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BY JOHN S. AUERBACH

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Black, Brown, and White: Thoughts on Psychoanalysis, the Blues, and Marginality



Tommy Potter, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, Miles Davis, Duke Jordan in August 1947.

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The date January 5, 2021, seemed to be a promising one. We were a day away from the Capitol riot, and Georgia Senatorial candidates Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff were heading to unlikely victories, creating a Democratic majority that, while far from guaranteeing the triumph of a progressive legislative agenda (how often has a Democratic governing majority been a false hope?), at least made such a development possible, a cause for hope after a four-year slide in the United States toward authoritarianism and the exclusion of all that might be remotely other. Their victories, by an African American

candidate and a Jewish American candidate, were driven in significant part by unprecedented turnout by African American citizens in Georgia, a turnout that the governing majority in that state seems determined not to let happen again. But just for a moment on January 6, before the insurrection, the putsch, later that day was to unfold, a participant on a psychoanalytic listserv in the tiny intellectual and cultural world in which I live posted, as his quotation for today, this paraphrase of some famous words by the great bluesman Big Bill Broonzy:

If your white, you're alright.

If you are brown, stick around.

but if you're black, oh baby

Get back, Get back, Get back

My colleague then added, "But not in Georgia yesterday," and for a few hours, there was an illusion of hope. But leaving aside the catastrophe that was going to be the main story of this particular day, and of nearly every day since, I thought something else was being communicated to the small world that is psychoanalysis—that my colleague had chosen Broonzy's words, now some 75 years old, because they would resonate with a psychoanalytic audience and that there were some important reasons why, some reasons I resolved to articulate at first for this shared community and now, in this piece, for a larger one concerned, as is the world of psychoanalysis, with social marginality and social inclusion.

It would be no understatement to say that Big Bill Broonzy was not a mainstream musical taste in 1951, when my colleague, as a university student, saw him in concert, just as my musical tastes, approximately 30 years later, were similarly unusual. But in 1980, having spent my 22nd birthday in a bar to see a later bluesman, Son Seals, for the second time, I quickly surmised that the artist in question might be different but that the sociopsychological dynamic was the same. In 1951, as in 1980, obscure bluesmen were the taste of Jewish male intellectuals who were somewhat marginal, who were interested in things outside the traditional American Jewish narrative of assimilation, and therefore might also be interested in psychoanalysis as well. Nowadays, this taste might be for obscure aspects of hip hop, but regardless, on January 6, I suddenly knew I had to write something about Big Bill Broonzy and "Black, Brown, and White." I choose to write about art in these troubled times because art, from a psychoanalytic perspective, helps to bind psychological wounds and traumas, and these are definitely wounded, traumatized times.

What, however, to write?

Nowadays no one much listens to jazz or the blues anymore. It also seems that no one pays much attention anymore, both within the core mental health fields of psychiatry, psychology, and social work and in the public at large, to psychoanalysis.

As brief examples, consider that the most popular jazz album of all time, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, with a title that speaks to the central role of the blues in jazz, has sold approximately four million copies since its release in 1959, not too shabby a commercial performance, but that the most popular record of all time, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, an album by an African American with nary a hint of the blues in its grooves, has sold perhaps 10 times that many copies since 1982. Consider also that nowadays, if one seeks help for emotional difficulties, one will be referred for antidepressant medication and a short-term cognitive-behavioral therapy, as if what was needed to solve problems in living, problems that often derive from profound traumas, was a technical solution. The ideas that the solution to difficulties in life often means learning the nature of one's personal truth and that discovering what that truth is might take time to sort out are apparently these days things of the past.

I would suggest, however, that in even their heydays, there was always something marginal about both of these fields of endeavor—about jazz and the blues in popular music and about psychoanalysis in psychology and related fields. No doubt this opinion will seem strange to many readers. Were there not periods in history known as the Jazz Age and the Swing Era? Can we not find evidence of the blues in nearly all genres of American and American-derived popular musical forms, in country music well before there was anything remotely like rock 'n' roll, ever since seminal figures like W. C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, and Ma Rainey say that they first heard the blues, characterized by its unusual tonality, in the early 1900s? And as for psychoanalysis, was there not a period of psychoanalytic supremacy in American mental health practice, roughly from the 1930s through the 1960s or even the 1970s, before the rise of neurobiology in psychiatry and of cognitive-behavior therapy in psychology? Still further, in the broader culture, is it even possible to understand huge numbers of films without some knowledge of Freud and his writings on dreams, the unconscious, and the Oedipus complex?

My reading of the historical record would suggest, however, that even at the peak of their popularity, there was always something marginal about jazz and the blues and also always something marginal about psychoanalysis. For those interested in scholarly references, a couple that I might mention are Elijah Wald's (2009) *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n'*

Roll and Russell Jacoby's (1983) *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*. The reason for the marginality of both of these cultural practices, however, is simple.

Each of these practices, which emerged in the early 1900s, as harbingers of the supposed modernity of the 20th Century, is the creation of a marginal group, African Americans for jazz and the blues, European Jews, regardless of their specific nationality, for psychoanalysis, and each piece of culture speaks for something outside the mainstream culture, something that the mainstream culture often tries to suppress or, failing that, tries to assimilate by sanding off the rough edges, smoothing out the tricky, sensual rhythms, harmonizing the difficult, dissonant blue notes. On the one hand, musical expressions like jazz, the blues, and nowadays hip hop, as the response of African Americans to racial oppression and exclusion in the United States, speak to America's deep-seated anxieties about race, its bad conscience. On the other, whatever the many problems with Freud's specific theories, chief among them their sexism and misogyny, psychoanalysis, as the creation of a minority group wrestling with the dilemmas of assimilation and exclusion, speaks to what has been excluded from dominant cultural discourses and rendered unconscious. For Freud, these concerns pertained to sexuality and aggression, and in modern psychoanalysis, the stress is much more on the difficulty of finding any authentic relatedness or intimacy in a world dominated by spectacle and celebrity. Both for foundational African American musical forms and for psychoanalysis, the dominant culture finds ways of appropriating that which was originally discordant—hip hop seems to be everywhere nowadays, and certain psychoanalytic words have long been part of everyday parlance—in that process stripping from them all that originally seemed dangerous.

I lay all of this out in detail because the two abiding interests in my life are psychoanalytic psychology and music—especially jazz, the blues, and their musical descendants, in no small part because both psychoanalysis and African American music in its various forms speak to that which is marginal, to that which is often excluded from discourse in mainstream society. These two interests are demographically rare, at least in the context of mainstream American culture. But amongst Jews of a certain generation, who feel alienated while becoming assimilated, who become assimilated while feeling alienated, my particular interests, in both psychoanalysis and a figure like Big Bill Broonzy, are surprisingly common.

For these reasons, psychoanalytic practitioners often straddle the divide between social marginality and social success, and they often develop musical and other artistic tastes that

are not part of the mainstream, that instead reflect his conflict between being inside mainstream society while remaining simultaneously apart from it. And here is where an interest in Big Bill Broonzy and his most famous song, “Black, Brown, and White,” tells us something about these social contradictions.

But let us then move on to another question at the heart of this essay: Who was Bill Broonzy?

Broonzy, a figure for whom I have no living memory, turns out to be difficult to write about because, although he was famous in the blues world of the 1930s and 1940s, his star has faded over the years while that of a relative obscurity from rural Mississippi, Robert Johnson, who may be considered alternatively as either (a) the founding member of the 27 Club after having been poisoned by a jealous husband or (b), this is not too much of a stretch, the Emily Dickinson or Vincent Van Gogh of the country blues, unknown in his time but revered as a genius today, burns brighter and brighter in blues history.

