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THE LIFE AND SONGWRITING OF VIC CHESNUTT

A Thesis  
Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Southern Studies  
The University of Mississippi

by

John Hermann

May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the life and music of Vic Chesnutt, and it accompanies a documentary film. Both components feature interview excerpts from over 30 hours of film footage with Chesnutt, as interspersed with archival documents of his life, along with dozens of interviews with his family, friends, peers, music writers, and bandmates.

Chesnutt's story can only be properly told through the lens of southern culture. He was not just a charter member of an international group, but a southern songwriter whose rural Georgia upbringing was paramount to his work. He has often been compared in music journals to the southern gothic schoolmates of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers, placing his songs in the context of southern writers. His music emphasizes the language and rituals of the people around him in Georgia, especially Athens, who helped give him such a strong sense of regionalism. A history of the related Athens music scene is another vital component of this thesis.

For Chesnutt and the southern gothic writers discussed here, their characters distinguish the South in a certain time and place; through storytelling they find that "peculiar crossroads" of a South steeped in mystery. It is the ultimate goal of this thesis to draw attention to Chesnutt's still obscure work, and place it within the context of writers such as Faulkner and O'Connor.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the helpful efforts of the director of my thesis committee, Dr. Charles Reagan Wilson, who has guided me with such an even hand through this process through the years. Also, I must give thanks to Dr. Ted Ownby and Dr. Kathryn McKee for their advice and allowing me to finish my degree. Dr. Andy Harper's advice on the film portion of this thesis was invaluable. And thanks to Dr. Adam Gussow for expending so much energy and time on this project. He pushed me to the limit to accomplish so much more than I ever thought I was capable of. And thanks to my wife, Christy, and my daughters, Julia and Lucy, for encouraging me to complete this great experience at Ole Miss. A special thanks must go out to Scott Stuckey for all his incredible work on the film, and for his help guiding me through Vic Chesnutt's volumes of songs.

And most of all, thank you Vic!

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## INTRODUCTION:

### ROMANCING VIC CHESNUTT

In the fall of 1993, on a perfectly gray and dreary day to be recording in John Keane's studio in Athens, Georgia, my bandmates and I were breaking in the living room when Gomer walked in. He was our longtime soundman and spiritual guru, and he came with a message. He said he'd been talking with our friend and producer Scott Stuckey, "and he was wondering about you guys recording with Vic." I knew that "you guys" meant my band, Widespread Panic, and I saw the rest of their faces radiate instantly as they looked around at each other in wide-eyed disbelief. I had just joined the band and moved from Oxford, Mississippi, so I broke the room's silence. "Who's Vic?"

I learned that Vic Chesnutt was one of the most acclaimed singer/songwriters in the Athens music scene, and that he would come into the studio the following day to discuss the project, which was to be called "Brute." I expected some tall lanky artsy guy dressed in the Athenian punk club garb of black jeans and red chucks to strut in, and was shocked when Scott came through the door pushing him toward us in his wheelchair. From under Vic's arm appeared a tattered old notebook overflowing with unbound papers of his songs from which he

would choose about 10 for us to record. And then Scott told me Vic's story.

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Though Chesnutt was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1964, he was raised by his adoptive parents in Zebulon, Georgia. For Chesnutt, growing up in rural Georgia “was a great life for a kid.” But tragedy struck on an early Easter morning in 1983 when he “drove into a ditch” after a night of drinking (*Interviews*). The accident left him paralyzed from the waist down, yet rather than discouraging him from songwriting, it helped transform him into one of the most prolific songwriters of his time. His songs were a release from “all this pent up energy” he had acquired being confined to his wheelchair. As his manager Kevin O’Neill states, “it gave him time to ponder” (*Interviews*).

