the only location where music cultures were being amplified. During the same decades, the city of Atlanta, Georgia also boasted a thriving fiddle and hillbilly music scene that coalesced around Atlanta's major mill villages, from which some of the earliest commercial recordings were captured. Among these was Fiddlin' John Carson, a well-known Atlanta fiddler and frequent performer at The Georgia Old Time Fiddler's Convention, whom Peer recorded in 1923 (Daniel). This convention, which ran yearly from 1913-1935, served as a proving ground for several early "hillbilly" musicians who, like Carson, would later become successful radio and recorded performers, big names like Gid Tanner, and Riley Puckett. In his book, *Pickin' on Peachtree: A History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia*, country music historian and scholar

¹⁰ Jon Stone's *Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of African American Folksong in the 1930s* offers more on Lomax and his other recording trips.

¹¹ Lomax' field notes are riddled with comments like these, describing the origins of songs, but also random commentaries about significance or connection to childhood.

Wayne Daniel explains the unique circumstances that encouraged Atlanta's hillbilly scene as born out of "hordes of rural refugees" who had arrived in Atlanta just after the turn of the century (18). Lured by the word-of-mouth promise of jobs, these new arrivals settled in mill villages and communities like Fulton Mill's Cabbagetown, Chattahoochee, and Scottsdale, carrying "the hallmarks of their rural culture":

Bringing their instruments with them when they came, they continued in the urban setting the long-standing tradition of gathering together in living rooms and on front porches for informal jam sessions and sing-alongs. Thus, the fabric of folk music tradition not only remained intact but was strengthened through the interweaving of songs and styles from different parts of the state. (17-18)

Bartow Henry, who played in The Buckaroos and was a regular on the popular Atlanta radio program "The Cross Roads Follies" (1936 – 1940) recalls his own rural, childhood experiences and how he was inspired to learn to play:

What inspired me really was just a country band –just a bunch of cotton pickers [who would] get together on Saturday night at different houses. We didn't have an entertainment other than just whatever people provided locally, and these people – the Davis family of Cobb County – played fiddle, banjo, guitar and, I believe, two fiddles. (Daniel 145)

Even now, as these songs are adopted, arranged, and recorded for larger audiences beyond the original contexts, they deliver a sense of folkishness, evoking the particular characteristics and behaviors that have become coded, emersed, and reiterated through them. For "You Are My Sunshine," written at a moment in which the boundaries between vernacular and popular American music were beginning to erode, this folkishness takes on a patina that is both vaguely

traditional and vaguely Country, imparting the themes and stories so popular in American music of the mid-nineteenth, early twentieth-century South.

3.3 Authorship and Identity

Though an authorial dispute surrounding “You Are My Sunshine” exists, involving at least three, and as many as five, musicians of the day, it is not necessarily unique. Still, the song’s question of authorship has been called “one of the most complex genealogies in the history of recorded music,” and a mystery likened to similar disputes surrounding Shakespeare’s work (Fontenot 48). As more research is done and articles, papers, and blog posts are written, a certain order of events begins to take shape, though. This order does not settle the veracity of an individual claim, but it does follow the common practices of sharing, trading, and formalizing music within the era. And, considering the ways in which the song shifted in purpose and meaning, and the overwhelming popularity of the song, the argument can be made that all three can claim responsibility for some aspect of the song’s being.

Each of the song’s possible authors hail from specific areas in the South, and all come from similarly depressed socio-economic circumstances. The paths of their lives overlap, intersect, and then begin to diverge, a split that then unfolds parallel to the rise in popularity of “You Are My Sunshine.” All three songwriters – Jimmie Davis, Paul Rice, and Oliver Hood – have claimed authorship for this song in some way or another, citing dates on a narrow timeline that roughly spans a decade: 1925-1939. Using this timeline, I ascribe to one possible narrative of events that unfolds against the backdrop of the Depression-era South and told through a cast of three musicians, whose social and musical circles overlapped in ways that mimic an early version of six degrees of Kevin Bacon.

Scholarship that addresses this dispute is localized within music studies and folk studies, where the stories of the song's origins are considered through the histories and musical styles of each musician. Two scholars, who feature in my own historical discussions and whose work intersects in the late 1980s, denote the muddiness of the debate and the global interest it has garnered. The first is Wayne Daniel, who is considered the authority on early vernacular and country music in Atlanta and sought to reclaim the city's status as an early cradle that helped jump start the commercial Country genre. Daniel's book, *Pickin' on Peachtree: A History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia*, is the culmination of decades of research, oral histories and interviews, and hunts within the Georgia archives. In the notes to his section on Paul Rice, Daniel names Hood as a possible claimant to the song, stating of his interviews with Hood's family members and musical associates: "Those whom I interviewed consistently place the time of composition as the early 1930s" (*Pickin' on Peachtree* 261). Yet, he concludes, that the authorship of the song might never be fully proven.

The second, whose English work on the subject is limited, is Toru Mitsui, a Japanese professor of Western music and culture, who wrote extensively on the American music industry and matters of race, copyright, and recording. In the eighties, Mitsui became interested in the dispute and set out to determine the song's authorship. Mitsui's research and conversations with Daniel and others resulted in a paper, which he delivered in 1989 to the 6th Annual Country Music Conference (Meridian, Mississippi) entitled "You Are My Sunshine: A Question of Authorship," which was later published in the University of Mississippi's journal of Southern culture studies, *Old Time Country*. Mitsui consulted with Daniel on his paper and later book, a Japanese language monograph entitled "The Story of 'You Are My Sunshine,'" both of which raised questions about the music industry's habits of song acquisition (Hosokawa). Mitsui – who

interviewed Davis, and Daniel – who interviewed Rice and other musicians in the scene at the time – both describe the song like a cultural and musical football in its time, being recorded and re-recorded, each with claims of authenticity and authorship tied to the region from which it hailed. Paul Rice, in his 1980 interview with Daniel, quipped in words that were truer than he perhaps realized, “there’s at least twenty people who ‘wrote’ ‘You Are My Sunshine’” (“A Question of Authorship” 19). Here we will look at the most likely candidates, whose histories, professions, and geospatial communities overlap.



Figure 2 Professors Wayne Daniel and Toru Mitsui in their discussions about the authorship of "You Are My Sunshine," courtesy of the Georgia State University Special Collections

3.3.1 Oliver Hood

Oliver Hood, who makes the earliest claims to authorship, was born in Alabama in 1896, but spent the majority of his life, 1919-1959, in a modest house on McGee Street, part of the

Calumet mill village in LaGrange, Georgia¹². Hood was a charismatic man, well-known in his community, the subject of strong recollection and anecdote, and part of a particular musical legacy that echoes what was happening in Atlanta, a few hours north of his sleepy, Southern town. Shortly after arriving in LaGrange, Hood married his second wife, Mandy Easter, with whom he had eight children – four boys and four girls. Hood worked as a doffer in the local cotton mill, but also took on additional freelance jobs as a house painter, and even occasionally bare-knuckle boxed for pay when times were extra lean. But Hood was best known about town as a professional musician, playing the circuit spanning Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, in his spare time, hosting a weekly country music show on the local LaGrange radio station, WLAG, and teaching music to anyone who wanted to learn– on the front porch if it was hot outside and, if it was cold, in his makeshift music room, a small den built beneath his front porch (Crook). Hood was “the most sought-after music teacher in town” known for his prowess on the mandolin, but taught multiple instruments, including the guitar and piano, sometimes in a group setting, and sometimes one on one (Pappas).

Of the musical community that Hood was a part of, Hood’s grandson, David Crook, writes, “McGee Street may not rival Beale or Bourbon Streets, but for years it was the center of music in LaGrange and an incubator for some figures who would have a profound impact on this artistic medium,” referring not only to Hood’s students, but also to those who he played with weekly (“The Oliver Hood Sessions” pp. 4). And Theodore Pappas, in his article Included in that group were some familiar names who are part of Country music’s first generation of musicians: Riley Puckett, the acclaimed blind guitarist and banjo player who played with Atlanta “hillbilly music” superstars Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers and was known for his own early

¹² Textile mills were a major source of industry for LaGrange and at least five were in operation during the early twentieth century.

recordings and yodeling style; and Chips Moman, who went on to become legendary in his own right as a songwriter and producer. Moman's own anecdote of Hood, collected by Crook, tells how integral Hood was to the tight-knit music community in LaGrange:

Chips, recalling his experience with Oliver Hood, said that he had actually taught himself to play the guitar. Yet at age 13, he asked his mother for guitar lessons so he could learn the names of the chords he played. She, of course, sent him to Oliver Hood, acknowledged as THE music teacher in LaGrange. After the first lesson, Oliver called Chip's mother to say that he had to give her son back his quarter, as there was nothing, he could teach the boy. Oliver did ask if Chips could continue to come over and play music, which the young man did for the next two years. [Chips] honed his musical skills under the Hoods' front porch, and at the age of 15, he decided to hitchhike to Memphis to make his own substantial contribution to music. Oliver encouraged the young talent to go, telling him that he had what it takes to make it in music. (pp. 4)

Despite his popularity during life, Hood's history is not widely formally preserved, and is traced, as McGeough describes – not in precise timelines, but in episodic anecdotes recounted across several generations, and as part of the “collective understanding of “who we are” (19). Narratives about Hood might include his fiercely sharp wit, or how to prepare boiled chocolate cake – a Sunday favorite in the Hood household – but the big stories often include music and some sense of loss that hints at how the emerging twentieth century music industry complicated long-standing musical traditions (Robbins). Crook recalls that another song, written by Hood, “Somebody Stole My Sunshine Away,” had been copyrighted in 1966 by Hood's oldest son and

eventually recorded by “unknown musicians”: “I heard this recording many times during my teens, but the 45 was lost, and even the Library of Congress [has] misplaced its copy” (pp. 3).¹³

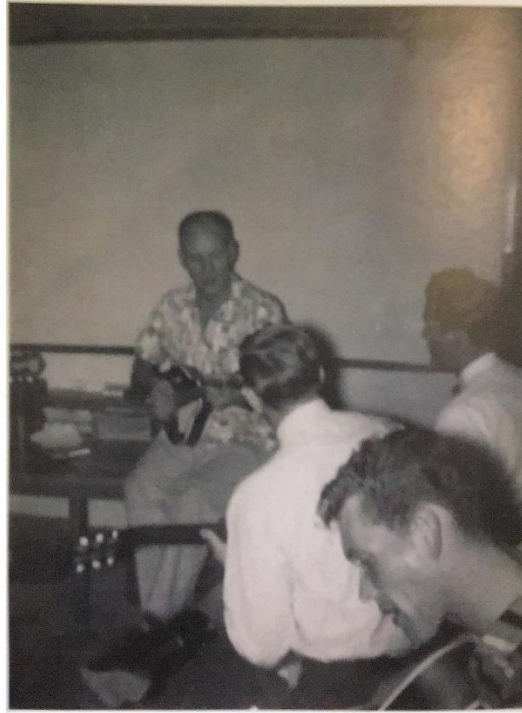


Figure 3 Oliver Hood instructing his students in the basement of his home, circa 1954. Courtesy of David Crook.

Though these sorts of stories of misfortune seem to follow Hood, and his children are now deceased, collection and preservation efforts of Hood’s music continue through subsequent generations of family, made up of “dozens of cousins in the next generations who are familiar with the story of [Hood’s] music and are very excited about hist legacy” (Crook pp. 3).

Additionally, throughout the last decade, several articles and blog posts have begun to surface, referencing Hood and his connection with “You Are My Sunshine” (Pappas, Sparkman, “Who Owns You Are My Sunshine?”), but so much remains largely unrecorded about the man who

¹³ According to his family, Hood wrote “Somebody Stole My Sunshine Away” in response to hearing that “You Are My Sunshine” had been recorded and copyrighted without his knowledge. He had refused to copyright this song or have it recorded, out of a distrust of the industry and the process. See Chapter 5 for more.

likely composed what Ronnie Pugh, the head of reference for the Country Music Foundation, called “one of the classic country songs of all time” (“You Are My Sunshine” – Jimmy Davis”).

Yet, recently, Crook, in collaboration with Hood’s other grandchildren, musicians, and friends, has sought to reinvigorate Hood’s historical presence and his musical legacy, a project which originated from a music program he organized in 2018, entitled “An Evening of LaGrange Songwriters.” For the program, Crook featured musicians who had all hailed from LaGrange, including Jimmie Farrar (Molly Hatchet), Chips Moman (Stax Records, Volt, American Sound), songwriter Pat Alger, and Hood. Crook soon realized, though, that while he had plenty of songs to choose from for the other musicians, for Hood, he had only “You Are My Sunshine,” and versions of two other songs, “Ponce de Leon Avenue” and “Somebody Stole My Sunshine Away.”

Out of this program grew Crook’s larger project to formally record Hood’s surviving songs and gather the anecdotes that everyone knew. Included in his project is a booklet entitled *The Oliver Hood Sessions*, of collected information and stories about Hood’s life, a discussion of the song “You Are My Sunshine,” and the process of completing the recording sessions. Crook’s booklet is slim, written for the purpose of the project, but shares research that offers a clearer picture of Hood and his identity as both a music-maker and a musician. But, outside of this and privately held papers still in the family, Hood’s appearance in the historical register is spotty, thanks to the 1936 Troup County courthouse fire. And, though Hood and his family lived in only one house, many of his personal papers have scattered amongst his children and grandchildren, only to later disappear. The few songs and documents that have been spared, were saved by his son Julian, who kept them quietly tucked away. The happenstance preservation of Hood’s work

is a story in itself about how community narratives grow, and are mythologized, then become disconnected and obscured.