The easiest answer is that Big Bill, so nicknamed because of his height, was an early blues star, a singer and guitarist, with a recording career that began in the late 1920s, but even though he was a central figure in the blues scene that formed in Chicago as a result of the Great Migration of African Americans that began in the early 20th Century and that escalated as result of the founding of the Second Ku Klux Klan in 1916 and of the Red Summer of 1919, his time as a leading figure of the commercial blues scene, with a predominantly African American audience, in Chicago, had passed by the early 1950s, when he was becoming well known among white intellectual and progressive audiences. It was not that Broonzy did not try to adapt to the new musical landscape in the African American world. In the 1930s and much of the 1940s, in addition to recording under his own name, he had been a session man for the Bluebird label in what might be regarded as the Chicago blues scene’s equivalent of what was to become in the 1960s Motown’s assembly line approach to music production. He played some sessions with swing jazz musicians, and I suspect that, although he was no Charlie Christian, he might have managed to keep up with bebop players. There are even a bunch of sides that he recorded in the late 1940s and early 1950s that used electric guitar and that sound very much like the early rhythm and blues of the day, hence early rock ‘n’ roll.

Nevertheless, while electric instruments became more prominent in traditional music, both white and black—that is, both in the Western swing and honky tonk movements on the country chart and in early r&b—Broonzy reverted to the acoustic guitar as he became more popular among the mainly white audience (more on that later) that was interested in

folk blues and that saw the use of acoustic instruments as a marker of artistic purity. As cultural irony would have it, Broonzy of the late 1940s and early 1950s was no longer the star of the Chicago blues scene that he once was, but he made more money performing folk blues for white audiences than he had ever made performing commercial blues and r&b for black ones.

Oddly enough, for such an important figure in blues history, we know surprisingly little about Broonzy that is reliable, mainly because he was a highly unreliable informant about his life. His autobiography, *Big Bill Blues*, is a particularly potent source of misinformation. Until the past decade, it was thought that he had been born in 1893 or 1898 in Mississippi. More recent evidence from his family, however, indicates a birth year of 1903 in Arkansas, although Mississippi was likely the state in which he grew up. Also, his name at birth had been Lee Bradley, not Bill Broonzy. Bob Riesman's (2011) *Big Bill* biography, *I Feel So Good*, contains this groundbreaking work on Broonzy's origins.

This would be neither the first nor the last time that an artist would create a new name and identity to meet what he or she perceived to be the public's demands. A more recent case might be a certain Robert Zimmerman, who came to New York in 1960 as Bob Dylan, not a middle-class Jewish kid and college dropout from northern Minnesota but a world-weary hobo who, despite being 19, had already ridden the rails all over the United States. Dylan's stories were quickly unmasked, perhaps as a result of his having come to the attention of national media so soon after his public career began, whereas the secrets of Broonzy's life were not discovered until more than 40 years after his premature death in 1958. I like to think, however, that Broonzy was simply better at the project of reinvention than Dylan, for all his genius at shape shifting, ever was and ever will be. In any case, a paucity of information never stopped dedicated scholars, such that we now know a great deal about the life of Robert Johnson, whose recording career lasted two scant years, but Broonzy, whose recording career lasted three decades, remains somewhat of a mystery when it comes to verifiable facts.

And what was "Black, Brown, and White"?

Written by Broonzy in 1946 and unveiled at a People's Songs concert at Town Hall in New York, definitely in a white area of town, it was by no means the first protest song dealing with racial injustice, but it was a very good one, with very sharp lyrics:

This little song that I'm singin' about

People you know it's true

If you're black and gotta work for a living
This is what they will say to you
They says if you was white, should be all right
If you was brown, stick around
But as you's black, m-mm brother, git back git back git back

It was so sharp and on target that, although it became a favorite within the emerging urban folk scene, a loose mix of bohemians, artists, students, intellectuals, and radicals, no commercial label would touch it. This seems particularly strange in view of the many antisegregation songs already popular and considered acceptable to significant parts the general public in the 1940s, but the song struck a nerve, perhaps because it was not a song about racial inclusion but instead a direct labeling of how a black skin makes one excluded. In this regard, it seems to fit Phil Ochs famous definition of a protest song as “a song that's so specific that you cannot mistake it for bullshit.” It was so pointed that Broonzy did not record it for the first time until 1951, this in Europe when he was on tour there, under the title “Get Back.” Somehow his friend Brownie McGhee managed to cut the first commercial recording of the song in 1948, and around the same time, Pete Seeger, to whose contributions we shall return presently, recorded a surprisingly bluesy version of it, albeit with jarringly white background singers. Still this song appears to have found an audience mainly among folkies, not among the black blues audience at the time and certainly not among the population at large, which in 1948 was still two years away from discovering the Weavers.

“Black, Brown, and White” was by no means the first important abolitionist or antisegregation song. To begin with, there were spirituals from the early 19th Century like “Go Down Moses,” “Oh Freedom,” and “No More Auction Block for Me,” all of them songs with clear antislavery messages. And before there was much of a market at all for commercial recordings, there was “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” words written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson and set to music in 1905 by his brother, J. Rosamund Johnson, as part of a celebration of Abraham Lincoln's birthday. In 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People dubbed it “the Negro national anthem.” The year 1927 gave us *Show Boat*, derived from Edna Ferber's novel about racism, with music by Jerome Kern and with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. Although the play has needed updating over the years as racial sensibilities have changed, it was unique in its time as a work written by white authors that portrays sympathetically the struggles of African

Americans against racism, and its central song, “Ol’ Man River,” remains essential to the American musical canon and was one of the defining works in the career of Paul Robeson. In 1929, there was Fats Waller’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue.” And the late 1930s gave us these two classic songs—“The Bourgeois Blues,” written by Lead Belly about his inability to be served in restaurants or to find housing in Washington, DC, and of course, “Strange Fruit,” the antilynching anthem made famous by Billie Holiday but composed by “Lewis Allen,” a pseudonym for Abel Meeropol, a high school English teacher who is also known to history as the adoptive father of Michael and Robert Rosenberg, the sons of Julius and Ethel. This last song was also a piece so hot to the touch that Commodore Records, an obscure label run by Milt Gabler, otherwise known as the uncle of Billy Crystal, decided to release it only when no major label would go near it. It became the defining song of Billie Holiday’s career, although once again probably better known to the white progressives who frequented Café Society, a racially integrated venue in the Greenwich Village where Holiday regularly performed, than to the African American popular audience, which at the time was beginning to shift its tastes from swing jazz, via the eight-to-the-bar boogie rhythms that began sweeping the nation in the late 1930s and early 1940s, to what was becoming r&b.

More disguised material had a better chance on the major labels. A good example would be Nat King Cole’s 1944 massive crossover hit on Capitol, “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” which reached number 1 on what was then the race chart, number 9 on the pop chart, and even more amazingly, number 1 on what was then usually called the hillbilly chart. A retelling of an African American folktale learned from Cole’s preacher father, this record figured a contest between a (signifying) monkey and a buzzard in which the monkey gets the better of the voracious, duplicitous scavenger, a bird with a habit of taking other animals for rides in order to dash them to the ground to make a meal of them, when the monkey nearly chokes the buzzard to death, forcing the buzzard to do what the title of the song says. Although Cole was, especially in this part of his career, a resolutely apolitical artist, it takes little imagination to see the political implications of this humorous, seemingly innocuous novelty tune.