This thesis will be an exploration of the life and music of Vic Chesnutt, and will accompany a documentary film. It was actually in 2006 when I first approached Scott Stuckey, who was not only Vic’s producer and archivist, but one of his closest friends and confidants, with the idea of producing the film, which will be prominently used to support this thesis. I wanted to interview Vic about his songs, so we went to his house on Meigs Street in Athens and recorded for three straight days both interviews and live performances. We conducted another set of interviews in 2008, which left over 30 hours of footage. These interview sessions would become the foundation of the film, and would be interspersed with archival footage and photographs of Vic’s life along with dozens of interviews with his family, friends, peers, music writers, and bandmates.

The only way in which Chesnutt’s story can be properly told is through the lens of southern culture. He was not just a charter member of an international group, as Benjamin



Filene coined in his landmark book, *Romancing the Folk*, of “folk-punk” writers such as Billy Bragg and Wilco who came to prominence in the 1990’s, but a southern songwriter whose rural Georgia upbringing was paramount in his work (234–35). Chesnutt has often been compared in music journals to the southern gothic schoolmates of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Carson McCullers, which placed his songs in the context of southern writers. He emphasizes in his music the language and rituals of the people around him in Georgia, especially in Athens, that helped give him such a strong sense of regionalism. As O’Connor, another Georgia writer whose deeply religious convictions will be compared with and contrasted to Chesnutt in this thesis, writes in *Mystery and Manners*:

In the South, we have, in however attenuated a form, a vision of Moses’ face as he pulverized our idols. This knowledge is what makes the Georgia writer different from the writer from Hollywood or New York. It is the knowledge that the novelist finds in his community. When he ceases to find it there, he will cease to write, or at least he will cease to write anything enduring. The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location. (59)

The image of Moses represents for O’Connor her obsessions with religion and redemption through violence in her stories. She takes these to be southern qualities that northern readers called “grotesque” in defining southern gothic. But for Chesnutt and the southern gothic writers discussed in this thesis, their characters distinguish the South in a certain time at a certain place; and through their storytelling these writers find that “peculiar crossroads” in a South that is steeped in mystery. As the title of O’Connor’s book suggests, mystery was a key element in the fiction of the southern gothic writer, which tied Chesnutt’s emphasis on mystery in his writing to

his southern gothic predecessors. O'Connor's "crossroads" represent a mysterious, mythological place where time and eternity meet. Blues singer Robert Johnson visited this mysterious place decades earlier in his song "Cross Road Blues" (1929). It became the legendary place, steeped in mystery, where he made a pact with the devil to sell his soul in exchange for being a great guitarist. Chesnutt and the southern gothic writers, like Johnson, created fiction as a literary puzzle, where the writer supplies the clues to the mystery of their stories, but whose final pieces can only be supplied by the imagination of the reader at the crossroads of his or her mind.

Filene's emphasis that folklorists can be more than mere recording engineers and documentors is a major inspiration for this study of Chesnutt as a southern writer. They can be part of the story as producers and editors, too. As Filene writes, the folklorists to be admired, such as the iconic field recorders John and son Alan Lomax, were "cultural middlemen who...did more than deliver "pure" music; they made judgments...and helped shape what "mainstream" audiences recognized as authentic. They 'romanced' the folk, in the sense of both wooing them as intimates and of sentimentalizing them as Other" (Filene 5).

Thus it is not only the ultimate goal of this thesis to draw attention to Chesnutt's still obscure work, but to achieve this end by placing it within the context of southern writers such as Faulkner and O'Connor. Bringing Chesnutt's work into what Filene calls "the public memory...depends on the efforts of the cultural workers—the middlemen between folk and popular culture who rediscover performers, reinterpret their early recordings...and redefine the artists..." (7–8). The purpose of this thesis, titled "The Life and Songwriting of Vic Chesnutt," and its accompanying film, *Interviews with Vic Chesnutt*, is to not only have his work rediscovered (over four years after his suicide on Christmas Day in 2009), but to reinterpret his writing in the context of the South and its heritage of writers.