3.3.2 *Paul Rice*

Paul Rice, and his older brother Hoke, born in 1913 and 1909 respectively, hailed from north Georgia's Chestnut Mountain in Hall County. While so much has been written about the life of Jimmie Davis, much less is recorded about Rice, despite the early success of his group, The Rice Brothers Gang. The most extensive biography of Rice comes from Wayne Daniel, whose 1980 interview with Rice, shaped chapters of his book *Pickin' on Peachtree*, and formed the basis for his 1996 article "The Rice Brothers," originally published in the *Journal of the American Academy for the Preservation of Old Time Country Music*. Like Hood, the Rice brothers' stories express the close connections between rural and city musicians within Atlanta's "hillbilly" music scene, and how the musicians in this scene overlapped with other hotspots across the country.

According to Daniel, the Rice brothers learned how to play music at home, first with their mother, who was the family musician, and adept at five-string banjo and piano, and later, with their stepfather, "Uncle Bud" Silvey, a textile mill mechanic and, as Daniel describes him, "an old-time fiddler and show business impresario" (*Pickin'* 140). Both of Silvey's professions moved the family throughout rural Georgia, though, Daniel notes, "Silvey's musical enterprises, which later included Hoke and Paul encompassed a wider circuit and took them to small towns in several Southern states," and would affect both boys and their musical journeys (para. 3).

Though the boys were raised in the vernacular "hillbilly" style, Paul's older brother Hoke branched out, taking guitar lessons to learn more formal structures that would come to shape the jazz and pop inflections he brought to his music. By 1929, Hoke struck out on his own as a solo

performer and found success within Atlanta's live music scene, and recording for record executives, like Peer, who were setting up pop-up recording studios with their portable equipment. Hoke, known for his flexibility, recorded with blues and hillbilly performers alike, and found regular airtime on Atlanta radio stations.

Paul, like his older brother, also sought an independent music career. He worked for WSB Atlanta in the 1920's, recording regularly with Fiddlin' John Carson and Gid Tanner. To make ends meet, Paul also continued to work back home, in the Gainesville textile mill, where he had his own band that performed at dances arranged for the mill employees. This suited Paul for a while, and musicians often sought work in mills and factories because they were able to work odd shifts and still play gigs outside. In 1934, both brothers decided to make a go of music as their main profession and set out together to play as a duo under the name The Rice Brothers. The brothers began a radio station tour that lasted for two years, playing across the east and Midwest, including Cincinnati, Roanoke, Baltimore, Washington, and Shreveport, Louisiana, and "a 13-week stint at the Village Barn in New York City and a six-month tour of duty with the 1936 Texas Centennial" ("The Rice Brothers" para. 6).



Figure 4 An archived advertisement in The Times (Shreveport) announcing the Rice Brothers' Gang. The Times, Shreveport, digital archives.

The Rice Brothers returned to Atlanta in 1937 for two years, and continued to hone their sound, expanding the band to a five piece that would match their more sophisticated ambitions and forming The Rice Brothers' Gang. In an interview with Daniel, Rice recalled, "We was hillbillies, but we didn't play hillbilly" (Daniel "The Rice Brothers" para. 1). Between 1938 and 1941, the Gang recorded over fifty songs for Decca, with songs that demonstrated their goal of shedding their hillbilly image by capitalizing on Hoke's jazz guitar background and the rising demand for gospel sounds. Despite their promising careers, however, the onset of World War II put an end to their goals. Post WWII, Hoke began a career at an appliance firm in Shreveport, giving up music altogether; Paul, returned to Atlanta and briefly performed on local television with a Western swing band, but never found the acclaim that earlier efforts suggested they might achieve.

As for “You Are My Sunshine,” in his interview with Daniel, Rice continued to claim authorship for the song, stating, “a girl over in South Carolina wrote me this long letter. It was long about seventeen pages. And she was talking about I was her sunshine, and I got the idea for the song [and] put a tune to it” (150). Interestingly, though, Rice’s story overlaps with an earlier account by two other Atlanta area musicians, Doug Spivey, and Marvin Taylor, also known as The Pine Ridge Boys. Again, in interviews with Daniel, Spivey shared that they had acquired the song from a young, red-headed woman from South Carolina, whom they met in the studios of WGST in Atlanta:

We first got it from a young lady that played guitar and sang from South Carolina that got it from some fellow there...she gave us the song because we were a duet...She said it would sound good as a duet. She said, “Take the song. Do with it what you want to,” and we mentioned about recording it. She said, “Take it. Get it copyrighted. It will be yours.” (149)

3.3.3 *Jimmie Davis*

The song is most popularly associated with Jimmy Davis, a Louisiana musician and politician who held the copyright of the song and first made it famous. Richard Severo, in his memorial article for the *New York Times*, outlines the Davis myth, recounting a legendary Southern childhood: being born to sharecroppers, circa 1899, Davis often quipped that he neither knew the exact year of his birth, nor did he have a bed to sleep in until he was nine. Despite being born in these dire straits, Davis and his ten siblings were always encouraged to attend school by their father, crediting this support with beating the odds and graduating with a master’s degree from Louisiana State University. Out of school, Davis began first teaching public school, then at a women’s college in Shreveport, Louisiana, before moving on to a job as court clerk,

where he stayed for most of the 1930's. However, Davis also had a musical career that he nursed on the side.



Figure 5 “Governor Jimmie Davis on horseback at the Jambalaya Festival in Gonzales Louisiana in 1971,” Courtesy of the Louisiana digital library, <https://louisianadigitallibrary.org/>

According to Davis, he began writing his own music to pass the time while clerking for the courts, although he could not read or write music and had no formal knowledge of chords. Instead, Davis would pick out tunes on the guitar until he learned to play them; he would eventually take up playing on the local radio station, where he was discovered by a local talent scout. With the scout, Davis travelled to Memphis where he made a few recordings and caught the ear of several bigger names, like Gene Autry and Bing Crosby.

By the end of the decade, Davis had amassed both fame and opportunity, which he parlayed into public office, first becoming Shreveport’s Commissioner of Public Safety in 1938. In 1940, he recorded “You Are My Sunshine,” which he would go on to use in all of his campaigns, exclaiming that “[i]t’s better in a political campaign to give folks very little talking

and a whole lot of songs,” (Severo). Davis’ popularity and charisma helped parlay his natural talents into a multi-platform career, not only succeeding in politics and music, but also in films. Overall, Davis painted himself as fun-loving, starring in B-movie westerns and playing music that he either wrote or purchased and put his name on. As an entertainer, he knew how to work a crowd and a microphone, feeling equally at home on stage or behind the mic of a radio show.

Contrary to his fun-loving, celebrity image, Davis’ political agenda and social beliefs were a bit stricter, as suggested by the thesis for his masters’ degree, entitled “Comparative Intelligence of Whites, Blacks and Mulattoes,” beliefs he took with him into his time as governor where his name was linked with both racism and scandal during both of his non-consecutive terms (Jeansonne). Despite some historians’ claims that Davis had “never been a demagogue or a hater,” he still rallied efforts to preserve segregation and slow civil rights in Louisiana (Jeansonne). During his second term, Davis also built a new 12-bedroom Governors’ Mansion on the taxpayers’ dime, by suggesting a quid pro quo of supporting public works in the districts that approved his request (Servero). Additionally, many of his bandmates over the years would “turn up in state jobs as ‘insurance rate supervisor’ and ‘inspector’ in the Louisiana Department of Agriculture” (Servero).

Davis had a decades-long career as an entertainer and politician and died at the seasoned age of 101. At the time of his death, he was the oldest man to hold public office. His name had long been connected with the song and, in 1977, the state legislature voted to adopt “You Are My Sunshine” as one of two official state songs in his honor, sharing space with “Give Me Louisiana.” Whether or not Davis wrote the song, he certainly knew how to brand it. In his campaigns, he used the song to great effect, forever connecting himself with the tune, drawing on repeated connections between the songlight-heartedness of “You Are My Sunshine” and his

public persona. Like a leitmotif, “Sunshine” popped up regularly throughout Davis’ public career, both in sound and name. He used the song, which had an old-time feel and sense of nostalgia, to rally supporters and votes, but he let the ideas of the song also echo elsewhere. He named his horse Sunshine, which he bought and rode to work during his second term after complaints surfaced regarding Davis’ use of funds for a Cadillac Limousine; he also used it for the name of a bridge he fought to build over the Mississippi river (Oliver). But Davis’ claims about how he wrote the song changed regularly and most understand that the song that is his, is the one he made through his years of recording and promotion, not the original plaintive lament (Mitsui).

3.3.4 The Dispute

Prior to 1939, Paul Rice, Jimmie Davis, and Oliver Hood had each found some success and were coming into their own, musically. However, 1939 marks a turning point for each of them and for the song, the year of its first major release. Davis already had a booming career as a performer and recording artist for Ralph Peer at Decca Records by this time. He was also a feature of Shreveport’s local radio stations, where Paul Rice and his Rice Brother’s Gang relocated to break into the budding Country music scene. In his article for the National Recording Preservation Board upon the addition of “You Are My Sunshine” to its’ National Registry in 2012, music critic and historian Ronnie Pugh details the order of events:

Two groups originally from the Atlanta area were the first to record “You Are My Sunshine,” both during the latter half of 1939. First of these was the Pine Ridge Boys, an old-time, close-harmony, two-guitars-with-yodels duo made up of Doug Spivey and Marvin Taylor; they recorded it for Bluebird (B-8263) on August 22. Almost a month later (September 13), a former Atlanta group by then based in Shreveport, the Rice

Brothers Gang, cut “You Are My Sunshine” roughly in the middle of an 18-song marathon session for Decca (Jimmie [Davis’] label) in New York. There is no composer credit on the Pine Ridge Boys record, while “Paul Rice” is listed as such on the Rice Brothers cut (Decca 5763).

Shortly after these releases and The Rice Brothers Gang’s appearance, Jimmie Davis and his writing partner, Charles Mitchell, legally laid claim to the song’s copyright. Pugh dispels the idea that Davis and Mitchell wrote the song, citing a 1956 article in the *Shreveport Times* that helps to clarify how Davis received the song, citing conversations with Rice and his former bass player, Reggie Ward, and declaring that “Rice sold all rights to “You Are My Sunshine” to Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell for the total sum of \$35, which Rice needed to pay his wife’s hospital bill” (<https://www.loc.gov/static/programs/national-recording-preservation-board/documents/YouAreMySunshine.pdf>). Of this shrewd business move Ryan Raul Banagale, another scholar who tackled the authorship dispute, plainly states, “Paul Rice needed money and Jimmie Davis needed a song” (14).

But, while 1939 represents a turning point for the song as a commercial success, it’s authorship can be traced back further to sometime between 1925 – 1933, to Oliver Hood. According to a growing number of sources both popular and scholarly, Hood, who was a contemporary and associate of Rice’s, is the most likely author of “You Are My Sunshine” (including Pappas, Daniel, Sparkman, Bulmer, and Mitsui). Yet, within Hood’s community, where he wrote and played music, there is surety that Hood is the song’s rightful author. Theodore Pappas, in his article “The ‘Theft’ of an American Classic,” references the community narratives about the song’s connection to LaGrange:

There are still people alive, however, who remember hearing the song long before 1937 – in particular, a mid-1930’s performance of the song by Riley Puckett himself – and what these people remember is the name of the musician with whom both Riley Puckett and Paul Rice played in the early 1930s: Oliver Hood of LaGrange, Georgia.

(<http://www.rosemontrecords.com/historical.html>)

Hood’s family narrative details that he wrote “You Are My Sunshine” on the back of a paper bag between the late twenties and early thirties, performing it at a VFW convention in LaGrange, Georgia in 1933. Multiple word-of-mouth accounts reported this to be the case and knew the song well, long before Rice or Davis recorded their versions. Unfortunately, newspaper clippings, posters, playbills, and other ephemera that might have mentioned this event were lost in a courthouse fire in 1936, obscuring decades of Troup County history and records. Still, stories of Hood and his song continued to be passed down by those who were there or had heard the tale. Chips Moman, the boy who had learned from and played music with Hood confessed to David Crook in one of their final conversations that the theft of the song had affected him deeply:

Chips had listened to Oliver’s live radio shows on local WLAG and also clearly remembers hearing his teacher’s recording of “You Are My Sunshine” many times over the years. According to Chips, he was in awe of Oliver, the first professional musician he had ever met. [Chips] recalled that one day before he left LaGrange, Oliver broke down and emotionally told his young student how “they stole my song.” [Chips] – who would go on to become a legendary guitarist, songwriter, producer, and music publisher – said that Oliver’s emotion deeply affected him, and from then on, any time he heard the classic, he would say, “I know who wrote that song” (pp. 3 *The Oliver Hood Sessions*).

Though, as Wayne Daniel notes, we may never have a definitive answer to who wrote “You Are My Sunshine,” Moman’s anecdote demonstrates why the story is important. And, in looking at the biographies of these three men, we can learn so much about the historical and socio-cultural contexts and identities being raised and passed along in the music, habits, and stories told. Today the song is far from what it was when it was first conceived, and the path it traveled to becoming its current iteration was deeply affected by the personal and cultural identities from which it sprang.

3.4 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have sought to connect music and identity, as it is defined for the Circuit of Culture. Using historical and archival research, I have examined the region, events, and musical practices happening at the rise of country music, to determine not only “You Are My Sunshine’s” place within these circumstances, but also how communities used, crafted, shared, lived through, and privileged music as part of the day-to-day. Comparing the lives of the song’s possible authors, apart from the authorship dispute, demonstrates how technological and social changes affected those communities and customs. In looking at the dispute, with a clearer picture of who these men were and the shared spaces in which they travelled, the narrative that each of the men are responsible for the song is clarified. I, like others who have written on the question of authorship, contend that it is time to dispel the idea that Jimmie Davis wrote “You Are My Sunshine” – he did not. But he did do what he was best at; he capitalized on the opportunity and made the song a permanent part of his persona, crafting his own charismatic narrative that indelibly connected him with the song. Today’s versions of “You Are My Sunshine” are part of his legacy, putting “an exclamation point on [the] transitional

period when “hillbilly music” evolved into an increasingly gone-to-town flavor of country” (Mazor, qtd. in Pugh para. 6).