The 1940s also saw, meanwhile, the beginning of the folk movement in American popular music, starting with the brief career of the founding group of the folk movement, the Almanac Singers, centered around Woody Guthrie and involving Pete Seeger, Lee Hays, and Millard Lampell. The loose musical circle around this particular group, which had had isolationist politics during the days of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and which then

switched to a pro-Roosevelt and pro-intervention position with the entry of the United States into World War II, was biracial and included figures like Broonzy, Lead Belly, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and Josh White, the last of whom was particularly important to the antisegregation movement of the time and who people who grew up in left-of-center circles will remember as having been a major star.

Josh White actually bears more than a brief mention. Elijah Wald's (2002) biography tells his story. A prodigious Piedmont guitarist and a singer with a surprisingly smooth voice, White had survived a deeply impoverished childhood in the segregated South and had already had a career in the blues and in gospel (under different names, of course) before, in the 1940s, he reinvented himself once again (albeit without having to change his name), this time as a jazz-inflected café singer purveying folk songs both black and white. He was a handsome man who, scandalously for a highly segregated time in which there were virtually no African American leading men in the movies and in which one of American society's greatest taboos was interracial sex, held an appeal for white women. Becoming eventually a close friend of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, he performed numerous antiracism songs, many of which can be found on, to cite a readily available source, the Smithsonian Folkways collection *Free and Equal Blues*, not only the title track but things like "The House I Live In," "Jim Crow," and "Freedom Road."

White's career was eventually derailed in the 1950s, in part because of the anti-Communist blacklist on the right, but in part because his tortured decision to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), led to his rejection by the left, even though White, although criticizing his friend Paul Robeson's views, named no names. By the late 1950s, White's career had begun to recover, such that he was still widely known among folkies, even though his music was no longer the popular taste it was in the 1940s. I first knew of his work, since he also is not a living memory for me, because my father, who otherwise loved classical music and who worked most of his adult life running a family firm in the shmatte business, had a Josh White album, *The Josh White Stories, Vol. 2*, recorded in the early 1960s, in his collection. This record was far from the rawer material with which White began his career, but it was not hard to discern the blues in it. Even though I no longer own a turntable, I still own my father's vinyl copy of it.

Still, despite the importance of the aforementioned spirituals and of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which came from the African American church, the protest material that I am describing derived mainly from the musical and political culture of the big cities, a culture

involving a mix of artists, bohemians, students, intellectuals, and radicals, a culture in which the Communist Party had a strong influence. It was also a culture with a disproportionate number of Jews, always a matter of central significance for psychoanalysis, and a culture in which Broonzy, with his sharp observations on racial issues, also participated, although there is no indication that he was the political activist that figures like Paul Robeson and Josh White eventually became.

It is equally important to note that antiracism and antisegregation songs cropped up in some very unusual places, not just among urban bohemians, radicals, artistes, and literati, but also in the Southern Appalachians, something I know a little about from having spent 17 years in East Tennessee, just an hour down the road apiece from the Southwest Virginia home of the Carter Family, a main, if not the main, source of both country and folk music. The Carters, as evangelical Christians who believed in the equality of all souls, were no racists, and A. P. Carter formed an unusual friendship with Lesley Riddle, a Piedmont-style guitarist from nearby Kingsport, TN, with whom A. P. traveled the South in search of traditional songs to Carterize. Riddle served as A. P.'s human tape recorder, taught him considerable material associated with African American culture, and taught Mother Maybelle how to play slide guitar.

Examples of her slide playing can be found on “Little Darling Pal of Mine” and “When the World’s on Fire,” the songs from which Woody Guthrie was later to lift the tune for “This Land Is Your Land.”

We should not ignore the inequality that existed in this relationship, the racial dynamic aside. The Carter Family, although hardly rich in the way that, for example, the Rockefeller family was, were the preeminent stars of country music from 1927 through 1941 and were slated to appear on the cover of *Life* magazine the week that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile, Riddle, although an important figure in the Piedmont blues circle around Brownie McGhee of Knoxville, TN, never recorded until 1965, after he was rediscovered by Mike Seeger, Pete’s younger half-brother, as part of the folk boom.

Nevertheless, in 1931, the Carters recorded “No More the Moon Shines on Lorena,” a tragic tale about a pair of African Americans separated by slavery—by the sale of Lorena to another plantation. This would not exactly be a big seller for a white rural audience in the segregated South, but they cut the song nonetheless. And in 1940, the Carters cut “There’ll Be No Distinction There,” with crucial lyrics as follows:

In the same kind of raiments in the same kind of shoes

We will all sit together in the same kind of pews

The white folks and the colored, the gentiles and the Jews

They will all be so happy that they (sic) doesn't refuse

This powerful articulation of human equality before God comes to us not from New York bohemian radicals but from Southerners who, as evangelical Christians, believed that all humans are created in the image of God, and even more interesting is that their recording is in fact a rewrite of Blind Alfred Reed's original song, first recorded in 1929:

In the same kind of raiments and the same kind of shoes

We'll all sit together in the same kind of pews

The whites and the colored folks, the gentiles and the Jews

We'll praise the Lord together and there'll be no drinkin' booze

As his original version suggests, Reed, a West Virginian, was even more conservative in his Christianity than the Carters were, but he is also the author of "How Can A Poor Man Stand Such Times and Live," also recorded in 1929, about the Great Depression, and he is therefore one of the great historical sources of protest music in general. Back then, they were called complaining songs.

In short, even in the deeply racist and segregated society that the United States was in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, even in the most segregated parts of that very segregated society, one could find strongly antiracist sentiments in the music, if only one knew where to look. In this regard, it is well to remember that the abolitionist movement of the 19th Century had been in large part an evangelical Christian movement. Although in the 1930s and 1940s, an evangelical Christian could never have been an atheistic Communist (with some important exceptions like Woody Guthrie's attempt to bridge this divide), a person of such religious convictions, whether segregationist (in violation of Genesis 1:26-28) or not, was almost certainly a New Deal Democrat, in favor of wealth redistribution, not a rock-ribbed Republican, in favor of maintaining the class divide.

Still the emergence of the folk community among urban bohemians, intellectuals, and radicals is of crucial cultural importance if we are to understand not only the story of Big Bill Broonzy and his famous song but also to understand the social origins of the psychoanalytic community, certainly in the United States but probably worldwide.

So what of the folk community or folk audience?

In 1940, there was only minimal distinction between the music we now call folk and the music we now call country. There are several ways to understand this.

First, *Billboard* magazine did not really have separate country and r&b charts until the 1940s. From 1942 to 1945, the chart for African American music was the Harlem Hit Parade, and from 1945 to 1949, it was the Race chart; these were polite names for a word that is now, with good reason, no longer permissible in everyday speech, however much it is reappropriated by hip-hop stars. Only in 1949, at the suggestion of Jerry Wexler, not yet the legendary producer he was to become and instead a fledgling music journalist, was this chart renamed Rhythm and Blues, a new title for a new music. Meanwhile, in 1944, *Billboard* introduced, for the rural white market, the Folk chart, changing its name to Country and Western in 1949, this name change reflecting the growing divergence of folk music from commercial country. Previously, this form of musical expression, heavily influenced by the Carter Family and by many others whose names we know only because they appeared on Harry Smith's (1952) *Anthology of American Folk Music*, would have been called hillbilly music, no matter that most of its audience and many of its early artists came from the flatland areas of the rural South.