In researching the second chapter juxtaposing Chesnutt's writing to those of Faulkner, O'Connor, and southern gothic filmmaker Billy Bob Thornton, I came across another inspirational figure. While reading about Faulkner's rise from obscurity, the name Malcolm Cowley emerged as the prominent force behind it. In 1946, Cowley's passion and foresight were instrumental "in his dual role as editor/critic in singular fashion to resurrect William Faulkner from near-total obscurity, persuading Viking Press to publish *The Portable Faulkner* and writing the groundbreaking introductory essay" (Gussow 299).

Cowley emotes a thrill in his letters and "conversations" from the "very great pleasure ...not of discovery, but of rediscovery, and discovery of the design back of all of Faulkner's writing" (Young 145). Yet it was not enough to simply recognize and document the works of Faulkner, as well as Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, and so many other authors whose genius and importance Cowley brought to light. He "romanced" their legacies, as well, in order to gain their work the exposure they would need to shine. More than just placing commas and proofreading authors' works, Cowley, as an editor, methodically and strategically maneuvered his way through the publishing culture in order to prove he was right about the authors who inspired him. For example, after Cowley had been rejected by Viking to publish *The Portable Faulkner*, he "responded by writing a long essay on Faulkner's work and then doing what he called 'beefing' it—publishing it in sections in several different magazines, using his independent critical voice to give Faulkner's name enough public currency so that Viking was finally forced to take a second look" (Gussow 300–01). According to Faulkner scholar Cleanth Brooks, Cowley's work, along with Robert Penn Warren's review of the *Portable Faulkner*, "really brought Faulkner's work into prominence. After that ...came the Nobel Prize for Faulkner" in 1949 ("Malcolm Cowley").

This paper and film on Chesnutt's work strives to achieve exactly what Cowley did—to force the people who can bring his songwriting to prominence into taking that “second look.” In speaking about Faulkner in 1983, Cowley stated, “you know what I did to Faulkner, and had done it to Hemingway before that time: I made them teachable, and they were taught. For a long time the academics didn't give credit to the *Portable*, but that's what set them reading it, and what...made his work teachable” (Young 194). Through Cowley's example, it is clear that reaching out to the academic sphere would be the first step, in not only legitimizing Chesnutt's work as being comparable to the likes of Faulkner and O'Connor, or even Dylan and Springsteen, as the film shows, but in telling the story of his life and music the way it needed to be told—through the study of southern culture. Not only is Chesnutt one of our “greatest modern songwriters,” as the British popular music bible *NME* stated, but he is, I hope to show, one of our greatest *southern* writers.

The next step for the documentary film will be to convince those at the helm of film festivals, television, and record labels/distributors that Chesnutt's work is commercially viable enough to be given that second look mentioned by Cowley. If these entities had been involved in the first step, the film could never have been made. Romancing Chesnutt's legacy in the mainstream media would be a lost cause. Corporate media outlets (i.e. VH1's “Behind the Music,” or *Rolling Stone*) have consistently proven that they are more interested in artists' habits than in their talents, though there are exceptions. Chesnutt actually had his shot with Capitol records, who should be given credit for signing him. But he blew his opportunity when he “disappeared at the start of his album's tour and was dropped by the label” (*Interviews*). If certain mainstream corporate heads thought his work was worth investing in before (Vic would be the first to tell you it wasn't for his dancing or good looks), there is reason to have faith it can

happen again.

In the making of the film, Chesnutt's southernness became the premise of the interviews I conducted at his house in 2006 and 2008. And through these sessions emerged the themes of his Georgian agrarian sense of place, his prominent use of southern "grotesque," an element of southern gothic, and, most importantly, the role of religion in his life and music. These are the themes, rooted in his own "little postage stamp of native soil," which define his work and are the focus of this thesis (Faulkner Interview).