Outside of the authorship dispute, what is clear is that the turn of the century brought with it exciting changes in music technologies that altered the ways that music and people interacted, shifting music from a community and cultural practice to also a commercial one. These changes also shifted the identities of musicians, who were being sought for their music, but not necessarily being preserved in the process. Lomax looked to save and record the music for posterity, and A&R scouts, like Peer sought to capitalize on a rising genre, but neither necessarily focused on who was creating the work, with exceptions like the Carter Family, who embodied rural life in their performance and in their sound and became the voices of this era.

Despite transitions to commercialization, the ways in which music bound communities like Atlanta’s rural transplants allowed their culture to persist through the instruments and musical customs they carried with them into their mill communities. Public spaces, like the Fiddler’s Convention or neighborhood music sessions, offered a sense of qualia that not only reiterated their rural cultures, but conjured a cultural space of home and belonging. The music made at the border of folk vernacular traditions and the modern music industry benefitted some, like Peer, Davis, and the Carters who were prepared for the shifting times, but it left behind many hometown musicians, like Hood, whose identities were still firmly rooted in their traditions and local places.

4 STORIES OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

MAN: Boys, that was some mighty fine pickin' and singin'. You just sign these papers here and I'll give you ten dollars apiece.

EVERETT: Okay, sir. But Mert and Aloysius'll have to scratch Xes - only four of us can write.

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

The Coen Brothers movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which parodies certain stereotypes of the Depression era South, also satirizes early recording producers like Victor's A&R man, Ralph Peer, as in the epigraph above. The scene begins with a shot of a car driving up an empty and dusty dirt road that leads to a rural radio station. Upon entry into the station, George Clooney's character Everett introduces himself and his band (played by actors Tim Blake Nelson, John Turturro, and C.T. King) to the blind station manager (Stephen Root) as "The Soggy Bottom Boys," with Everett explaining, "We hear you pay good money to sing into a can" (20:00 – 26:00). The tongue-in-cheek scene suggests a two-way deception: the station manager, who knows he has a hit on his hands, thinks he's getting a steal by paying \$10 per musician and capitalizing on their assumed hillbilly naivete; Everett, however, also hopes to take advantage, pretending there are extra members in the band, playing up the naïve stereotype for his own benefit. Later, in a twisted turn of events, "The Soggy Bottom Boys" find themselves on stage at a campaign dinner, singing the same song, which has become a hit over the airwaves, to the enthusiastic crowd of attendees. Seeing the popularity of the song and hoping to catch some of that magic, the incumbent Pappy O'Daniel (Charles Durning), hops on stage in a forced

endorsement. As O'Daniel takes over the stage, "The Soggy Bottom Boys" slink away while O'Daniel leads the crowd in a round of "You Are My Sunshine."¹⁴

Both of the scenes depicted in the film hint at the power dynamics between author, performer, and publisher accompanying the rise of commercial music, the developing practices of production, and in the ways, music is being embraced and consumed during the 1930s. This chapter addresses these power dynamics and practices through the next two nodes on our Circuit - Production and Consumption - as they relate to the rhetorical circulation process by which interactions between publics and texts occur, over time and through space. In this sense, I defer to Michael Warners' second and third use of the term "public" in his essay "Publics and Counterpublics." Warner applies it first to a "concrete body" that has "a sense of totality bounded by the event or by the shared sense of space" that is experiencing performance of the text "witnessing itself in time and space;" his second use of the term applies to "the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to their texts and circulation," the reading audience that experiences from within (50). In using these definitions in relation to the nodes, I aim to discover the "civic consequence of [these] material traditions," as James L. Bradshaw phrases it, especially as those consequences ripple across both categories of public (4). When applying these terms to performable texts, such as music, I contend that these publics will often overlap (4).

To complete these segments of the circuit, I look first to Production, through which the Circuit seeks to answer not only how the object is technically produced, but also how it is

¹⁴ The Coen Brothers use a collage of historical characters and events to create an impression of the Depression era South. The film is set in Mississippi, ca. 1934, five full years before the first recording of "You Are My Sunshine." Pappy O'Daniel was a real politician but based in Texas. Like his *O Brother* character, O'Daniel hosted radio programs during the twenties and thirties, and was a well-known hillbilly and Western musician that also used his music to great political effect. He served as governor of Texas (1939-1941), and Senator (1941-1949). (Green)

produced culturally, to attain meaning. Overlapping with this question of cultural production is Consumption's interest in how the object is used and what it comes to mean for those using it. While these nodes are separate and distinct on the Circuit for purposes of study, du Gay et al. stress how interdependent the two nodes are on one another, citing Marx' own words: "Production is ...at the same time consumption, and consumption is at the same time production" (du Gay et al. 47). In other words, when looking at either, one is really looking at aspects of both.

The Circuit's questions may be answered in different ways along the timeline of "You Are My Sunshine." I have already explored and addressed some of the ways in which each of these was occurring in my discussion of the temporal and cultural boundaries between folk and popular Country music¹⁵. Here, however, instead of looking at the general overview, I begin to telescope in on the circumstances specific to the song "You Are My Sunshine" as a hit for these early recording artists, which marks the ways in which it is allowed to attain its classic status. I first want to offer a brief overview of the technological advancements shaped these nodes.

4.1 Technology, Recording, and Power

In the 1930s, the music recording industry was coming into its' own, though its practices were still being codified. As mentioned in the previous chapter, however, the increased mobility of recording equipment expanded opportunities for capturing sound for remote audiences who were investing in these sound technologies. Though records and cylinders had been available since the end of the nineteenth century, as with many new technologies, the players were often expensive and unreliable, both in performance and sound quality. Additionally, though by 1900

¹⁵ See Chapter 3

production and design began to stabilize, the recording industry still vied for attention with another music industry – that of sheet-music publishing.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, popular music was shared through piano rolls, sheet music, and live performance, while folk music continued to be practiced locally and within the home. Tin Pan Alley’s publishing machine still dominated the music industry, driven by vaudeville, Broadway, and radio productions, and promoted by radio and film stars, who extended the earlier Tin Pan Alley marketing practices of “song plugging” (strategically performing songs in public spaces to increase interest and sales), and “booming,” a more aggressive form of plugging (Wooley) – both of which are not so different from today’s marketing practices.¹⁶

However, changes were afoot that would shift the dynamics of the home music parlor, with music players like Victrolas vying with pianos for larger portions of space. In 1900, sheet music sales hit \$4 million (roughly ten million units), while combined cylinder and record sales earned around \$3 million (2.75 million units combined), a clear testament to the sheet music industry and home music practices (Gronow 104). By 1920, alongside the issuance of the first commercial radio call letters to Pittsburgh’s KDKA, and amid RCA Victor releasing their first mass-produced radios, the piano was pushed even further in the corner, making more room for recorded and broadcast entertainment (“History of Commercial Radio”). In 1921, record sales confirm that a power shift had occurred, with sales of records skyrocketing to 140 million copies, valued at \$106 million (Gronow 114).

¹⁶ See figure 6, an example of how sheet music capitalized on the star power of rising film and stage actors.

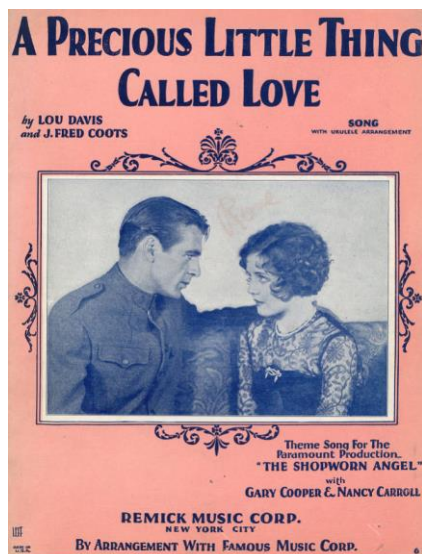


Figure 6 Sheet Music for "A Precious Little Thing Called Love," 1928 from the film, "The Shopworn Angel." Collection of Jessica Rose

This shift in power not only moved energy from printed music to recorded music, though. It also changed who was able to make demands of the industry. At the height of sheet-music's popularity, songwriters were needed for content, but performers and musicians were important in determining how music was regulated, produced, and shared. As printed material, sheet music needed players – those song-pluggers and boomers. Stage and screen stars also had heavy influence over the production of the works that they attached their names to, including a voice in arrangement and lyric choice. Without these performers, the music could not “sing” and remained on the page; for this reason, there was always work for the pluggers and boomers, and more elite performers could demand a great deal more from songwriters and publishers (Gronow). However, with the rise of music recording, a redistribution of power occurred within these relationships. Recorded music could be played repeatedly, needing fewer performers, and generating name recognition for those performers who were recorded. Thus, the sweat and ultimately demands, of performers were replaced by the magic of these machines, offering

record companies and publishers greater leeway in determining how money was spent and made. Moreover, while songwriters continued to write, advances in mobile recording devices meant that a greater variety of songs could be acquired from more artists, broadening playable content, and welcoming a variety of genres and performers into the home.

Advances in mobile recording technology allowed ethnologists and musicologists like the John and Ruby Lomax the opportunity to preserve the sounds of traditional music across culturally diverse communities. But these advances also offered an opportunity to engage with the other technology-on-the-rise – radio. Nestled between sheet music publishing and modernizing radio, and with advances that affected how music could be mediated and consumed, the recording industry found itself in a goldilocks zone, whereby it could wield a great deal of influence over music as an art form and a commerce.

4.2 Stories of Production: “Location Recording”

For early A& R reps, like Victor Records’ Ralph Peer, whose company needed content for their new music players, improved and portable recording technologies provided the means by which even small companies could benefit from the increasing popular phenomena of vernacular genres like blues, hillbilly, and traditional old-time. These early producers had a kind of wild freedom in choosing both who and what they would record and that they were “[crafting] deals more than [crafting] sounds” and “[functioning] as agents of “artificial selection” which “profoundly shaped, even defined, country music” (“Producing Country”). Though Peer is the most cited of A&R men, especially in relation to the narrative of Bristol, he was not the only travelling A&R producer looking for talent. Yet, he was one of the most prolific and, through his scouting prowess, was also able to dictate how recording sessions occurred. In 2014, Ashira Morris, reviewing a biography about Peer for *The PBS Newshour*, published an article with the

headline, “The modern music industry was shaped by a man you’ve never heard of.”¹⁷ Morris recounts a bit of the narrative that has developed around Peer’s rise within the industry:

During a two-week period late in the summer of 1927, a little-known producer named Ralph Peer recorded 77 songs in a hat warehouse he had converted to a studio. It would turn out to be a landmark moment, known as the Bristol Sessions, that Johnny Cash would later call “the single most important event in the history of country music.”

This is the myth that has emerged of Peer and those Bristol sessions, which historian Nolan Porterfield referred to as “Country music’s big bang” (Olson). The story depicts Peer as youthful and ambitious, spinning a bootstraps-style tale that seems to have eclipsed the rest of his already established career in publishing and recording as much as it has eclipsed the nuanced realities of Country music’s geographic, socio-economic, and racial origins.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Peer’s contributions are clearly significant, even if the story is more “brag” than bang, as Country music historian Ted Olsen describes it (“The 1927 Bristol Sessions”).


Peer, working for Victor Records at the time, hoped to solidify the company’s burgeoning label and provide material for their new Orthophonic music players; the goal of his “location recording sessions”¹⁹ was to “discover” and sign new “old-time” and “hill-billy” groups and expand their catalog of songs. But Peer had been travelling to record in places like New York, Asheville, and Atlanta as early as 1923, recording for Okeh Records. Peer’s Atlanta sessions were much broader in genre and scope, and he recorded a diverse group of players with

¹⁷ See Mazor

¹⁸ According to Mazor, Peer was enterprising and had already sought to record music genres beyond those to be played in the family parlor, recording the first blues song sung by a person of color, ever: Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” in 1920.

¹⁹ “Location recording sessions” were so named to differentiate them from the scholarly “field recordings” that were also happening at the time, according to Olson.

backgrounds in jazz, and blues, as well as folk-country. Musicians were always looking for places to play or opportunities to record and were paid per session.



**Don't deny
yourself the sheer joy of
Orthophonic music**

A SMALL down-payment puts this great musical instrument in your home. Here is a source of entertainment for yourself and friends without end. You may have it *now* for a little cash and nominal monthly payments.

The Victor Co. will have a recording machine in Bristol for 10 days beginning Monday to record records—Inquire at our Store.

Clark-Jones-Sheeley Co.
Victrolas — Records — Sheet Music
621 State St. Bristol, Va.

Figure 7 The Victor Co. ad placed in Bristol, original image The Bristol News Bulletin, Bristol TN, 25 July 1927, pp. 8. Newspapers.com.