Second, therefore, one of the brilliant things about the Harry Smith Anthology, across a distance now of nearly seven decades, is that this compendium of the various folk musics (e.g., early country or old-time, Anglo-Celtic (or Child) ballads, blues, cajun, gospel, etc.) in the United States between 1926, when recording with electric microphones began, and 1933, when the Great Depression shut down most of the recording industry, refused to acknowledge the racial divide instantiated in separate markets for "race" music and "hillbilly" music and instead demonstrated the ways in which musicians we now call folk artists were listening to each other across that divide, this at a time when there was still very little radio play to facilitate these cultural transactions. Thus, the Harry Smith Anthology contains recording stars of the period like the Carters in the white tradition and Blind Lemon Jefferson in the black tradition, and, in 1952, considers their recordings as much folk music as it did those of fairly obscure figures of the period as Mississippi John Hurt, whose 1928 recordings were commercial failures and who therefore did not achieve fame until his rediscovery in the 1960s folk boom, and the Bently Boys, who recorded "Down on Penny's Farm," the eventual inspiration for Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm," as one side of the only disk they appear ever to have cut.

But third, the Harry Smith Anthology, which would be crucial to the folk boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s, was already a relatively late development in the emergence of the folk music culture. Per above, the Almanac Singers were formed in c. 1940, and the Weavers in c. 1948, and the efforts of folklorists (e.g., John Lomax and his radicalized son

Alan Lomax, whose career was also derailed by the blacklist of the 1950s) to discover folk music, on both sides of the racial divide in the United States, goes back still further than that—in the case of the elder Lomax to the early 20th Century and possibly even the late 19th Century. And before figures like the Lomaxes, whose work was energized by the invention of recorded sound, there were 19th Century figures like Francis Child, to whom we owe our knowledge of Anglo-Celtic ballads. Still, it is a historical irony that it was recorded sound that made possible the preservation and continuation of folk music by transforming what had been shared living cultural traditions amongst the poor and working classes, music that could be performed by almost anyone, into a commercial commodity, created by “authentic,” often rural performers for a cultural marketplace of urban consumers who bought this music first on shellac (78s), then on vinyl (45s and LPs), and nowadays in digital form (CDs, downloads).

With the migrations of the 20th Century (i.e., of African Americans from the South to the urban centers of the North like Chicago and Detroit, where the automobile industry was just getting started, and of rural whites from the Dust Bowl of the Midwest to California or from the coal mining areas of Appalachia to aforementioned Midwestern urban centers), blues and country music were brought to the cities and updated for newly urbanized audiences. Old-time or hillbilly music became Western swing (e.g., Bob Wills) and honky tonk country (e.g., Hank Williams, Lefty Frizzell), and blues became r&b (blues with electric instruments and a driving beat, the founder of the style being Louis Jordan), although sometimes older styles, like the Delta music of Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf and John Lee Hooker, now electrified, found audiences in the northern cities, among consumers seeking music that reminded them of home in the rural south. But these musics remained on the fringes of mainstream, usually white taste, and an interest in particularly early forms of these musics (e.g., for Charley Patton or Blind Lemon Jefferson instead of Howlin’ Wolf or T-Bone Walker or for Jimmie Rodgers or the Carter Family instead of Hank Williams or Bob Wills) was increasingly to be found amongst urban bohemians, intellectuals, and radicals, who were looking to purchase authenticity, something that they thought would bring them closer to the experiences of the working poor, both white and black, for whom their politics advocated.

The stories of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger provide a highly instructive example of these developments. There have been several biographies of Guthrie, but the first, by Joe Klein, dates to 1980. Guthrie, who is the central figure in the separation between modern country music and modern folk music, was already downwardly mobile from his middle-

class origins in Oklahoma as a result of his father's failed business ventures and his mother's deterioration from Huntington's disease when, in the 1930s, as a dustbowl refugee himself, he arrived in California from Texas, already married and the father of three. Leaving his family behind in Texas, he hoped to find work, and employment for him proved to be a radio station gig performing a mix of songs we might variously label country, folk, or hillbilly. Eventually, he became successful enough that he could send for his family, who were still back in Texas, to join him. He also began to write his own songs, and one of them, "Oklahoma Hills," eventually became a Western swing hit for his cousin Jack Guthrie in the mid-1940s. Woody Guthrie was therefore originally a country singer who had been heavily influenced by Jimmie Rodgers, by the Carter Family, and, like many early country performers, by the blues. It is reasonable to consider him a founding figure of the country music scene in California, the scene that eventually coalesced in Bakersfield and that gave us artists like the Maddox Brothers and Rose, Buck Owens, and Merle Haggard. Had he not been radicalized, he might eventually have been become a country star known mainly for "Oklahoma Hills."

In California, faced with the plight of the many poor and starving workers around him, large numbers of them from the dustbowl that he himself fled, Guthrie moved leftward in politics, in the process becoming aware of the racism that had been everywhere around him in youth and learning to oppose an evil that he had previously never questioned. This opposition to racism and segregation would have been part of his coming into the orbit of the Communist Party; although Guthrie never joined the party, he stayed allied with it, quite publicly, for the remainder of his career and was even a columnist for the *Daily Worker*, the party's newspaper. He most famously wrote, "I ain't necessarily a Communist, but I been in the red all my life." Unfortunately for him, his isolationism during the period of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact led to a dismissal from his radio gig in California, so leaving his family off in Texas, he ventured on to New York and to the folk music community forming there around Pete Seeger and the Almanac Singers. In New York, he also cut his first, and most successful commercial recording, *Dust Bowl Ballads*, a distillation of his experiences in Oklahoma, Texas, and California and perhaps the first concept album, well before there was anything like the Beatles or *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It was definitely different from anything that might be heard on the Grand Ole Opry, by then a dominant force in country music.

Guthrie made another trip across country and back before returning to New York for good in 1943. Guthrie's first marriage, to a Texas-born woman uncomfortable with New York

radicalism, bohemianism, and racial integrationism, and also increasingly frustrated with her husband's apparent inability to stop his rambling ways, eventually collapsed, and a powerful indicator of Guthrie's sociocultural transformation from would-be hillbilly star to urban bohemian radical and folkie would be his choice of a second wife, Marjorie Mazia Greenblatt, a Jewish woman who had been a principal dancer with Martha Graham and who, as a dance instructor with her own studio, was an important part of the arts community in New York.

As for Seeger, there are two main biographies of him, *How Can I Keep from Singing?* (David King Dunaway, 1994) and *The Protest Singer* (Alex Wilkinson, 2009). Seeger was of New England Puritan background, certainly not wealthy, given that his father, Charles Seeger, was a professor and a musicologist, not a financier or a captain of industry, but reasonably well off, given that his father had earned a doctorate at Harvard and also given that he himself (Pete, not Charles), already the son of a pacifist (Charles, not Pete) and already having been radicalized by folk music and the labor movement, was a Harvard dropout. Seeger, as is well known, was a man of conviction, an important participant in the labor, civil rights, antiwar, and environmental movements, among other things a key figure in transforming Charles Albert Tindley's spiritual "I'll Overcome Some Day" into the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome." His specific songwriting contribution was to change the imperative "will" to the indicative "shall" because he thought that the latter sang better. In my opinion, the linguistic shift also boosts movement optimism by transforming a matter of collective intention into a matter of collective, even Biblical, inevitability. Our overcoming *shall* come to pass. It is ordained. It is more than a matter of our collective *will*.

Seeger, unlike Guthrie, had actually been a member of the Communist Party but had left in 1949, apparently unable to abide its strictures and its rationalizations, but despite his great personal courage, both in facing down the 1950s blacklist and in supporting the civil rights movement when it was considered by many to be a threat to the American way of life, not something that gives us a feel-good holiday every January, he appears to have been unable to speak against the Communist Party until the Solidarity uprising in Poland in 1980. Not even Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968 moved him to a public pronouncement, and the Prague Spring of 1968 was clearly a socialist uprising, clearly of a piece politically and culturally with the antiwar movement across the United States that year (think of Columbia and of Chicago) and with the May 1968 uprising in France, not to mention the student uprising in Mexico City, this last one cut

short by an early October massacre so that there would not be huge demonstrations “sully” the Olympic Games that were scheduled to begin just two weeks later.