Part One, titled "Why Athens?," places Chesnutt's work in the context of the musical currents undulating beneath Athens, Georgia, and helping this small college town's rise to worldwide prominence in the late 1970s and beyond. Athens' history is unique and crazily vibrant, and drew artists from all over the South who yearned for the artistic freedom it offered. The constantly churning music "scene," which turned Athens into a global musical force with its hit bands like the B-52's and R.E.M., gave Chesnutt the location he needed to create such a wealth of music. Athens is in the South, but it is unlike any town the region has seen. The University of Georgia's School of Art drew and nurtured artists from all over the region, and some of them, though they could barely play their instruments, started bands. When The B-52's started playing their strange new music at local parties around 1977, the sound reverberated all the way to New York City, merging the two music scenes and changing Athens even to this day. The B-52's, and a few other bands that followed them, brought back down South the influences of the late-70s punk and Andy Warhol art crowds, through artists like Patti Smith and Lou Reed. This musical migration gave Athens its unique sense of place, combining local talent with northern urban influences.

Part Two places Chesnutt at the table of the greatest southern writers by comparing his

work to that of Faulkner and O'Connor, through the genre known as "southern gothic."

Though this term begs to be ridiculed for its overuse, it still matters because of those who created it. Modern southern writers, such as Billy Bob Thornton, whose breakthrough screenplay *Sling Blade* resurrected southern gothic's darkly humorous portrayals of its heroes, dwelling on the outside fringes of southern society, kept alive this strangely unique southern school of writing born in the 1930s and 40s. And it gave Chesnutt's work a place it could settle into with writers who shared his region and experiences, though not his personal views or religious beliefs.

Part Three, "Faith and Death," elaborates on the special bond between the lives and works of Chesnutt and Flannery O'Connor explored in Part Two. Both had their roots planted in Georgia, about 75 miles apart between Zebulon and O'Connor's farm in Milledgeville. And they share an uncanny life's history, which is shown in their work. Chesnutt was actually born only four months after O'Connor's untimely death from lupus at the age of 39 in August 1964. Though they share a richly dark humor in their characters, outlining the "grotesque" and the macabre of southern rural life as they saw it, they are complete opposites in their views on religion. She was a devout Catholic who went to mass every day. Her whole life and mind and heart were centered on her extreme and uncompromised Christian faith. The heroes of her stories, especially Hazel Motes in the novel *Wise Blood*, achieve redemption through some violent act, and "a moment of grace...in which the meaning of the act compels from the hero a new recognition of his identity...which is at once a conversion to Christ" (Orvell 66). Some of these southern gothic examples of violence in her work were perhaps glorified in the medieval Catholic churches of Europe; certainly not in the Baptist church down the street in Milledgeville. Chesnutt, on the other hand, "came out" as a non-believer and preached his atheism (what he calls "my faith") out loud on the downtown streets and nightclubs of Athens. As his manager

Kevin O'Neill recalls, everybody "wanted to kick his ass" (*Interviews*).

Though their religious views are polar opposites, Chesnutt and O'Connor have more in common than just their Georgia roots. They shared an intensity of approach to matters of the spirit, and to their different views of original sin and redemption through a belief in Jesus Christ. They were both debilitated; him in a wheelchair from his drunk driving car wreck, and she on crutches from the slow onset of lupus. They both knew they were going to die young, which would permeate the authors' works throughout their careers. And they shared an appreciation of their sense of place and the influence it would have on them as southern storytellers. Chesnutt would no doubt agree with O'Connor when she said, "southern writers are stuck with the South, and it's a good thing to be stuck with" (Magee 108).

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHY ATHENS?

In the summer of 1980, Wollman Ice Skating Rink in New York City's Central Park would convert to a makeshift concert venue, with ramshackle metal bleacher seats rising up before the stage. The New Wave phenomenon, which exploded off high school and college turntables in 1977, found an unlikely home here away from the punk clubs that spawned them only a few years prior. And that stage at Wollman Rink became my altar that summer. It was where I first saw The Talking Heads, who debuted their landmark fourth album, *Remain In Light*. I also saw The Pretenders, an English import, though singer Chrissie Hinde was actually from Ohio. And it was where I saw the band whose albums changed music around the world seemingly overnight back in '78. The B-52's and opening band Pylon heralded from this strange little town in some far off place in Georgia called Athens. And they took over New York City that night at a skating rink.