Marion “Peanut” Brown, an Atlanta area musician who was playing in Atlanta during the era Peer was recording, speaks to the unpredictable slog of musicians working in Atlanta at the time in his 1979 oral history; he recalls recording and playing a combination of conventions, dances, theatres, radio stations with few breaks. Brown’s group regularly played radio stations

like WJTL, WGST, and WSB, in addition to performing on stage, with some sessions lasting six or seven hours. These stations, some of which were housed in theatres that could double as recording studios, did not have steady, uninterrupted content, and could be more flexible entertaining the whims of musicians. Often radio programming was a mix of dead air, recorded programming, and some live performances, “when they could get it” (Brown 10:36). Brown notes, “back then [a band] could just walk in a radio station, and they’d set ‘em up and put ‘em on. [They’d] put on a program and let ‘em play right then” (10:44 – 10:55). Featured players might get their names in the newspapers and gain some exposure, but, Brown admits, the money wasn’t great in any case. “But we’d go, you see, we was committed to it. We’d play anytime, anywhere – at a bus stop with three people if anybody’d listen to it” (11:38-11:42).

While recording and playing in larger cities was an everyday practice for musicians, recording opportunities in rural Appalachia were less common. Peer, however, was aware of the diversity of rural acts and interested in broadening his catalog of traditional and old-time artists. Contrary to the myth of Bristol, Peer’s Asheville 1924 recordings, the earliest location recordings of Appalachian musicians, had already yielded him performers like Ernest V. Stoneman, who, like the Carters, was part of a multigenerational music family (Olson). It was Stoneman, in fact, who pointed Peer in the direction of Bristol “as an ideal location for some recording sessions” (Olson 268).

What is perhaps more remarkable than the artists Peer captured was his idea to transport recording equipment through the mountains of Appalachia in the first place. But, given the nature of recording and production at the time, most music production work happened outside the recording studio and was directed at selecting artists and repertoire (“Producing Country”). As Olson notes in his discussion of the event, taking his studio mobile “constituted a shift from

the earlier practice of depending upon Appalachian musicians to leave the region to make studio recordings in such large Southern cities as Atlanta or in Northern studios” (268). The Asheville sessions became a test case for later sessions, like Bristol. The bang that Bristol bore was not Country music itself, however, but it was the birth of commercial Country music records and the rules of the recording industry. Subsequent sessions of note continued throughout the late twenties from multiple record companies. Recordings in Winston-Salem (OKeh 1927), Ahsland, Kentucky (Brunswick Records 1928), Johnson City, TN (Columbia records 1928,2929) and in Knoxville, TN (Brunswick and Vocalion 1929,1930) continued the tradition of location recording, each broadening the sounds of American music, with some cities, like Knoxville, looking to incorporate genres like jazz, blues, gospel, and Black string band music (Olson 269).

Though Peer was a pioneer of scouting recording talent, his real legacy lies in setting the standards for how artists would be compensated. Most artists and bands were paid for their recordings but left out of the publishing process. Peer saw a value in royalties, though, specifically with artists he knew had potential to become popular. Peer’s biographer, Barry Mazor, says of Peer that “he saw something early on. [The] reason he would bring Jimmie Rodgers or the Carter family...they were strong personalities with songs. The personality would sell the song, and then the song would sell again” (Ryssdal). Peer’s business acumen and his knack for seeing the potential in problems drove many of his A&R decisions. For instance, in his work with OKeh,Records, whose sales had been flagging, Peer saw within hillbilly and old-time, new audiences and new material that would reinvigorate the label and drive dollars. Support materials for *American Experience*’s limited biographic series *The Carter Family: Will the Circle Be Unbroken* references this less mythological side of Peer: “Peer was no saint, and he was in the business because he smelled money, not because he loved music. He had a gift for

giving the American people what they wanted to hear, and in the process, he made a lot of money” (“Ralph Peer”). With Victor Records, Peer elected to trade his work not for a salary, but for a commission of royalties, probably to Victor’s chagrin. This arrangement led Peer to profits of \$1 million per year, while continuing to pay Stoneman and others meager royalties of \$3000-\$4000 (pbs.org).

Peer would later leave Victor, moving to Decca records, the British label who had signed a number of Country musicians, including Jimmie Davis and The Rice Brothers’ Gang, both of whom recorded “You Are My Sunshine” for the label. Peer would continue his practice of location recording, moving internationally to discover and record songs like Besame Mucho, among others. After leaving Decca, he formed his own company, Southern Music (now Peer Music) which holds the publishing rights to a number of songs that he helped to record and produce, including “Georgia On My Mind” and “You Are My Sunshine” (peermusic.com).

4.3 A-Sides

In *Doing Cultural Studies*, du Gay et al. clarify that objects are imbued with meaning through interaction and citing Baudrillard’s claims that “consumption is a system of meaning like language, [where] commodities and objects, like words” constitute a system of signs and “a code with which our entire society communicates and speaks of and to itself” (85). Consumption, therefore, is not merely the purchasing or listening experiences, but rather it is also found in the performance of those songs, in making use of them, rhetorically, in both word and sound.

For “You Are My Sunshine,” consumption takes a multitude of turns that persist past its first publication and reception. In this section, I address the song’s circulation as a piece of music, leaving its other manifestations for the final chapter, Representation. As mentioned in previous chapters, the song was first recorded three times, in quick succession as it made its way

from Georgia to Louisiana. As it gained popularity, the song was recorded hundreds of times over by artists as diverse as Bing Crosby and Johnny Cash, art rock crooner Bryan Ferry, and the Irish alternative band Therapy? (as a hidden track). Interrogating the variety of recordings made and paying attention to their stylistic differences and the stories attached with each, we can better understand how “You Are My Sunshine” not only “burst the then-narrow bounds of [its’] genre at a time (1940) when such cross-over hits were virtually unprecedented,” but also continues to stray across bounds of genre and purpose (Pugh para. 1).

4.3.1 *The Pine Ridge Boys and The Rice Brothers Gang, both 1939*

The first recording of the song comes from the Atlanta, Georgia duet The Pine Ridge Boys, composed of Doug Spivey and Marvin Taylor. They released the song in 1939 for Bluebird Records, part of RCA-Victor (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmrAYWTZnpE>). Their crooning version of the song begins with a yodel and plays with the tempo of the tune, adding an extra playful “only” to the second line of the chorus: *You are my sunshine, / My only-only sunshine*. Though the first recording, the delivery is somewhat sophisticated and sounds like an update, suggesting the development of hillbilly into Country, which was solidifying by 1939.

The second, by The Rice Brothers Gang, was also released in 1939 and recorded on Decca (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4oqjF-txkZ8>). In this version, Paul Rice holds on to his characteristic hillbilly twang, but the song serves as an excellent example of both Paul and Hoke’s attempts to blend roots music with the sounds of jazz and blues. The recording bears the hallmarks of Hoke Rice’s jazz guitar, which almost pushes past the vocals to the front of the recording with its fancy fingerwork and suggests a flexibility that is both physical and musical.

The significance of this recording, apart from it being the first time it is formally linked to Rice, lies in the Rice Brothers’ Gangs’ evolution and timeline, as discussed in chapter three’s

overview of Paul Rice. Both brothers had sought solo careers in Atlanta prior to teaming up and going on the road, finding influences that moved beyond their traditional and hillbilly roots. Hoke, especially, had begun to branch out, working with blues and jazz bands to develop a more worldly sound. Paul, continued to play with hillbilly impresarios like Fiddlin' John Carson and Gid Tanner, and in barn dances across Greenville, staying close to his musical roots but developing his own style along the way (this dissertation 51). After three years on the road, developing and merging their styles, this song represents all of these experiences, supporting Paul's later assertion, "We was hillbillies, but we didn't play hillbilly" (Daniel "The Rice Brothers" para. 1).

Both groups make the song their own in a way; The Pine Ridge Boys' feels intimate but playful, while the Rice Brothers' arrangement feels effortless, with Hoke tapping the guitar as if they had played it a thousand times on the road. Both performances feel sophisticated, suggesting that, by the end of the 1930s, hillbilly really was coming into its own and Country could be something more than front porch get-togethers. These recordings push back against that notion, with purposeful instrumentation and arrangement.

4.3.2 *Jimmy Davis, 1940*

Davis's first official recording of the song occurred in 1940, also with Decca Records (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckKeQNCyPBU>). Called his "lifetime calling card" by the Songwriter's Hall of Fame, this recording of "You Are My Sunshine" sold over a million copies in the United States (songhall.org). Davis' version of the song embodies every bit of his personality and charisma, featuring an announcement of Dixieland horns, and a Hawaiian-inflected slide guitar gliding lightly underneath. His voice, both restricted and resonant, illustrates his geography, at times taking on a more Western twang and at other times remaining

true to Louisiana. The orchestration of his song is busy, upbeat, and celebratory, nothing like the sappy group sing-along that Pappy O'Daniel leads in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and suggests the necessary showmanship needed to carry off a contentious campaign, exuding confidence.

The National Recording Preservation Board mentions Davis' adoption of the song for his 1944 campaign, speculating that he was perhaps drawn to it because of a track he had recorded earlier, "I Wish I Had Never Seen the Sunshine" (Pugh). Davis, ever the showman, enjoyed manipulating musical themes and often employed a rhetorical leitmotif, stringing storylines across several songs. Stephen Deusner, in writing about the song for *Salon*, references Davis' ability to use the song to sidestep controversy. Davis, who had a back catalog of less wholesome tunes filled with blue humor that were sometimes used in an attempt to discredit him, would redirect the crowd with a round of "You Are My Sunshine," sometimes singing it on the back of his horse, affectionately named Sunshine. Running on a segregationist platform, Davis could lubricate the room with a rousing round of the sweet-sounding song, adding special lyrics in verses 4 and 5, to inspire state pride (netstate.com):

Louisiana, my Louisiana
the place where I was borne.

White fields of cotton
-- green fields clover,
the best fishing
and long tall corn.

CHORUS

Crawfish gumbo and jambalaya
the biggest shrimp and sugar cane,

the finest oysters
 and sweet strawberries
 from Toledo Bend to New Orleans.

CHORUS

(netstate.com)

4.3.3 Ray Charles, 1962

Ray Charles recorded “You Are My Sunshine” in 1962, as part of his second country album, *Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music, vol. 2* for ABC-Paramount Records (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HAjeSS3kktA>). Both volumes enjoyed critical and commercial success, with “You Are My Sunshine” spending nine weeks on the charts and reaching number one on the R&B chart. Charles’ version of the song, recorded with backing singers The Raelettes, delivers what the album’s title promises, with layers of sound that swell and ebb suggesting a call and response that is indicative of Charles’ habit of infusing and adapting gospel songs and sounds into his work²⁰. Sung as a duet with Raelettes’ Margie Hendrix, the song becomes not a one-sided lament, but a heated conversation that is at once celebratory and pleading.

Critic Jim Hynes notes that along with the addition of Hendrix, “varying tempos, producing big band and/or string arrangements and having other powerful voices [these] were radical transformations of familiar tunes” (para 6). But those changes also come in the form of shifting the lyrics, not overtly, but subtly, removing words that feel quaint, like “dear” and

²⁰ Charles was well known for drawing on his gospel roots, both musically and lyrically, to adapt songs to secular circumstances and contexts.

adding others to give the events of the song a sense of urgency that strikes the listener as participatory:

The other night as I lay sleeping

Whoa, I dreamed I held you, held you in my arms

Whoa, but when I woke up this morning

I found out I was mistaken

Do you know that I hung my, I hung my head and cried?

Whoa, you are my sunshine (you are my sunshine)

Oh, my only sunshine (my only sunshine)

Well, little girl you make me happy sometimes (you make me happy)

When my skies are grey (when skies are grey)

Umm, you'll never never-never know dear (you'll never know, dear)

How much I love you (how much I love you)

Whoa, and I don't want you to take (don't take my sunshine)

My sunshine away (shine away)

You told me once that you really loved me

And no one else could ever come between, yeah

But now you left me, and you love another, yeah

And you have shattered, oh yeah, all of my dreams

Whoa, you are my sunshine (you are my sunshine)

Oh, my only sunshine (my only sunshine)

Oh, you make me happy sometimes (you make me happy)

When my skies are grey (when skies are grey)

Whoa, you'll never never-never know dear (you'll never know, dear)

How much I love you (how much I love you)

Whoa, and I don't want you to take (don't take my sunshine)

Whoa, if you love me (don't take my sunshine)

Umm-hmm if you need me (don't take my sunshine)

Uh-huh, if you want me (don't take my sunshine)

Waaaahh! Listen (don't take my sunshine) (don't take my sunshine)

I don't want you to take (don't take my sunshine)

Whoa, my sunshine away (shine away)

The result is a version that is church-like and infective, shaking off any markers of sentimentality or corniness that are possible with the song and making it feel fresh and current, while still remaining timeless. Charles was asked about his choice to make the album – an idea that was his from front to back. He responded,

I'm not a country singer. I'm a singer who sings country songs. I'm not a blues singer, but I can sing the blues. I'm not really a crooner, but I can sing love songs. I'm not a specialist, but I'm a pretty good utility man. I can play first base, second base, shortstop. I can catch and maybe even pitch a little. (Hynes).

The field on which Charles was playing at the time of this song's release was a contentious one, despite his success and venerated standing. In 1960, sit-in campaigns at lunch counters were being waged in Nashville, which had firmly taken its position at the location of the Country music industry. In 1961, the Congress on Racial Equality organized the Freedom Rides, which sought to normalize everyday acts through having Black and white volunteers sit next to each other on buses. The following year, Charles released not one but two volumes of Country

music in a sonic act that not only speaks to Civil Rights issues and events of the day, but also prefigures the reclamation of Country as part of American Black culture, disputing the idea that the genre had separate roots from blues.

Responding in a letter to comments regarding Charles' version of the song and its popularity, Jimmie Davis defended his own recording:

Of course, the Ray Charles version of "YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE" is far different to my version; and incidentally, my version is more or less on the "cornfed" side. But, nevertheless, the tune itself is well established and planted in the minds of the people throughout the world.