Despite this considerable personal failure, it is well to remember Seeger’s greatest act of personal courage because of its great personal cost to him. Already blacklisted, he was in 1955 summoned before HUAC. There he defied the committee by pleading not the Fifth Amendment, which protects against self-incrimination, a legal defense that was considered permissible, but the First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, a legal defense that had been ruled unacceptable and that therefore placed him in even greater trouble. In 1961, Seeger was convicted of contempt of Congress, this conviction eventually being overturned on appeal in 1962. Only in February 1968 did he finally break through the blacklist against him by appearing on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* to sing “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” a description of the abuse of military authority that had clear relevance for the Vietnam War then at its height. His Smothers Brothers appearance occurred, by some miracle, scarcely two or three weeks into the Tet Offensive, which took by surprise the American political and military establishment, even though every American soldier in country in January 1968 knew what was about to happen.

In 1994, Seeger, a former Communist, who still considered himself a communist (i.e., a believer in small face-to-face societies with shared goods and without hierarchy), had survived the blacklist to be awarded a National Medal of the Arts and to receive a Kennedy Center Honor. In the mid-1950s, however, having been blacklisted, he made his living by playing at any college campus or summer camp or union hall that would have him, and by collecting royalties from whatever few records he could sell to committed lefties on Moses Asch’s Folkways label, but before then, he and the Weavers had been the unlikeliest of popular music stars, New York radicals who were able to sell folk music to a broad popular audience.

Founded in 1948, the Weavers, whose story can be found in *Wasn’t That a Time* (Jesse Jasnow, 2018) and also in the 1982 documentary *The Weavers: Wasn’t That a Time!*, were on the verge of breaking up when, in December 1949, they snagged a Christmas-time gig at the Village Vanguard, ordinarily a jazz club, in New York. Their two-week residency stretched on for months, and they acquired a significant fan, big band arranger Gordon Jenkins. With Jenkins’s advocacy, they signed a contract with Decca. Collaborating with Jenkins as their producer, they became famous virtually overnight in 1950 when their horrendously over-orchestrated rendition of “Goodnight Irene,” recorded as a tribute to

Lead Belly, who had died prematurely in December 1949 of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS or Lou Gehrig's Disease), hit number 1 on the pop charts, the biggest record of the year, outperforming even Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa," a song that to me reflects both Cole's meteoric rise as a pop star, perhaps an unprecedented popular success for an African American artist of the period, and his precipitous decline as a jazz artist.

For those older than I—who grew up with the Weavers, who might have been Red Diaper Babies themselves, and who think that I, of decidedly upper-middle-class background, am being sacrilegious in my description of the Weavers' original recording of "Goodnight Irene"—I recommend that you track it down, not so hard to do in the age of digital downloads, and give it another good listen. Play it all the way through (if you can), the version recorded for Decca in 1950, not the later acoustic version recorded at their Carnegie Hall reunion in 1955 and released on Vanguard in 1957. To its credit, it lacks the truly obnoxious brass arrangements that mar the group's later hit, "Wimoweh (Mbube)," known to us now as the "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," a fascinating example of cultural appropriation that is worth a long discussion all by itself, but that is another story. To modern ears, the Decca recording of "Goodnight Irene," with Gordon Jenkins's treachly string arrangements, is simply unlistenable.

But in 1950, it was as close to the music of Lead Belly, Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, Josh White, Cisco Houston, etc., as anyone was likely to find on the pop chart. In much the same way, eight years later the Kingston Trio's equally unlistenable and equally popular botch of the North Carolina murder ballad "Tom Dooley"—or "Tom Dula," about which go check out either the earliest (1929) recording of it by the duo of Grayson and Whitter (yes, this Grayson was a relative of the Tennessee landowner Grayson who turned in Tom Dula to the authorities and who was not, as the Kingston Trio would have it, a romantic rival for the affections of the murdered Laurie Foster) or the definitive 1964 recording of it by Western North Carolina native Doc Watson for Vanguard—became foundational to the next folk boom, the one that started in the year of my birth (1958). Without the Weavers, there is no popular discovery of the early records by Lead Belly, Guthrie, Broonzy, White, or Houston, just as without the Kingston Trio, we do not get to the groundbreaking early recordings of Bob Dylan.

Also intriguing about the Weavers was the ethnic composition of the group. In addition to the patrician Seeger, the group contained Lee Hays, a Methodist preacher's son from Arkansas whose politics became radicalized as his family's fortunes declined in response to his father's sudden death in a car accident and his mother's resulting emotional collapse;

Ronnie Gilbert, the daughter of working-class Jewish immigrants and a Red Diaper Baby who had developed her interest in folk music and radical politics in youth by virtue of her mother's membership in the Communist Party; and Fred Hellerman, another child of Jewish immigrants whose class background would be better described as lower middle class, his father having been a shop owner, but whose radicalism and interest in folk music also appears to have started in adolescence, with participation at Camp Wo-Chi-Ca, where he met Ronnie Gilbert, and to have taken its full form by the time he was a student at Brooklyn College, known back then as the poor man's Harvard.

In sum, aside from Hays, the individual members of the Weavers had backgrounds that gave them little direct or lived contact with the main strands of American folk music, either black or white, even if Gilbert actually was of working class origins, and Hays's background, as a preacher's son in the South who also had had some college education, meant he was decidedly middle class in origin, despite his having had considerable contact with the working class culture, both black and white, around him by virtue of his having become a labor organizer under the influence of the radical Christian minister Claude Williams.

More to the point, although this should come as little surprise, two of the group members, although of working or lower middle class origins, were Ashkenazi Jews, for whom an interest in American folk music would actually be a form of cultural assimilation, rather like speaking English instead of Yiddish or Hebrew at home, even if this particular form of assimilation, with its leftist politics and its focus on music from what was presumed to be a hoary past, would be far different from assimilation through developing an interest in the hit parade of the day or in the latest Hollywood movies, things in which Gilbert and Hellerman were in fact interested. In this form of cultural adaptation, I suspect, the individual Weavers would be similar to that of most others in the urban folk audience. One thing is certain: No members of the Weavers, not even Hays, had backgrounds much like those of the people whose music they were celebrating, nothing like the sociocultural backgrounds of, say, the Carter Family, Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers, the Memphis Jug Band, or Cannon's Jug Stompers, recording stars from just 20 years earlier, all of whom can be found in the Harry Smith Anthology, just as in a later era, the backgrounds of Mick Jagger, Keith Richards, and Rolling Stones founder Brian Jones were nothing like those of the Chicago blues musicians (e.g., Muddy Waters or Howlin' Wolf, although surprisingly similar to that of the more middle class Chuck Berry) with whose music they fell in love and just as Bob Dylan's background was nothing like that of

country blues artists he featured on his first record, never mind like his idol Woody Guthrie's.

In writing these comments, I do not doubt the musical and political sincerity of Seeger and colleagues, in part because they were some of the main figures in creating the American folk canon, people without whom we might know nothing of our shared past; in part because I surely lack Seeger's courage in facing the risk of prison for asserting his First Amendment rights and in continuing to advocate for justice for others, regardless of personal cost to him; in part because, as someone of upper middle class background, I have little ground to judge the motivations of Hays, Gilbert, and Hellerman, all of whom came from backgrounds much less privileged than I and who were committed leftists at a time when it was *very* dangerous to do so; and in part because I, in my own leftist politics and my own idealization of early records from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, clearly share many of their cultural assumptions regarding the authenticity of early folk and blues music.