These bands' minimalistic and strangely radical approach to guitar, bass, and drums was drastically different from the records we were listening to at parties in 1976 (no, not disco) mostly from the bands depicted in Martin Scorsese's *The Last Waltz*, such as Neil Young, Joni



Mitchell, Eric Clapton, Dr. John, Dylan, etc. The cheesy farfisa organ sounds and amateurish style, as heard in The B-52's "Planet Claire," turned keyboard playing as I knew it on its head. And the lead singers were from another universe compared to the rock n' roll vocals of the records I had ever heard before. These new bands taught me you didn't have to be a great musician or singer to rock the world. As Randy Bewley, guitarist for Pylon stated, "I guess we're anti-musicians" (Dafoe). They were first and foremost great artists, which endeared them not only to the Andy Warhol crowd lurking in the bathroom stall shadows of clubs like CBGB's and Max's Kansas City, (where The New York Dolls and Velvet Underground thrived years before '77), but to the clueless high school kids like me, as well.

In the summer of 1980, when this new wave of music, with a new giant engine called MTV, was steamrolling across mainstream white college kid America (and Europe, as well), I was well aware by that time of the Athens music scene, but I had no idea of the direct influence my own music scene, centered around Max's Kansas City on 17th street and Park Avenue, had on Athens bands like the B-52's, Pylon, Love Tractor, and a few years later, the band that created a whole new music genre known as "alternative" or "indie-rock," R.E.M.

So why Athens? What was and is still so special about this particular southern college town that allowed it to spawn such a wide variety of music, and leave such an indelible mark on the world's musical stage? What must be mentioned first is what Ben Brazil in *The Washington Post* found; that "the sheer number of musical options on any given night is daunting. Flagpole publishes a music directory that lists nearly 550 local bands and solo artists and more than 30 music venues, the best of which are within walking distance of each other" (Brazil). Secondly, of course, is that Athens is a college town. But what separates it from other college towns is its vibrant arts community who came to Athens because of its art school. Athens musicians in the

late 70's were artists first and musicians second. They subscribed to the punk rock mantra from New York City bands like The Ramones and Velvet Underground that when it comes to playing rock n' roll, "anybody could be in a band despite...ability"(Aikin 1). Yet what came out of Athens during this time had little to do with New York's bands musically; only in the ethic that you didn't have to be a great musician to form a band. In fact, Athens music in the late 70s before R.E.M. had little to do with any music that came before it. It exploded out of a vacuum like a cultural Big Bang, and although the University of Georgia's School of Art provided the place where this could happen, the random confluence of people and events (at parties really) also created the musical imaginary in music critic circles known as "a scene."

#### 1. A Tattered Little Town Called Athens

In tracing the importance of music and parties to Athens, one must go all the way back to its founding fathers. Just after the American Revolution, the state assembly of Georgia decided as one of their first post-war acts to draft a charter for a university. The Georgia legislators themselves endowed the school in 1785 with five pieces of 5,000-acre tracts of land, "thereby initiating the concept of state-supported higher education" (Thomas). But it was not until 15 years later, in 1800, that a committee was formed to enlist five settlers to seek out a site for the university. Their names dot the street signs of downtown Athens to this day: Baldwin, Milledge, Walton, Twiggs, and Lawson. These five men set out riding through old Indian trails and along riverbanks until, after a night of drinking at a tavern on the Jackson County line, they rode on the morning of July 4th towards the long and meandering stream of shoals on the Oconee River. They stumbled onto a group of settlers celebrating the day of American Independence. And there along the Oconee they decided the University of Georgia should lay its foundation. As legend

tells it, the rum was flowing and they all sang old revolutionary battle hymns to fiddle music. In a random congregation of drinking and music, the five men “set a tone that has since resonated throughout the history of the Georgia town that has since come to be called the Liverpool of the South and the Land of a Thousand Dances. They crashed the party” (Brown, *Party* 10).