Davis said of Charles' version:

But, now to the Ray Charles version – I had a feeling when I heard his recording that it would be a nation-wide hit and perhaps go to the No. 1 position. I had always felt that if it got the right kind of what I call the "wild treatment", by the right artist, it couldn't miss. And, frankly, I do not know of a person who is in a better position to give it this "wild treatment", or this modern touch or whatever you want to call it, than Ray Charles because he is a person that knows pretty much what to do with any song that he records, and when he sings one, it's had the works.

He closes with, "I don't care how they sing it – just so they sing it!" (Davis). Despite his attempts to reclaim his ownership of the song ("the tune itself is well established") and offer his expert analysis of Charles' success and style, Davis misses the point. In the re-recordings of "You Are My Sunshine," Davis saw an opportunity to reiterate his position as a musician and public figure, something that could provide both economic and social commerce. Yet, through recording and singing "You Are My Sunshine," the song which had formed the soundtrack for a

segregationist governor, Charles expands the song's purpose and meaning and addresses its Southern roots in an act that is revolutionary and rhetorically retools its cultural purpose.

4.4 Bootlegs

While the versions above serve as examples of "You Are My Sunshine's" use by recorded musicians, the song has many unofficial versions sung by families and friends for specific purposes and contexts, as well as stories that indicate how the song has developed as part of cultural and family language. This usage highlights the circulation of the song across publics that are both present and remote, some with elaborate backstories and others as simple memories. But they all demonstrate how the song, which moved from being chiefly formal and bound by the recording process to informal and steeped in the immediate context.

For example, in Steven Deusner's account of the song, he opens with the story of a deadly tornado that hit Moore, Oklahoma, and the Agapeland Learning Center, which was right in the tornado's path. The teachers quickly sequestered their students into the safest place in the building to wait out the storm, singing "You Are My Sunshine" to distract and calm them. This story went viral in the coverage of the tornados because, Deusner contends, both the act and the image of that act are powerful: "It's hard to imagine the uncertainty they faced, or even how the youngest of their charges would have responded, but certainly the situation lent new gravity to that final line of the chorus: "Please don't take my sunshine away" (para. 2).

Sue Bulmer, a New Zealand musician, also writes about the song but highlights her lack of sentimentality and explains that her American mother shied away from singing it to her children in the sixties because the song had been so heavily linked to "a white segregationist politician." However, her experiences with the song changed as her mother began to experience dementia. She explains that in the dementia care facility where her mother was living, "many

residents knew all the words to all four verses, when they couldn't remember what day, it was," and in group sessions it was a favorite for many of the patients (para. 4).

It is these interactions and experiences with the song that clarify it as a cultural object. The song's flexibility as a lament when all the verses are present, and as a lullaby when restricted to just the chorus, set against its simple tune has helped not only turn it into an earworm, but also fold it into the cultural language referenced by du Gay and Baudrillard. It is imbued with a pathos and sentimentality when it is introduced into family and cultural contexts, tying it to those events and people, but it has a familiarity that makes it useful in multiple contexts. Jimmie Davis understood the usefulness of this familiarity and took advantage of it to great effect, hitching his wagon, his campaign, and even his pet horse to its star.

Looking at conversations between strangers in comments threads demonstrates just how ubiquitous yet personal the song is. On the chat room *Mudcat Café Music Foundation*'s thread for "You Are My Sunshine," these shifts in meaning and purpose come up as part of a conversation on adapting the song for children. CHARLES92027 asks : "Does anyone have any kid-friendly lyrics for You Are My Sunshine? I know the proper lyrics, but they're pretty dark. I don't remember how we sang it in school. I'm getting requests from kids to play it, and all I've been doing is alternating the chorus and a melody on harmonica. I don't think they want to hear "I hung my head and I cried...."

Responses to Charles92027 included personal anecdotes and a full rewrite focused on gentler lyrics. For example:

THE FOYLES TROUPE: "This was often (in my environment) teamed with another similar period song as a 'medley' - I seem to think it was "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam".... :-)"

DEBTRE: 2nd verse I created for my son:

The other night dear as I lay.... ... you in my arms.

And when I woke dear you were bedside me,

So, I pulled you close and held you tight.

But other responses came from British WWII veterans, who knew the song as rewritten for a completely different context:

DAVID: I remember from WW2 years (I'm 87) something like this:

You are my Woodbine, my double Woodbine,

You make me happy when skies are grey (or something),

My Senior Service,

Don't make me nervice,

Don't take my matches away.

And another response, by GUEST, that referenced the same revision:

GUEST: You are my Woodbine my Double Woodbine

My glass of brandy, my cup of tea

My drop of whisky that makes me frisky

Please don't take my woodbine from me.

Remembered in Craigmiller, Edinburgh 20+ years ago by a woman who remembered she and fellow ATs singing it as they marched in 1945.

Each of these new versions adapts the song for their particular use but retains its familiarity in an act of bricolage whereby the context, the lyrics, and the music are purposefully

tied together. Though not lyrically similar, the tune works as a familiar sound memory to generate nuances in meaning that are rhetorical. Shifts in lyrics to make them suitable for kids offer a generational bridge between singer and songwriter where meaning is intentionally updated for the listener but remains the same for the singer. Lyrical shifts that are more extreme, such as these last examples from WWII, generate a use that is ironic and references multiple contexts and emotions together, references that could be further individualized by the individual – the war, comradeship, sadness, love, and nostalgia, among them.

As a body, the examples reflect du Gay et al.'s assertion that, contrary to straightforward ideas about consumption as something that must have economic or "exchange value," cultural consumption has what Baudrillard identified as an "identity value," a term referring to the notion that material culture's use and consumption "not so much for the intrinsic satisfaction it might generate but for the way it acts as a marker of social and cultural difference and therefore as a communicator" (du Gay et al. 85).

4.5 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have looked at the technologies and methods of production that were in place when "You Are My Sunshine" was entering formal, commercial space, and some of the individuals who helped to prepare and stabilize that space. The technologies surrounding early music recording and production had a profound effect on the way the American recording industry grew, introducing location recording that offered musicians an easier path to being heard and the burgeoning industry a larger pool of artists to pick from. Radio was also diversifying, as "Peanut" Brown's oral history attests, and looking to make room for itself in both spaces of production and consumption and dictating how local musicians might fail or prosper.

As an object of use and consumption, “You Are My Sunshine” is recorded within the Country and hillbilly genre three times over two years, but with sounds that demonstrate both cultural shifts and changing power dynamics. Davis’ use of the song as an extension of his charisma and a tune of propaganda suggests the power of song to shape the rhetorical context of a specific temporal or cultural moment. Ironically, Charles’ recording of the song twenty years later does something similar, inserting his voice and “singing” himself into social and cultural conversations of the time regarding race and Civil Rights. Unofficial lyrical versions of the song, of which there are many, vary on a spectrum from slight to extreme. In some, the sound of the song’s well-known melody acts as a carrier of nuanced meaning whereby the song is adapted to be a shorthand of communication which layers memory and emotion which demonstrate the identity value placed upon the song and its’ circulation across multiple publics.

5 REGULATION AND REPRESENTATION

The last two nodes in the Circuit are “Regulation” and “Representation,” which each pays attention to the ways in which meaning making is managed and shaped in public and private spheres. Regulation interrogates how an object responds to established legal and regulatory boundaries, as well as how it challenges the notions of public and private space. Alternately, Representation examines the practice of meaning construction through the socio-cultural use of signs and language. Pairing these two nodes together offers some interesting insights into cultural interactions on both ends of the song’s timeline – its current, mostly informal uses and its participation in the regulations that were developing around the technological and social changes happening when the song was first copyrighted. Additionally, this pairing also considers formal and informal considerations of the term “public domain” and the depth to which competing interests are considered or discounted, and codified.

5.1 Regulation

Current conversations surrounding music regulation are complicated and reflect both the full-bodied entity that is the modern music industry and the sophisticated technologies that mediate music today. Certain forms of regulation address moral regulation, as with the development of parental advisory labels, which were adopted by the Recording Industry Association of America in 1985, (RIAA). Other conversations address commercial regulation, with topics including sampling, streaming, pirating, licensing, and copyright. When discussing regulation, particularly in reference to intellectual property, these conversations tend to default to legal regulation.

For instance, consider the recent legal dispute over the master rights to Taylor Swift's first six albums, which demonstrates the power that regulation can assert over artists.²¹ When Swift was fifteen, she signed a thirteen-year contract with *Big Machine Label Group* in which *BMLG* retained the master rights to her albums, while Swift retained her composition rights. When her deal expired in the fall of 2018, Swift signed a contract with another label, *Universal Music Group*. However, a year later, her old label (who still held the master rights) sold the company to Ithaca Holdings, a media company run, at the time, by Scott Braun. Swift contends that she was never notified of the sale to Ithaca, nor was she offered an opportunity to purchase her old masters before the sale.

Braun and Swift, who already had a contentious relationship, waged a very public battle over the rights to her first six albums. A year later, with words fired and nothing resolved, Braun offloaded Swifts masters, selling them to a private investment group for a sum which *Variety* speculates to be between \$300 million and \$450 million dollars, and again with no opportunity to purchase the masters herself (Halperin). In response, and in a bold move that defies current practices, Swift elected to take advantage of a clause in her original contract and re-record the albums with her new label, re-creating masters that she could control and negating the value of the old masters.

Swift's example demonstrates the delicate tension between the creative and commercial forces at work in the music industry, as well as how stakeholders of intellectual property can both work within and resist the regulatory processes by which an industry is bound. Writing for *Variety* about the sale of Swifts back catalog, Shirley Halperin explains that Swift's decision will likely have a financial impact, rerouting income from the buyer by ensuring that her new

²¹ Currently there are two different categories of copyrights – the composition rights, referring to the lyrics and melody, while the master rights refer to the master sound recording

versions are accepted by fans and public, commercial media. But, for Swift, her decision is bigger, one she thinks will change the relationship between artists and publishers, redistributing power over creative works, as she explains to *Variety*:

I do sleep well at night knowing that I'm right, and knowing that in 10 years it will have been a good thing that I spoke about artists' rights to their art, and that we bring up conversations like: Should record deals maybe be for a shorter term, or how are we really helping artists if we're not giving them the first right of refusal to purchase their work if they want to?" (Halperin para. 11)

Swift's story speaks indirectly to the copyright dispute over "You Are My Sunshine," as she is the beneficiary of legal changes brought to combat the practices of early labels, like Victor and Decca, and respond to social and technological shifts. But how did copyright laws, this formal regulatory mechanism for intellectual property, advance from what they were in Oliver Hood's era to what they are in the Taylor Swift era? In order to understand that connection, it is necessary to look back at the history of music and copyright and the stories that inspired critical changes.

5.1.1 An Abridged History of Copyright Law

Notions of copying rights and intellectual property may seem ancient, but, like "You Are My Sunshine", they have conflicting origin points that are more modern than they appear. For centuries, music was an oral practice with little oversight, but even after the rise of composed music, musicians borrowed liberally from one another in ways that created sonic dialogues. For centuries musicians regularly rearranged, repurposed, quoted contemporaries, remodeled their own works, and sampled the works of others as parody or reference. For instance, Tchaikovsky

references the national anthems of Russian and French armies in his 1812 Overture (Aoki et al. 57).

The first formal, recorded instance of a copying rights dispute comes from Ireland in 1532, and recounts the case of Columba²², a legend that dates to 560 AD (Lacey 78). As the legend goes, the High King of Ireland, Diarmait mac Cerbaill, sought to settle a copying dispute which arose when Columba, a monk, came to visit the monastery of Finian at Moville. In the monastery of the library was a famous copy of a coveted biblical text, a Psalter, which Columba had been copying without his hosts' permission. One night, Finian discovered Columba and asked him to hand over the copy; Columba refused, and the case was brought before the high king. The king ruled in favor of the monastery, assigning ownership of the book to them, saying "To each cow its calf; to each book its copy" (O Baoill 2).

While Columba's is the first written account of dispute, the first written account of copyright *law* that relates to American law falls to England's "Statute of Anne" (1710), which addressed printing and publishing rights. The Statute, which sought to encourage "learning by vesting the copies of printed books in the authors," openly challenged a century of previous acts that had granted rights almost exclusively to publishers and printers ("The Statute of Anne; April 10, 1710."). However, this statute's own origins are contentious, with scholars arguing original motivation and purpose. Likely the statute was not meant as an economic kindness to authors, but some argue it was intended to ensure the production of "useful" books, while others assert the statute was a rhetorical move meant to disband any publishing monopolies which might influence political power; still others claim the statute satisfied multiple parties, acting as a multi-point solution (Bracha 1431). Regardless, the invention of inexpensive printing methods

²² Ironically, the patron saint of bookbinders.

had sparked a market for books that incited pressure to protect economic, legal, and social structures as the age of print emerged.

Early origins of this pressure include European petitions requesting printing rights dating back to the fifteenth century. By the mid-sixteenth century, England was granting monopolies to a new guild, the Stationers Company. Stationers were the only people allowed to print books, but they were also endowed with the rights of search and seizure, whereby they could destroy any works that tread on their territory. Most significantly, authors were not allowed to be part of the Stationers and, in practical terms, had no legal rights to their output (Patry). However, the Stationers Company directive was not aimed at controlling intellectual property for profit; rather it was aimed at the preservation of religious piety and the printing of proper texts, protecting against “certain seditious and heretical books [rhymes,] and treatises...” (Arber xxviii). Given the guild’s mission as a religious and political entity, the Stationers would wield an immense amount of social power.