I like this music because it contains the rough edges that the popular music industry relentlessly sands down, as it did even to an earthy tale like Lead Belly's "Goodnight Irene," one that describes heartache so deep that the song's narrator might "jump into the river and drown" or "take morphine and die." But these founders of commercial folk music, for all of their reliance on the Carter Family and other early artists in the country tradition, were very different from the founders of commercial country music in class background, in politics, and in advocacy for racial integration, a view perhaps even more taboo in the world of commercial country music than the socialism or even Communism of folk-music pioneers like the Weavers, given that race, rather than class, is the most fundamental division in American history. We simply would not confuse Seeger, Hays, Gilbert, or Hellerman for Roy Acuff, Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams, or the members of the Maddox family.

And this is where we return to the story of Big Bill Broonzy. It appears that the first time Broonzy ever appeared before a mainly white audience was in 1938, at the *From Spirituals to Swing* concert organized by the legendary talent scout John Hammond. Hammond is also the subject of a biography (Dunston Prial, *The Producer*, 2007). A Vanderbilt, Hammond came from a background even more privileged than Seeger did, and although he shared many of the same cultural values as those who founded the folk movement, he also represented a split in the community of urban radicals, intellectuals, and bohemians I have been describing in that, despite his also having leftist politics, his

first love was jazz, not folk. He wanted music that sounded sophisticated, not crude, although clearly having strong populist elements in his musical taste, he seems not to have liked the art music that jazz became as a result of the bebop movement. He wanted music for the masses, something that bebop definitely was not.

But Hammond, who was instrumental in the careers of Bessie Smith, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, Teddy Wilson, Big Joe Turner, Charlie Christian, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, and, finally, Bruce Springsteen, and who signed Pete Seeger to Columbia in 1961, had ears. He had a way of always finding the best. He was concerned, in his famous concert, to present the range of African American music styles to a largely white audience of fellow progressives, and his historically prescient choice for a representative of country blues was the very obscure Robert Johnson, who had but one hit, “Terraplane Blues,” to his name. Hammond apparently heard something powerful in Johnson’s handful of recordings, something that is now widely recognized as genius, and wanted to bring him to New York, but Johnson was already dead, murdered, as is also now finally known in 2021 (but not in 1938), by a jealous husband. Hammond therefore set about to find a “primitive” blues artist, “primitive,” sadly being Hammond’s term here, even though I would like to think he knew better, to take Johnson’s place, and he came up with Bill Broonzy. In keeping with his romanticization of Broonzy’s primitiveness, or with the sale of it to an urban white bohemian audience as a form of authenticity, Hammond said in the program notes that Broonzy was a farmer when he was not playing music, a claim that had not been true for nearly two decades.

Now I suppose one might call Broonzy or Johnson “primitive” because they lacked formal musical training, could not read music, and the like, but anyone who listens to their records readily discovers that there is nothing crude about their playing. And just as important, in the world of the blues, Broonzy was no obscurity but in fact one of its leading stars, a man who could play virtually all of the African American popular styles of the day, swing jazz included. But at *From Spirituals to Swing*, Broonzy’s job was to play folk blues or country blues, from his background in rural Arkansas and Mississippi, not the sophisticated sounds of the urban Chicago scene of which he was a central figure. And at that concert, he connected with this new white audience and perhaps glimpsed that he had a new way forward.

Although Broonzy was still playing and recording on the Chicago blues scene, it was through People’s Songs, a group organized to promote folk music, that he came in contact with the white folk community. The People’s Songs organization, was founded on

December 31, 1945, by various members of the New York folk community, among them Woody Guthrie, Alan Lomax, Bess Lomax Hawes, Josh White, Agnes “Sis” Cunningham, Burl Ives, Millard Lampell, Tom Glazer, Ronnie Gilbert, and Irwin Silber, to promote folk and labor music. They elected Pete Seeger the organization’s president and Lee Hays its vice president.

And it was at a People’s Songs performance in New York in 1946, after the collapse of the Almanac Singers and before there was anything like the Weavers, that Broonzy discovered how potent “Black, Brown, and White” was to an audience of urban white progressives, what we would now call folkies. So it was also through People’s Songs, with its emphasis on racially integrated concerts, that Broonzy began his slow shift from a commercial blues musician playing mainly to African Americans to a folk blues musician playing the style of music with which he had started his career to an audience that was mainly white, often sharing the bill with, who else, Pete Seeger, in the process making more money this way than he had ever earned as a star of the Chicago scene. Never leaving that scene fully behind, Broonzy took his earnings and founded a blues club on the South Side and also served as a mentor to many up-and-coming bluesmen, most prominently McKinley Morganfield, otherwise known as Muddy Waters, who came to Chicago in 1943.

Known, however, to his black audience simply as Big Bill, he became Big Bill Broonzy to the audience for which he was now playing. His career was given a boost among this audience by frequent appearances on Studs Terkel’s radio show on the local Chicago public radio station, WFMT. In his folk career, Broonzy visited Europe several times, stayed overseas for extended periods, began a relationship with a Dutch woman in Amsterdam, and had a child with her. In the United States, he had been a struggling commercial bluesman and an increasingly successful folk singer, but in Europe, to the blues and jazz connoisseurs and cognoscenti, people rabid about an American art form but having had little direct contact with the brutal racial world that had formed it, he was a conquering hero.

It was in Europe, as noted that Broonzy cut “Black, Brown, and White,” retitled “Get Back,” for the first time. Also interesting in Europe was that, within their urban bohemian communities, unlike those in the United States, there was, in the 1950s, almost no split between the jazzers and the folkies, such that in England traditional jazz player Chris Barber launched the career of folkie Lonnie Donnegan, who had a hit with Lead Belly’s “Rock Island Line,” and that is why Broonzy might perform in jazz clubs abroad but urban folk clubs back home. Still, in the 1950s, as part of the emerging folk and folk-blues

movements overseas, he also became an influence on nearly every British guitarist of next decade, all of these figures having come of age playing acoustic guitars in what the British called skiffle groups—one of those groups being the Quarrymen (note the folkie-sounding name), later the Beatles—and what Americans would instead call, if only they knew the term, jug bands.

As a result of this shift in his music, it is likely that most white blues fans know mainly Broonzy's later folk recordings (e.g., among others, *Trouble in Mind*, which contains a recording of "Black, Brown, and White," and *Big Bill Broonzy Sings Folk Songs*, both records reissued on Smithsonian Folkways and both records, in their time, clearly marketed to white progressives and bohemians), and they might know "Key to the Highway," an eight-bar blues recorded in 1942 and covered in 1970 by Eric Clapton on Derek and the Dominoes' *Layla and Assorted Other Love Songs*. But they will not know the perhaps 300 sides he cut as Big Bill for a black audience before he was able to cross over to a white audience in the late 1940s, not unless they can find the JSP or Document remasterings of these early records. I should also note that Broonzy, although in the late 1940s and 1950s no longer the popular figure among Chicago blues audiences that he once was, remained a beloved figure among the community of Chicago blues musicians because of the way he mentored and guided younger musicians' careers, Muddy Waters likely being the example most familiar to modern blues fans. Muddy Waters was one of his pallbearers in 1958, when Broonzy died prematurely of throat cancer at age 55, and after Broonzy's death, Waters recorded a tribute album to the man.