Yet, by the early seventeenth century, authors began to speak up in earnest, calling for their own rights of ownership, as a counter to the Stationers’ licensing acts. By 1640 an order was issued to the House of Commons requesting full rights of ownership be granted not to printers, but to authors. The order noted that, “the Masters and Wardens of the Company of Stationers shall be required to take especial Order that the printers do neither print nor reprint anything without the name and consent of the Author...” (Patry 65). However, the first statutory copyright would not emerge until the “Statute of Anne” (1709), which ascribed the “sole right and liberty of printing” for fourteen years to a manuscript upon publication (Kretschmer 198).

The “Statute of Anne” would influence American lawmakers in their own “Copyright Act of 1790,” which provided copyrights limited to “any map, chart, book or books already printed”

(“Copyright Act of 1790”). In an article written as part of the celebration of the statute’s three hundredth anniversary, Oren Bracha dissects a direct relationship between the “Statute of Anne” and American copyright law, calling the latter a “major operation of international plagiarism” (1428). Specifically, Bracha considers the “Copyright Act of 1790” the first consolidation of individual American copyright laws, to be of the same lineage as the “Statute of Anne” regarding the former as a simple “transplant” of the latter (1428). Bracha deduces that the Americans leaned on the “Statute of Anne” for two reasons: familiarity and expertise. The “Statute of Anne” held a cultural currency and having sprung from the English soil, most Americans were already familiar with it. Instead of reinventing the wheel, Americans chose to capitalize on the best of what they came from. Additionally, the British were highly regarded as authorities of this area of legal scholarship, having already tested the less successful versions of copyright and determining that the “Statute of Anne” suited the needs of their print-active culture.

Still, all of these early copyrights focused on printed materials, ignoring other media. The earliest known copyright of music occurred in 1575, when Queen Elizabeth granted court musician and church composer Thomas Tallis (1505-1585) and his student, William Byrd (1543-1623) a monopoly on polyphonic music, and a patent on the printing and publishing of church music for twenty-one years (Kretschmer 206, Lord 69). However, Elizabeth’s patent was an outlier and most musicians in England did not benefit like Tallis. In fact, the notion of music as intellectual property to be legally considered stalled until France created its copyright laws in the early-nineteenth century, laws which extended to all intellectual property and also included rights of inheritance and performance (Latournerie). But, while these advances were occurring in Europe, they would not arrive in America until 1831 with the revision of the “Copyright Act,” before which time music was rarely a regulated property.

A decade after the enactment of the “Copyright Act of 1831” the first successful American minstrel, Stephen Foster, began to make a living both writing and performing his own works. Foster found modest success and even became known as the America’s First Composer, penning perpetual favorites that would enjoy later success in the sheet-music trade, like “Oh, Susanna,” “Beautiful Dreamer”, and “Camp town Races.” Despite Foster’s promise and legal opportunities, he died penniless in 1864, not having realized the same success that subsequent musicians would have. In fact, music would not be seen as a platform for financial gain until 1893, when Charles K. Harris would sell over 1 million copies of sheet music for his song “After the Ball,” a feat that made entrepreneurs sit up and take notice of the potential cash cow that music could be (Goldmark 4). Out of Harris’ success came the rush and rise of Tin Pan Alley, the legendary New York home of the sheet music trade and piano tuners, each angling to achieve a similar success. And for Broadway songwriters like Jerome and Stearns success was swift, but others, would end up like Stephen Foster, selling their songs for pennies, to make the rent.

The history of copyright demonstrates the lack of consideration for music prior to its ability to be commercialized. While copyrighting printed works had been discussed and debated for almost a millennium, in one form or another, by the time “You Are My Sunshine” was penned in the 1930’s, the rules for copyrighting music had only been around for roughly a century, with an even narrower window for songwriters and performers to actually make money at the profession. Musicians who made their primary wages on songwriting and performing were like goldminers, looking for the same kind of payoff as “After the Ball.” The reputation of Tin Pan Alley as a dangerous and dishonest place was not undeserved, and many walked away fleeced. And, even thirty years later, with radio and recording technologies ushering in a new

music paradigm, the industry was ruthless, pitting those dedicated to the work against each other, and putting those who did it for love at a distinct disadvantage.

Modern revisions of the Copyright Act came but with long stretches in between and were slow to respond to the cultural and technological changes that necessitated updates. The first twentieth-century update occurred in 1909, in the midst of the sheet-music surge, but before radio or recording were firmly established. The next revision of the act would not come until 1976, which means that it was the 1909 revision by which songs like “You Are My Sunshine” were being regulated. This 1909 iteration sought to respond to the modernization of music, adding a mandatory mechanical license that gave a two-cent royalty on all reproductions of the recording, regardless of type (Moser and Slay). However, the U.S. copyright act of 1909 was also very plain in its intention:

The enactment of copyright legislation by Congress under the terms of the Constitution is not based upon any natural right that the author has in his writings, but upon the ground that the welfare of the public will be served and progress of science and useful arts will be promoted by securing to authors for limited periods the exclusive rights to their writings. (qtd. in Kretschmer 214)

In addition to its focus on industry, the 1909 act was also taken to task for not complying with the Bern convention, an international set of guidelines regarding copyright law. American lawmakers justified the convention’s exclusion by claiming that the Bern convention was not comprehensive enough, seeking certain formalities and shorter terms of protection (Moser and Slay). According to Moser and Slay, “[unlike] the United States, most foreign countries did not condition copyright protection upon any formalities such as registration and notice...[which] the United States felt strongly [was] important” (18).

The specifics of these copyright laws become significant for the possible songwriters of “You Are My Sunshine,” providing the circumstances by which the song remained in a public and musical domain without formal authorship. The legal mechanisms for copyright between 1909 and 1976 required musicians actively seek recognition for their work, accompanied by monetary fees, which privileged certain groups, while alienating others. For musicians who were not part of the publishing machine – those who were unaware of the legal process, were chiefly performers, or who could not afford to divert money to announcing what they already knew was theirs – these laws put them at a distinct disadvantage and privileged already established industries and institutions that could benefit most from ownership of the work.

The 1976 copyright act brought important changes and was written after a twelve-year stint of hearings and revision sessions that included public interest groups, publishers, creators, libraries, and educators. Significant among the changes in the 1976 copyright act was the inclusion of federal copyright protection for every work as soon as it is created “in a tangible medium of expression” (Hull). The duration of copyright was also extended to reflect more generous, international copyright laws, calling for rights to be granted for the life of the creator plus a term of years, rather than restricting the copyright to a fixed number of years.

5.1.2 Public Domains

Formal, legal regulation addresses public use of intellectual property, such as the right to play or perform the work, as much as identifying ownership of the text. However, formal mechanisms of regulation regarding songs were still working to respond to the developments of recording and radio. Given the secondary roles of these public-driven regulations, I want to briefly address the term “public” in relation to “audience” and “listener,” specifically as part of the text-derived public that Michael Warner cites in his “Publics and Counterpublics,” and which

I reference in the previous chapter. Warner identifies three distinct publics, referring first to the nebulous entity derived from phrases like “public good” and “public interest,” as the 1909 copyright act cited. However, Warner’s additional uses of the term – as a concrete audience, and as a text-conjured audience are significant for considering how regulation occurs, less formally. These versions of publics are not passive, requiring attention and are, “contingent on [their] members’ activity, however notional or compromised,” as opposed to an involuntary membership (51).

The concrete publics that constitute the audiences of live performances – such as those who were attending the barn dances and music expositions that helped disseminate Country and hillbilly music in the 1920s and 1930s – are bound to the spaces in which they gather, their sense of public derived from the performance experience. However, the third sense of public that Warner cites – “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation” – is bound only by being conjured through the texts (50). Warner’s goal in separating and defining types of publics is nuanced. He clarifies that the imagined public, “a public,” is very different from “the public” referenced in phrases like “the public interest” and “the public good” (89). While I don’t intend to wade into these intricacies, I do intend to consider his definitions of public specifically in relation to how these publics act, not as receivers but as disseminators, and how their definitions might overlap where texts are mobilized, heard, and able to be shared.

Considering the moment in which “You Are My Sunshine” was first being played and, later, recorded, these definitions of public help us understand the transition of unofficial regulation to official regulation in relation to the development of the commercial music industry. Extending Warner’s use of the word “text” to include those texts shared across radio waves

suggests an overlap in publics, whereby a listening public may be concrete or conjured. Particularly in the rising era of radio, when listening was a conscious endeavor and where people gathered around the radio to “tune in,” those publics existed simultaneously, not merely listening, but participating and influencing the flow of texts through dialogue in the form of casual conversation and song requests that pushed past the temporal and spatial parameters of audience (Razlogova).

These listening publics influenced how formal mechanisms of regulation developed. Recall “Peanut” Brown, whose oral history recounted his life as a musician in Atlanta and his experiences with local radio. Brown noted that programming was inconsistent, with dead air being broken up by limited recorded content and live performances, some of which were spontaneous. He recounts how, as more music was recorded, regulatory bodies like ASCAP became increasingly aggressive about listening to programs to ensure that songs with current recordings were not being played, regardless of how new or old the music was. Of the song “The Navajo Trail,” which Brown’s band played live on air and earned the station a \$500 fine, Brown remarked: “They didn’t want that many people to hear it [for free], they wanted them to go and buy the record.” (15:26-15:29)

Performance-regulating bodies like ASCAP have a history that parallels the history of copyright, with the earliest organized group of “listeners” arising in France with the invention of laws that addressed the right to public performance in 1791 (Kretschmer). The first of these, the *Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques*, formed in the interest of writers and composers who wanted to collect royalties for performances of their work and serve as intermediaries between formal and less formal regulation. However, performance had been legally addressed, securing performance royalties was difficult and not easily enforced until a

French court upheld the performing rights law when two composers, Ernest Bourget and Victor Parizot, refused to pay for drinks in a Paris café after hearing Bourget's music illegally being played. Bourget famously defended his stance, stating "You consume my music, I consume your beverages; property against property" (Kretschmer 211). As a result, other organizations emerged, sending crowds of "listeners" to public performances across cities in order to ensure that royalties were fairly earned.

Another influence of publics over the regulation of music comes in the form of the how music was found and recorded, as was demonstrated by the common cultural practice of song borrowing and sharing. In the early part of the twentieth century, folk and hillbilly musicians still engaged in community musical practices where music was played together and songs circulated, being freely shared, collaged, and repurposed. As the genre commercialized, however, song-sharing continued, both among musicians and as practices taken up by song finders and A&R men. "Peanut" Brown remembers the widespread community practices by which songs circulated in rewritten or rearranged forms. Clifford Kuhn, who recorded Brown's oral history, asked Brown about the commercial version of song sharing: "you say some people would always share and take things from other people. How would that work?"(15:20) Brown responded with an example:

Songs? I call it stealing - everybody did it, you know swiping tunes. All songs somewhere down the line will go together, but [John] made that song "Eugene Talmadge Three Dollar Tag" and got the tune – he stole the tune from The Hesitatin' Blues, and there's been a lot of other numbers that's used the same tune. (15:22-16:30)

This act of overlapping familiar music with new words is one version of song sharing and dates back to the early practices of composers. This form of song sharing often served as a

construction of public, recursive text that held embedded references and conversation, making these compositions not merely aesthetic, but also rhetorical (Aoki et al.). However, as a widespread habit of the folk-Country era and enabled by the common community knowledge of traditional songs, the newness of technologies, and the isolation of rural communities, the commercial application of song sharing lacked the benefit of historical and cultural context and raises ethical questions regarding how music attribution occurred. Country heavyweights like A.P. Carter regularly “collected” songs from the public domain or as part of song finding expeditions meant to keep up with the Carter Family’s busy recording schedule. Just as Peer had done, Carter regularly travelled Appalachia looking for music that he could refresh, rearrange, perform, and copyright, a practice that extended song sharing to formal and legal arenas (Doman). Carter’s treks are considered instrumental in shaping the evolution of Country’s sound by setting a standard for scope, theme, and style, as much as they set the standard for how music might be shifted from the public to commercial spheres (Doman). Such internally regulating practices continued in the emerging music industry among producers like Peer and musicians - particularly those who were well-known and held a certain amount of clout like the Carters and Jimmie Davis.

These formal and informal modes of regulation both aided in the development of the music industry at-large and the cultural interactions among performers and publics, more generally. In response to having to re-record her early catalog and unintentionally referencing the consequences of the layered way in which regulation and artistic control emerged, Taylor Swift told *Variety*:

to this day, none of these investors have bothered to contact me or my team directly — to perform their due diligence on their investment. On their investment in me. To ask how I

might feel about the new owner of my art, the music I wrote, the videos I created, photos of me, my handwriting, my album designs. (Halperin para. 10)

Swift's experience is the legacy of the way the recording industry evolved and its nascent habits of song development. The adoption of community practices like song sharing and reappropriation by commercial musical entities in combination with an "opt-in" approach to copyright that existed for nearly seventy years gave disproportionate power to publishers and producers and dismissed the value of songwriters and performers.²³ Though her suit is not directed at songwriting credit but to her masters, her words still speak to a loss of ownership over her artistic output.

5.2 Representation

While Regulation references the historical and current ways in which meaning making is managed and shaped, "Representation" examines the practice of meaning construction through the socio-cultural use of signs and language. As a topic of study, "Representation" is most often connected with language and image, particularly with the rise of mass visual media, which "seems to have become the privileged sign of late modern culture" ("Stuart Hall Lecture" 1:22). "Representation" also closely relates to identity, particularly within our current, hyper-visual, hyper-digital paradigm. We connect with brands of phones, sneakers, coffee through identification, as well as through musical genre, accreting these things to us so that they stand in for who we are, re-presenting us, publicly.