I am assuming that "Black, Brown, and White" found a receptive audience among African Americans whenever Broonzy played it to them, but his reputation among white blues fans on both sides of the Atlantic rests, besides "Key to the Highway," on a song protesting racial injustice that appears to have been intended mainly for his new audience, which in the United States were mainly white progressives, and that was not primarily intended for the blues clubs of Chicago. And to close the circle, the song appears to have been further popularized in the white folkie community, with Big Bill Broonzy's approval, by one Pete Seeger, perhaps the only white artist I can think of who, by virtue of his lifelong commitment to the civil rights movement, could perform the song without sounding patronizing or engaging in otherwise would be cultural appropriation, an ill-defined term with which I struggle because, to quote Pete Seeger quoting his musicologist father, "Plagiarism is the root of all culture."

Still, I think such a charge is accurate if this particular song is performed by white singers, as has often happened, who have never experienced the deep, soul-rending discrimination that the song describes and who have not had anything like the commitment to racial equality that Seeger always had—who are therefore using the song to burnish their street cred. As for how often this happened, I cannot say, but I recall Eric Idle of Monty Python fame once playing it on Terry Gross's *Fresh Air*, although Idle had sufficient self-awareness to appreciate the ridiculousness of having this particular song become something of an anthem among white British musicians, some of them privileged enough, as Idle was, to have been university students at Cambridge. In the same way, white singers should not cut Bob Marley's "Redemption Song," unless you happen to be Joe Strummer, formerly of the Clash.

So what has any of this musical history got to do with psychoanalysis?

It is well known that the culture of psychoanalysis, from its beginnings, as always been heavily Jewish and also contains a large degree of political radicalism, a good treatment of which can be found in Russell Jacoby's *The Repression of Psychoanalysis*, his elegy for Otto Fenichel and his circle of political Freudians in pre-Nazi Europe. Elsewhere, Arnold Richards has written persuasively about these matters, about how foundational members of American psychoanalytic orthodoxy like Charles Brenner, Jacob Arlow, Ralph Greenson, and Leo Rangell, people who though not part of the émigré community within the field, also had leftist political leanings, so much so that they were at the very least fellow travelers with, if not members of, the Communist Party. Theirs was a political affiliation that I have always found troubling for many reasons large and small, a small reason sparticularly relevant in this specific context being the authoritarianism of both the Stalinist Marxism and the orthodox psychoanalysis of the 1930s and 1940s, a fascinating parallel that explains, I think, a significant portion of what went wrong in psychoanalytic history, with the not insignificant proviso of course that orthodox psychoanalysis, however much grave harm it did to women and to people of nonheteronormative sexuality, did not lead to mass murder. It is also my impression that none of these figures (e.g., Brenner, Arlow, Rangell, Greenson), who were, as Richards tells us, courageous early public opponents of the Vietnam War, seems to have remarked publicly about what it meant to practice a profession, psychoanalysis, that the Soviet Union of its early days, under Lenin and Trotsky, had welcomed but that the Soviet Union of the 1930s onward, under Stalin and successors, had banned.

Another piece of context must also be noted. Jews, although overrepresented on the left side of the political spectrum and therefore overrepresented among persons with socialist and Communist political affiliations, were never overrepresented in these radical political movements in the way that they (we) have been overrepresented in psychoanalysis from its earliest days, psychoanalysis having begun, as we all know, as the Jewish science. If for decades Jews constituted a majority in the demographics of psychoanalysis, they (we) have never constituted a majority of persons with socialist or Communist views, a fact I am at pains to stress because the myth of Jewish Bolshevism lies at the heart of Naziism and other modern forms of antisemitism. Instead, at least in the United States, the dominant Jewish cultural narrative has been one of success through education and assimilation. That is certainly the dominant narrative of the suburb in which I grew up, and a narrative that always filled with me, with politics that shifted leftward over my adolescent and early adult years from McGovernite liberal to democratic socialist, with unease and led to my early publications on narcissism. Still, from my years in the psychoanalytic world, I believe that, among the Jewish professional class, or for that matter any professional class, no subgroup is likely to have politics that would be more consistently described as left of liberal (e.g., socialist, socialist-feminist, radical feminist, anarchist, queer liberationist, etc.) than those who are interested in psychoanalysis.

As discussions within the psychoanalytic community indicate, it was that way in the 1940s, when the oldest members of the present-day psychoanalytic community were coming of age, and it is that way today. Another way of understanding this is to note that, as regards the American Psychological Association (APA) interrogation scandal, reactions on the listserv of the Society for Psychoanalysis and Psychoanalytic Psychology (APA Division 39) were very different from those on the listserv of the Society for Clinical Psychology (APA Division 12), where many apologists for the APA were not in the least bit shy about posting their views attempting to exonerate the larger parent organization. Meanwhile, on the Division 39 listserv psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic clinicians of varying generations and orientations were united in their (our) opposition to what the APA had done. There have been significant changes in leftist thought since the 1960s, with the twin decline of Marxist and Freudian orthodoxies and with the rise of various strands of feminism and postmodernism, not to mention, more recently, multiculturalism, antiracism, and queer theory, but the political and social marginality of the psychoanalytic community, this among a group of relatively successful urban professionals, remains the

same, and speaks to the conflicts within the group over individual success versus social justice.

And so what, finally, has any of this got to do with Big Bill Broonzy and musical taste in the psychoanalytic community more broadly?

In my telling, the emergence of psychoanalysis in Western civilization, starting in the late 19th Century and continuing now into the 21st Century, required a group of people who were simultaneously marginal and successful, a group with one foot inside the dominant culture to experience its anxieties and one foot outside the dominant culture in order to critique it. Attendance at the most recent Division 39 Spring Meeting, although decidedly less Jewish and more multicultural than in previous years, remains full of people who straddle marginality and success (or achievement), and a group of this type, it is my contention, is attracted to musics that reflect this particular paradox. In the early 1950s, this music was likely to be folk or blues, although there has always been a sizeable group of us who were (or are) interested in jazz, who want something esoteric instead of something vernacular. And some of us, like me, although I write from the perspective of the generation who came up through rock ‘n’ roll, rather than the world prior to the musical transformation of 1955, are drawn to both—that is, to both Charlie Parker and Charley Patton, to both John Coltrane and Mississippi John Hurt.

But either way, the appeal seems to be to music that signifies the other, something more authentic than the pop mainstream seems to represent, an appeal that reflects longings to be both inside and outside the dominant culture. I suspect that, in the current age, the attraction would not be to folk or blues or jazz but instead to obscure aspects of hip hop. But if we look at the matter longitudinally, we will see a group of successful professionals who are simultaneously marginal and that is heavily dominated by a social and ethnic group, Jews, who have managed to be simultaneously successful and marginal for generations now. The followers of Jacques Lacan in the psychoanalytic world would tell us that a focus on otherness, and the Other, is essential to psychoanalysis, and I believe this insight to be correct. Thus, an interest in Big Bill Broonzy, in any age, would be a kind of marker for this particular focus. Amongst American Jews, from the early days of blues and jazz on into the hip-hop era (to consider one example, the first great white hip-hop group were the Beastie Boys, three upper-middle-class Jewish kids from New York), it is a matter of being attracted to the music of the only group in American society more marginal than they.

There are huge problems with this stance, of course. For starters, a group of white people, even a group of white people with a long history of being discriminated against themselves, looking at group of black people in search of otherness is very easily a racist trope. At the very least, it means seeing the black people who created these art forms as symbols, rather than as flesh-and-blood human beings, and we could go on for days simply about this matter. Referring to Big Bill Broonzy as a “primitive” blues musician is but a minor example of the problem.

But more important, the potential for cultural appropriation, economic exploitation, and social domination was, and is, enormous. I believe that most of the white figures who I have mentioned in this essay (e.g., Seeger, the Lomaxes, Hammond) as bringing Bill Broonzy and other major artists in African American music to the broader world were well-intentioned, courageous individuals who were totally committed to this task as their mission in life—persons who, as committed antiracists, treated their African American colleagues with respect and dignity, who saw them as people, not as representatives of “Blackness” or otherness. In this mission, they largely succeeded because it was white folkies who preserved the names of Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson, Blind Blake, Mississippi John Hurt, and of course Big Bill Broonzy, among many others, figures who would have been otherwise lost to history in a culture that, in search of the latest and the greatest, readily discards all that is not new. In the more recent period, it was white fans who preserved the careers of people like Betty Carter, Ray Charles, Ella Fitzgerald, B. B. King, Sonny Rollins, and Muddy Waters, all of them iconic names in African American music, and all of whom I saw perform live in the 1970s and 1980s at venues on the white side of town, in audiences that were almost entirely white. Before there was a Beat Generation in the 1950s or hippies in the 1960s, figures like Hammond, Alan Lomax (also the subject of biography, John Szwed, 2010), and Seeger saved American culture. They made sure that the culture of poor people, of all ethnic and racial backgrounds, were not forgotten, were not homogenized or sanded away. This does not mean that frank exploitation did not occur. Examples here are far too numerous and egregious for me to discuss with any brevity—it is too hard to determine which example to pick, although perhaps the fact that Big Bill Broonzy could barely make a living as the reigning star of the Chicago blues scene of the 1930s and 1940s says it all—but it would not strain credulity in the least to say that the music industry has never been kind to black artists. Still, for a white person to pursue this music, even as just a fan, in a highly segregated country and in an age in which, unlike today, you could not just go

stream it on Spotify or Pandora or YouTube, you had to go in search of it, really meant something. These are the same kind of people, at least in my generation and before, who might be drawn to psychoanalysis too, especially if they needed to keep one foot inside mainstream culture, as professionals, and one foot outside, as others, as outsiders, as hipsters.

Still, another issue in need of critique is the very notion of artistic or cultural authenticity, the main value underlying the folk culture. This is a value mainly found among folkies and hipsters—among people who, coming from privileged backgrounds, could afford to be purists, but among musicians of indigenous or truly folk backgrounds who need to work for a living, artistic purity is a luxury. In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, when these musical traditions were coming into being, black musicians played country tunes, and white musicians played blues, in part because they played what they liked but mainly because they played what audiences liked. This is one reason why, as we move into the 1950s, not just Elvis Presley but Chuck Berry straddled the line of racial division in music, playing both country and the blues. Berry and Presley seem like roots musicians to us today, but they were definitely creating something new in 1955, something that they hoped would sell.

From this perspective, no art is authentic; all art, and pay attention to the etymology here, is artifice, all surface and no depth, the perfect critical perspective for an age in which most music on the popular charts is synthesized and sampled, rather than played. All music, even that programmed on a computer, needs creativity and inspiration in order to compose it, but music played on instruments also takes skill. I suspect that this may be a generational divide between those who grew up before the digital age and those who grew up entirely within it, perhaps like the generational divide that began definitively in 1955 between those who liked beat-driven, electrified music (a.k.a. rock ‘n’ roll) and those who saw it as a barbarism. This earlier generational division, it is well known, split the folk community a decade later, separating, at Newport in 1965, Bob Dylan from Pete Seeger, about which see Elijah Wald’s (2015) *Dylan Goes Electric!*

As someone who has now made it the other side of the new generational division, I will note that, when it comes to most but by no means all sampled music, because I can think of some very important exceptions, I seem to have a hearing loss. I just don’t get much of it. At least that is what happens when, lost in the supermarket, to quote the Clash, musical heroes of my youth and, by my standards, folkies by virtue of their uncompromising political lyrics and uncompromising interest in what we now call world music, I have the

opportunity to hear what is current. I do not feel betrayed the way an earlier generation of folkies did when Dylan went electric; I just feel empty. Okay Boomer, I suppose. And I just don't get popitism, the critical perspective that informs and flaws the most recent edition of *Rolling Stone* magazine's most recent edition of what they think are the top 500 albums of all time and the aesthetic that informs present-day music far more than hip hop does. But I got Big Bill Broonzy, who of course is not on the *Rolling Stone* top 500 in any way, shape, or form, the first time I heard him, no questions asked.

I will say this, therefore: Artifice, it seems to me, is only one part of art; affect is the other, and the artifice of music that is played, and played skillfully, instead of sampled gets more effectively, in my opinion, to the affect that needs to be communicated, although of course I have seen the reverse. A good recent example of the latter might be The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights," which sounds mostly synthesized but which involves music that is played, which is clearly speaking to something deeper, to the deep loneliness of modern life, and which I would like better as song if only it did not sound so much like classic Prince, to cite another great artist who straddled the line between music that is synthesized and music that is played. Great popular artists know how to make art that speaks to something real and that can still be sold to a public, whether they do that with a piano, a synthesizer, or a Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI).

So when Bob Dylan went electric in 1965, he was of course selling out folk music as it was understood at the time, creating a new synthesis of electric blues, folk, and country, but in 2021, he is seen, despite his origins as a Jewish middle-class kid from Northern Minnesota, as one of our greatest living exponent of roots music, with influences that reach deep into the Mississippi Delta and the mountains of Appalachia. He is one of the patron saints for Billboard's relatively new Americana/Folk chart, which might be described as roots music for liberals, lefties, and various other bohemians, basically the music I listened to when I lived in East Tennessee because there was no jazz, only a little blues, and a whole lot of Nashville country, so maybe not so far from Pete Seeger's concept of folk music after all. And thus maybe in 50 years, Ed Sheeran's "The Shape of You," a song that is one of the most popular of the digital age and that sounds rootsy but that involves a tape-loop rhythm track and that I regard as a Van Morrison imitation (the lyrics even say as much) and as nowhere near as good as the master's "Brown Eyed Girl," will be folk music, just as Chuck Berry's "Maybellene," itself a fusion of country music and the blues, with lyrics that bring together cars, sex, class, and race in a glorious 2'20", is by now a folk song, a piece of our shared culture, 65 years after it was recorded, if only

because every guitarist in the world can play Chuck Berry licks. Who knows what will be authentic, or what will speak to the center of society from its margins, in another 65 years? And therefore, to return to the days that started me thinking about the material in this essay, there is little of good cheer these days. We are facing a country in which at least one third of the populace has doubled down on a leader who is essentially authoritarian, with no light from outside able to penetrate their psyches, and that is moving, on the state government level, to reverse decades of hard-won social progress to maintain their privilege in opposition to a new multicultural United States. It is terrifying to watch, and I have no memories of the 1950s blacklist to which to compare it.

Away from the news, I get some hope from the idea that there is an Americana/Folk chart, even if mostly I listen to jazz these days, because it is a chart that says that there is a place for musical tastes like mine. This particular chart is still painfully white but spiritual descendents of Big Bill Broonzy, rootsy African American artists like Valerie June, Rhiannon Giddens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Brittany Howard of the Alabama Shakes, Keb' Mo', and Black Pumas, have done well in this new genre. As a way, therefore, of arriving at some comfort in an age that relentlessly seems not to give us any, I will give the final word to Big Bill Broonzy himself, in a statement that I have heard Pete Seeger quote as his way of making peace with commercial music, something that all music must strive to be if it is to be remembered: "I guess all songs is folk songs. I never heard no horse sing 'em."

John S. Auerbach, PhD, is a clinical psychologist in Gainesville, Florida, where he works in both private practice and the public sector. He is an honorary member of the American Psychoanalytic Association. He serves on the editorial board of Psychoanalytic Psychology and has served on the editorial board of the Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association.

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