In his "Rhetoric of the Image," Roland Barthes examines a French advertisement that employs familiar iconography to represent what Barthes calls "Italianicity," the sense of

²³ One could argue that these practices carried over into other genres of the industry, such as Motown, where early performers were undervalued and underpaid, particularly regarding royalties and contracts. (see Zwerin for more)

authentic Italian culture which the image evokes. The goal of his analysis is to demonstrate that images have meaning and can be broken into signs and symbols that construct a discourse. Music performs a similar function in similar ways using specific sounds, like Davis' slide guitar and second line horns, or Ray Charles' invocation of gospel through riffing to not only construct genre, but also discourse between the artist and listener. Moreover, songs that have jumped from popular music to "timeless classic" move beyond genre invoking their own "folkishness" or cultural sound, which can conjure feelings of nostalgia and cultural memory (as described in Chapter 3).

"You Are My Sunshine" developed into one of these timeless classics, thanks in no small part to Jimmie Davis' showmanship and business acumen. By performing his music outside of overtly commercial contexts in places like campaign events, picnics, and festivals, Davis built a bridge for the song to travel beyond its strictly regulated boundaries. The song circulated in a truncated form through community spaces and kindergarten classrooms, shifting not only the song's lyrical story, but also its meaning. As "You Are My Sunshine" hopped from context to context, it became part of the rituals of families and lovers alike developing a sentimentality that was quite separate from its original, plaintive expression of loss. Through this shift in meaning, it also transformed the boundaries of the song itself, whereby lyrics were extracted and repurposed beyond music in commercial goods that further entrenched itself in the American psyche. To demonstrate, I will first look at the truncated version of the song and how its use has shifted in relation to representation. I will follow up with a look at the ways in which the song has been reified through material rather than musical means.

5.2.1 “Cultural Initiator”

Several theorists speak to how music has become more than a listening act, becoming an element deeply tied to personal and cultural representation. Michel Foucault, in conversation with Pierre Boulez and John Rahn, positions rock rhetorically as a “cultural initiator” noting that “to like rock, to like a certain kind of rock rather than another, is also a way of life ,a manner of reacting; it is a whole set of tastes and attitudes” (“Contemporary Music and the Public” 8). While Foucault is describing the identity value rock has on its public, he is also describing the language of rock and how it represents attitude, ideologies, and whole paradigms.

Consider briefly, the early eighties D.C. punk band Minor Threat, which sparked the “straight-edge” punk movement, which advocated a clean lifestyle that eschewed drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex. The term, coined by Minor Threat’s front man Ian MacKaye in the 1981 single “Straight Edge,” became synonymous with a larger set of principles that continued to evolve over three decades into a vibrant scene with its own complex codes of conduct and visual cues, such marking the back of both hands with a black “X” to indicate straight-edge status. The lyrics were simple, but they represented a cultural shift that, when delivered through the adrenaline infused music, spoke to a generation who was drawn to the intellectual elements of the punk scene but not its nihilist and destructive trappings:

I’m a person just like you, but I’ve got better things to do
 than sit around and fuck my head, hang out with the living dead
 snort white shit up my nose, pass out at the shows
 I don’t even think about speed, that’s something I just don’t need
 I’ve got the straight edge (“Straight Edge” 1981).



Figure 8 Straight Edge Hand, wiki commons.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Straight_Edge_Hand_X.jpg

“Straight Edge” offers a contemporary example of how music, in both lyrics and arrangement, can subvert even its own genre to represent something beyond conventional meanings or interests. For example, there were no “straight edge” Country or Disco artists catering to Straight Edge’s theoretical ideals being touted – abstinence from sex, drugs, and alcohol. Rather, the evolution of straight edge as a community was sparked by the common language of sounds and signs that served as an expression of the culture and could, therefore, be subverted.

5.2.2 “Speak Themselves into Spaces”

A completely different example of how music and song develop a representational language comes from Tammie Kernodle, whose work on the role of women and the music of the Civil Rights movement demonstrates the ways in which music cuts across time and space to connect communities and mark presence. Kernodle initially examined the habit of freedom singing, the practice of calling protestors and marchers to gather through song in an act that Kernodle cites as familiar to the Black American experience: “every generation has in some

ways tried to use the song to articulate and speak themselves in spaces” (Robin 36:03). In a podcast interview for *Sound Expertise*, she explains how music came to represent not only the movement, but the role of women in the movement:

Because the spiritual [for] centuries has been linked with the essence of Black existence, because it’s a reminder that the African story in America is one that begins with slavery, right? And that’s [an] experience that cannot be divorced from this [conversation]. So, these songs have long served as a representative of the essence” (Robin 35:18).



Figure 9 "Public Domain: Odetta at 1963 March on Washington (NARA)" by pingnews.com is marked with CC PDM 1.0

She notes that music represents more than just lyrical sound, but rather it conjures both a history and an ancestry that offers “a full representation of Black experience in American, just in songs alone” (Robin 38:36):

When DuBois writes about [folk] in *The Souls of Black Folk*, [the word] folk is the populace, it’s the people, but it’s the essence of those songs and what those songs embody, right? So, in order to speak yourself into the narrative of freedom, right, you

have to go back to that historical poem where that question of freedom begins, and that's the spiritual. (Robin 35:52).

Kernodle cites sixties folk musician and civil rights activist Odetta, particularly, who imbued her performances with rhetorical shifts in lyrics and sound that expressed full conversations about mood, current events, and cultural pride that takes on “expansive levels of meaning.” For instance, at the Washington March Odetta performed the spiritual “On My Way to Canaan Land,” historically connected with the underground railroad, but changed the chorus to “On My Way to Freedom Land.” Kernodle cites this move as a way to draw on a shared historical past in which Odetta can “[provide the] next generation a language [in which] to document their experiences” and “[speak] the past into the present” (Robin 18:47, 34:26). Kernodle’s work demonstrates the rhetorical power and flexibility music has to address and gather publics. By “tweaking words” and sounds that were an essential part of the Black American experience, Odetta extends cultural memory and unifies cultural generations through “a common musical thread” (Robin 34:02).

5.2.3 Extending Sentimentality

“You Are My Sunshine,” connects culturally, as well, though in completely different ways, drawing on a familial sentimentality that has shifted its literal meaning and regulated how the song is consumed and performed in our informal spaces. Stephen J. Deusner’s story about teachers soothing children with the song during a terrifying tornado not only demonstrates its flexibility, but also indicates how embedded the song has become as “a ditty” within childhood experiences, both in the United States and abroad. For instance, Susanne Garvis in “‘You Are My Sunshine My Only Sunshine’: Current Music Activities in Kindergarten Classrooms in Queensland, Australia” speaks to more mundane instances in which the song might be sung.

Garvis' article investigates the effect of music on childhood learning, when included in everyday spaces like classrooms and the home. The example she alludes to in her title, highlights "You Are My Sunshine" as part of a school activity in which children, seated on a mat, are practicing the song for Father's Day. To make the song meaningful, the class has changed the lyrics slightly to "You'll never know Dad, how much I love you" (18). What is interesting about this example is its two-fold nature: it demonstrates specifically how the song has embedded itself into childhood-centric spaces in such a way as to render it part of the cultural experience; however, it also demonstrates how the cultural practice of song-sharing and remixing continue to occur in informal spaces.

Another example of how the song rhetorically circulates is the 2020 advertisement for the diabetes drug *Rybelsus*. The ad includes an up-beat, rock-tinged rendition of the song by the band The Next Great American Novelist as part of its advertising campaign (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_F7D0Mj6y80).²⁴ The ad opens with the sound of an upbeat rock guitar over the animation of a woman waking up in her bedroom, stretching her arms in the air. Over the music, a man's voice enthusiastically announces, "People are waking up to a bright day," after which the song's first line is sung, "You Are My Sunshine, My Only Sunshine" (:07). The song's vocals fade after this first line to make room for the voiceover as it discusses the benefits and adverse reactions of the drug. Images include mail being delivered, birds flying, The Statue of Liberty, a couple standing on a bridge, and then a radiating blue sun that serves as a place for rotating text. Near the close of the commercial, vocals return pleading "please don't take my sunshine away." This bizarre commercial invokes a different form of nostalgia. By using a highly energized and electrified version of the song, the commercial is

²⁴ The Next Great American Novelist's version may be heard in full here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v82nLvjKWpw>

actually broadening the temporal range of the nostalgia to include not only those emotions tied to young childhood that Garvis references, but also the feeling of youth and freedom that a driving, upbeat pop guitar might also suggest.

5.2.4 *Physical Representations of Sentimentality*

Though we can look at the musical and sometimes audiovisual representations ascribed to “You Are My Sunshine,” we can also examine the song’s representation through additional manifestations over several new media. Within these new media the song’s lyrics are cleaved from sound but, because of how deeply “You Are My Sunshine” is situated within American quotidian spaces, the song continues as intact. While the song is taken out of its original form and the music becomes a ghost, “You Are My Sunshine” maintains its original reference and ability to invoke and manipulate nostalgia.

Consider the most obvious of these physical shifts, the greeting card, which represent complex messages in small spaces and are designed to fit a broad range of rhetorical contexts. Greeting cards present themselves across a variety of contexts, re-commercializing sentiment, and representing sonic messages through their material nature. The song, “You Are My Sunshine,” is prolific across a variety of greeting cards that may use only the first line, or the chorus to call on the song. A simple google search of the phrase “You Are My Sunshine greeting card” yields 17,700,000 possible returns, exaggerating just how ubiquitous the song has become.

Examples of these cards include fig. 10’s Kawaii inspired card, which remains blank inside, “for your own thoughtful message,” but visually accesses a cuteness that appeals to a younger, but not necessarily childhood audience (etsy.com). In another example, an invitation for a baby shower, the card references the birth of a child, announcing not only the good news, but the continued nostalgic connections between childhood and the song (fig. 11).



Figure 10 "You Are My Sunshine Kawaii Card." HappyDaddyBits.
[https://www.etsy.com/listing/78728774/you-are-my-sunshine-card-illustrated-sun.](https://www.etsy.com/listing/78728774/you-are-my-sunshine-card-illustrated-sun)

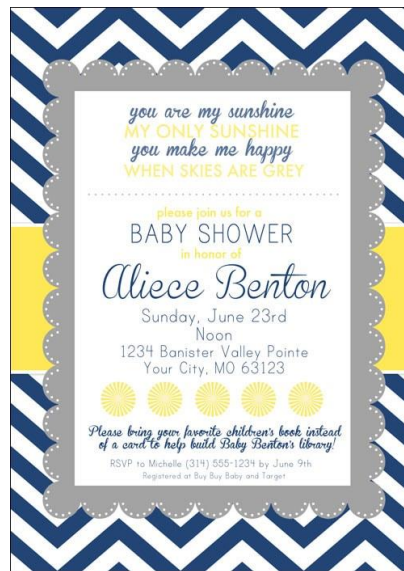


Figure 11 "You Are My Sunshine" Baby shower invitation, howtonestforless.com.

But a proliferation of objects beyond cards also manifests the song in physical form, including jewelry (fig. 12), and pocket tokens (fig. 13) that “sing” the first line of the song and suggest intimate relationships that may be familial or romantic.



Figure 12 "You Are My Sunshine" pendant by Alison Kelley Designs is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0



Figure 13 "You Are My Sunshine" sharing token, courtesy of Jessica Rose

Alternately, plaques, posters, and wall art found home goods stores and arts and crafts websites offer an opportunity to expand the sentiment to the entire home, expressing familial and cultural attitudes about how the space is used. The image below (fig. 14) is designed for a nursery, but other examples are as sophisticated as cast metal wall art and as rustic as painted wooden planks, both blending image and text together.



Figure 14 "You Are My Sunshine" Walmart wall art, walmart.com

In public spaces, including this same sentiment in graffiti or as signs rhetorically draws connections to those same familial attitudes but for different ends, to unnerve (fig. 15) or unexpectedly delight (fig. 16). Regardless of the material or visual platform, the significance lies not in how it is used, as the meaning is not consistent. Rather, it is simply that it is used, perpetually, repeatedly, and referentially as a common cultural touchstone.



Figure 15 "You are my sunshine..." by KylaBorg is licensed under CC BY 2.0



Figure 16 “You Are My Sunshine” sidewalk graffiti, flickr, courtesy of YamiYugi36, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/yamiyugi36/3358687384/>

5.3 Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have sought to look at some of the conditions and events that have influenced the way the song “You Are My Sunshine” transformed from a simple recorded tune to something that represents multiple aspects of the cultures in which it is embedded. As I noted at the top of the chapter, “Regulation” and “Representation” both speak to the ways in which a community engages with an object, and considers who, how, and under what conditions that engagement is allowed. Legal regulation highlights the firm rules in place regarding sound and exposure, and who can withhold and share. Public regulation demonstrates the ways in which music is informally disseminated, used, and passed down, regardless of legality. Finally, Representation, the last node in the Circuit highlights the iterations of the song and how meaning has shifted over those iterations.

These nodes of the Circuit delineate the pressures placed upon the song as a material artifact. In pairing these two nodes together, I seek to tease out the serendipitous rhetorical

potential of the song that has emerged through those pressures. Without the precise legal conditions, or habits of song sharing, “You Are My Sunshine” might never have reached Jimmie Davis, which would likely have altered its course of travel; but it did reach Davis and his larger-than-life persona. Today, as a cultural touchstone, the song echoes individual and cultural moments that are “heard” across a variety of media and in various forms.

6 CONCLUSION

“You Are My Sunshine” is a simple, melancholy tune that has worked itself into the soundtrack American culture over the past eighty years, being sung in nurseries and pre-schools, over skinned knees and at bedsides. Yet, while the chorus – *‘You are my sunshine, my only sunshine | You make me happy when skies are gray | You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you | So, please don’t take my sunshine away’* – is often interpreted as sweetly sentimental, Stephen Deusner encapsulates the phenomenon that is “You Are My Sunshine” when he describes it as “so deeply embedded in the popular culture” that people have “simply lived with it from the time they developed a memory.” What Deusner references is the metaphorical echoic memory process through which communities and cultures construct and accept their common spaces. With a possible twenty-plus verses, depending upon which version you know, the song can sing multiple stories, heartbreak and loss, familial love, passion, and state pride, among them. But when one pixelates the song, telescoping in on the circumstances in which the song came to be, other stories emerge, including cautionary tales about the impact of technological shifts on communities and cultural communications and practices.

At the outset of this project, I described sound as an object, not in defiance of its status as a relationship between listener and soundwave but, rather, to extend the possibilities of how we define that relationship to include culture. As an object, sound is simultaneously composed, performed, and heard not just through the ears or body of the listener, but also through their identities and memory. This cultural listening hears rhetorical dimensions, particularly when that sound is song. As folkways and cultural initiators, songs do rhetorical work that can soothe anxieties, reinforce customs and mores, incite change or action, connect communities and generations, and participate in the practice of meaning making. Their elastic nature means songs

are capable of traversing semi-permeable and generating layers of meaning that are personal to each listener. Considering “You Are My Sunshine” within this framework opens up the possibilities for tracing its influential arc and identifying the connections between the song’s diverse listening audiences.

6.1 The Circuit as Recursive

Though the Circuit of Culture can be run and re-run, it is not circular. Rather, it is a web offering stopping points and inviting the researcher to craft a shape specific to the work at hand. It solicits gymnastic thinking that stretches to fill gaps, build bridges, and deconstruct narratives that can then be reconstructed. In this last respect, the Circuit of Culture is also very much an instrument of critical imagination, assisting in the “commitment to seeing possibility” which reconsiders how presence is counted, looks for “the noticed and unnoticed,” and speculates “about what could be there” (Royster and Kirsch 20). The shape I have sought to craft over the course of this dissertation relies strongly on the possibilities of resituating a song so ubiquitous that the lessons it has to teach us have been swallowed by its acceptance into our everyday spaces.

6.1.1 Lessons from the Circuit

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to share stories and narratives that bridge together different ideas about the cultural and sonic roles of music. I have considered the song “You Are My Sunshine” as a cultural artifact and traced the origins and individuals involved in its authorial dispute. I have also considered the song’s role in personal and cultural meaning-making. I have shown how production and consumption affects meaning and identity when it comes to cultural objects and considered the legal and regulatory dimensions of these affects. The result is a case study that focuses not only on the song, but also on possibilities. It identifies

the ways in which a song like “You Are My Sunshine” has an opportunity to take on a rhetorical life, while also suggesting that “You Are My Sunshine’s” specific rhetorical life is the produce of the conditions in which it as injected into the cultural framework. For this reason, “You Are My Sunshine” can offer insight into how we value music as sound, cultural text, and commodity.

6.1.2 The serendipitous arc of “You Are My Sunshine”

The arc of the song from a folk-vernacular tune to the published Country hit, and back into vernacular spaces as a children’s song is interesting to how we manipulate sonic texts and their roles in making meaning. Songs like “You Are My Sunshine” have a stickiness, a *je ne sais quoi* that keeps them relevant while also translating themselves into lyrical and sonic narratives that can close stretches of time and space. During the moment in which “You Are My Sunshine” was first recorded, the sound was part of a new wave of interest in folk-vernacular music that grew from the changing composition of Southern city populations thanks in part to the exodus of rural farmers looking for work. Mill communities and the cultures that developed around them brought their musical traditions. This music not only provided a sense of home for them, but it also provided a sense of certainty in invoking place through sonic space and resisted the alienation of their new circumstances.

Some musicians, like Hoke and Paul Rice, were taking in the genres of surrounding communities, like jazz and blues, in an attempt to address their changing circumstances and evolving cultural identities. Paul Rice’s comment, “we was hillbillies, but we didn’t play hillbilly” speaks directly to this evolving identity in which old and new paradigms collided (Daniel “The Rice Brothers” para. 1). Old time hillbilly music became an expression of these collisions, which were undoubtedly both cultural and personal. As Country grew, it continued to develop its identity based around musicians like the Carter family, driven by the marketing work

of A&R men like Peer, and affecting Country's sound, its listening publics, and its status as a marker of white, rural identity.

Within our current global context, these songs sound quaint, perhaps even corny, and so we relegate them to the role of "children's songs," even if the songs' lyrics conflict with the themes of joy and happiness we so often want to instill within small minds. Songs which attained popular status, like "You Are My Sunshine," developed that cultural stickiness that minimized any dark underpinnings. However, "You Are My Sunshine" offers a particularly interesting set of circumstances. Like any good modern pop song, it is written in a major scale and suggests all the elements of joy. The chorus can also be reinterpreted as soothing when sung to a child, suggesting that they are important and loved. Thus, in excising the chorus from the rest of the text, the updated interpretation is completely shifted and finds a new, perennial audience.

6.2 The Consequences of American Song

The impact of an artifact like "You Are My Sunshine" upon a community or author can help us treat artists and creators more equitably, as we move towards more inclusive and fairer public and commercial contexts. Oliver Hood's story serves as that cautionary tale of how frictions between regulation, industry, and changing technologies affect individuals caught within these frictions. Hood's narrative is repeated over the course of the music industry's development as part of a history of song sharing practices ranging from appropriation to theft. Moreover, these practices were not just local; the hit American song "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," was originally recorded by in Africa by Solomon Linda as "Mbube," was not settled until 2006 ("Seeking Justice").

Musicians and songwriters were not part of the public of "public interest" noted in the 1909 copyright act, but even today publisher's right still wrestle with composition rights, as

Taylor Swift's case shows. This history of song-sharing draws attention to the disconnected perceptions of songs as musical texts, authored works, cultural folkways, and commercial sources of entertainment. Especially in light of our new technological paradigm where music is increasingly digital and digitized as compositions, performances, streamed recordings, repurposed samples, we must evaluate how we consider authorship and ownership. The radio and recording industries are over one hundred years old, but the precedents they set up by not attending to the cultural aspects of music and songwriting still persist and will continue to affect how we engage with musical texts. Particularly, in privileging the technologies and industries that we develop around music, we will continue to construct narratives that prize ownership more than the creative process of authorship.

6.3 Implications for Future Research

***6.3.1 PS: "The archive still promises"*²⁵**

Archivally, the project is a deferred opportunity to dig further into the materials connected with the song and its circulations. As I suggested in the Introduction, archives are places of promise, but in certain circumstances that promise is a secret where obscurations of documentation are not via collection but by access. As my own plans changed, I asked myself: What happens when access is limited by events like a pandemic or a war? What happens to those archives that exist amid political upheaval and restrictive regimes? How does collection and research continue beyond the archive and despite barriers set in place? I had the benefit of wonderful primary research and several generations of community preservation efforts, but what about historical work being done where access is crucial but denied? Moreover, when access is revoked because of physical destruction (such as with the 1936 Troup county courthouse fire)

²⁵ Arondekar's opening line, referenced on pp. 8.

how do we account for potential loss? This particular question stays with me; without the oral histories and private primary materials of Oliver Hood's community and family, my work would be less complete.

As it stands, the project has room to grow, particularly with a more research inside the physical archives. The benefits of the digital and digitized archives I used were fantastic, and some of the archives I accessed are born digital and have no place to visit. For instance, I accessed original legal documents through places as far as England and The University of Toronto (copies of original English legal documents). However, other materials I had hoped to include just were not available online.

For example, though Jimmie Davis used the song prolifically, so much of his political paraphernalia is not digitized, necessitating I visit Southeastern Louisiana State University collections. Other materials related to Davis and relevant figures, the song, and the history of Country music are also listed within finding aids, but not yet available online. Georgia State University still holds the papers of Wayne Daniel, which include his interviews with Paul Rice, and Toru Mitsui's interview with Jimmie Davis, as well as a wealth of information on the development of music in the early twentieth century South.

Digital collections I visited online include the Robarts collection, part of the University of Toronto; the Collections of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture; the digitized Living Atlanta Oral History Recordings Collection at the Atlanta History Center; the Library of Congress' John and Ruby Lomax digital collection; the University of Mississippi's digital collections, where Toru Mitsui's work is held; and the Songwriters Hall of Fame. The following repositories, some of which I also visited digitally, constitute potential sites of extended research to develop this project and its extensions:

1. *Archive of American Folk Song, John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax papers, 1907-1969, Library of Congress* – The Lomax archive is substantially digitized and assisted my research on identity and song-sharing. Though not central to the research on “You Are My Sunshine” or established Country music, the Lomax archive’s collections of correspondence, transcriptions, and research notes offer critical insight into the music and cultural practices of rural families during the eras I am investigating. They also suggest potential for further investigations into song sharing and sonic rhetorical circulation. The digital collection is rich, but more exists to be discovered.
2. *Bristol Birthplace of Country Music Museum Archives and Collections* – The Bristol museum was one of the few places I was able to visit, although at the time the archives and collections were closed for processing. However, the museum itself offers so much fantastic material related to the recordings and the musicians who traveled the area. One of the first next steps I intend to take is a second visit to the museum and the archived collections.
3. *Country Music Hall of Fame, Oral history, object, and printed materials collections* – The CMHF special collections offer a variety of materials and ephemera that could be useful for the extension of this project. Particularly, oral histories about the early days of country music can corroborate and further contextualize how the recording industry developed both alongside and in spite of musicians and songwriters. Their digital holdings were helpful in cross referencing versions of the song, performances of the song, and recordings of the song.
4. *Dolly Parton and the Roots of Country Music Collection, The Library of Congress* – Unlike the Lomax collection, the Dolly Parton collection highlights the rise of Country as

a genre and a cultural music. Though Dolly is the focus of the collection, it holds ephemera and documents that help trace movements in the Country music scene.

Included in its digital collections was a detailed timeline of music's arrival in the United States and dates associated with the development of folk, hillbilly, bluegrass, blues, and Country.

5. *Jimmie Davis Archival Collection, Southeastern Louisiana University* – While some of this archive is digitized and accessible, some of the significant ephemera remains undigitized. Materials of interest include publicity publications, speeches made throughout his campaigns and in his position as governor, and ephemera including bumper stickers, campaign buttons, anti-propaganda brochures, thank you cards, and original sheet music and posters for “You Are My Sunshine.” Recordings include Davis singing the song publicly, for the last time.
6. *Louisiana hayride collection, 1904-2006, The Library of Congress* – Constituting 5 linear feet and 10 boxes, the collection documents Shreveport, Louisiana's radio history and includes early radio performances, particularly on KWKH, the station where Davis and The Rice Brothers Gang regularly performed. None of these materials is digitized as of yet.
7. *Troup County archives, LaGrange, County Georgia* – The Troup County archives has limited research opportunities and most of the research is done by archivists working within the Historical Society. However, the archives hold some information about mill communities during the 1920s and 1930s. Though some archival materials were lost in Troup county's courthouse fire of 1936, the Historical Society has recovered some documents that had been privately held by influential companies and families, like the

Calloways. Holdings include manuscripts, photographs, materials related to the history of textile mills in the region, and oral histories.

8. ***Wayne W. Daniel Collection, Georgia State University*** – Part of the Popular Music and Culture collections. Daniel’s papers include letters, recorded oral histories, photographs, posters, event flyers, sound recordings, periodicals, and sheet music.
9. ***WSB Radio Records 1920-1985, Georgia State University*** – Part of the Popular Music and Culture collections. WSB was one of the most influential radio stations in Atlanta and played an integral part in hosting performers as part of general and program-specific formatting. Paul Rice and Hoke Rice were featured regulars. But this collection is also a potential site for discussions about informal regulation, song sharing, and the formalization of hillbilly as the genre Country.

6.3.2 Other research opportunities

As an investigation of rhetoric and music, my research offers up some interesting possibilities to extend scholarly conversations about historical in the field. The examples of Ray Charles’ 1962 cover of “You Are My Sunshine” and Tammie Kernodle’s research into Odetta and the freedom singers prompt questions about the rhetorical subtleties of music within past social spaces and moments. In particular, I am interested in revisiting Schafer’s early discussions of soundscapes and environments, with a historical eye trained on technological changes to quotidian spaces. For instance, I wonder how city sounds imposed on Atlanta’s mill villages influenced the sonic practices and musical interactions of these formerly rural citizens, more minutely. Furthermore, I see significant potential in bringing sonic rhetorics into the archives and collections, where oral histories and ephemera can deepen our understanding not only of sound, but also of the ways in which we consider and document the past.

Similarly, the project poses questions about culture and commerce. How do we currently honor or discount creators, not only in music but in other media, as well, where culture and commerce collide? Appropriation is a regular conversation in fashion design, which has a history of reiterating iconic cultural messages in ethically questionable ways. But, specifically in moments of technological change, how can we reconcile the ways in which cultural practices are accounted for when they enter commercial public realms? What can legal scholarship learn from examples like “You Are My Sunshine,” particularly in reference to the stratified ways in which authorship, performance, and recordings are assigned rights? What does the process of reconciling legal copyright with historical acknowledgment of authorship look like, particularly when requests for recognition are not monetarily driven?

In rhetoric and composition, especially as we work with new technologies and text production, how do we also attend to the unintended consequences of those new paradigms? Teachers work hard to address the ethical considerations of composing with “shared” materials, but how might we continue to think through transparency and acknowledgment in remixing, sampling, and creative referencing that moves beyond spaces like Creative Commons and considers the narratives that are being created through those acts? Finally, this example of “You Are My Sunshine’s” unexpected rhetorical life uncovers possibilities for further study of the power of serendipitous rhetoric and its role in social and cultural spaces.

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