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There are several factors that explain why a little college town in Georgia is placed on par with Memphis, New Orleans, Nashville, and New York City in music historical importance by foreign tour guides. But all these factors, which swirl around the surface of explaining Athens musical history, boil down to the singularity of “place.” The importance of place in Athens music is found in its unique history, which separates its music from that of any other city or town in the South.

As one Atlanta journalist writes in the *Atlanta Constitution* on R.E.M., “it’s rare that where a band comes from takes on nearly as much importance as what it’s playing” (qtd. in Brown, *Party* 187). All stars shine in their own way, but they all share a common singularity, a place of birth. All Athens bands share this sense of place, which manifests itself through their music, though the artists themselves and the music they created, like the stars, could not be more varied. The two bands that turned Athens into a global force, the B-52’s and R.E.M., could not be more different musically. And other artists such as Love Tractor and Vic Chesnutt also created a completely new and exciting sound of their own.

As Elvis Costello once stated, “writing about music is like dancing about architecture” (52). And he is right. In attempting to write about music, it is especially tough being a musician. Rock music, which is founded on dancing and feeling, and has little to do with analytical

discourse, is really a force of nature, albeit a human one. Music might be as close as humans get to their natural beginnings or places of birth. Our sense of rhythm is indeed one of our first human instincts. It is universally common to see infants swaying and moving to music, or pounding on an object like a drum, before they even learn to crawl, let alone speak. Thus, in “Why Athens?,” writing about music as a force of nature, and using those very metaphors that apply to the natural world are employed.

The notion that “place matters” is related in Wanda Rushing’s *Memphis and the Paradox of Place: Globalization in the American South*. While most studies of globalization focus on the “homogenization of culture and the demise of place distinctiveness,” she poses that those “qualities that make ‘place’ distinctive, cumulative, durable, and meaningful,” are what makes Memphis so vibrant and unique (Rushing 187). Rushing’s work serves as a template for this study of Athens, utilizing her ideas on how the history of a city is not a linear one, but meanders like a stream with various “disruptions” which change its course. That a city’s culture “ebbs and flows” like the tide gets to the crux of Athens music history; for what creates the seemingly random shifting of culture are its currents (Wilson “SST”). When the currents on the surface of a river, for example, cross with the undercurrents moving beneath, sometimes in the opposite direction like an undertow, the course of the water changes in all different directions. In his interviews on Athens songwriter Vic Chesnutt, filmmaker Billy Bob Thornton states that “there’s something in the water,” that gives southern music its greatness (*Interviews*). The history of Athens music moves just like the water’s currents and undercurrents which create the turbulence necessary for such a vibrant culture. Just as one group of artists, for example the art-rock bands of the late 70s like the B-52’s and Pylon, whose name is taken from the Faulkner novel, rises to the surface of global prominence, an undercurrent develops. R.E.M., whose music, (what critics

call “indie-rock”) moving in an opposite direction from the art-rock bands, eventually comes to the mainstream to create a whole new musical genre that takes over the world of music. And just as that current surfaces in the 1980s, other undercurrents represented by singer/songwriters such as Vic Chesnutt start to emerge. And, on a side note, during the height of indie-rock’s popularity, a little undercurrent writhing its way through the small bars of Athens in 1986, the “jam-bands” (spinoffs of the legendary Grateful Dead and Allman Brothers) slowly drew larger crowds in the 1990s. But these bands never really come and they never really go. They just play in a sort of rock n’ roll limbo, orbiting the sun in its shadows within the distant voids of music’s outer universe; like a cultural Oort Cloud of icy bodies.

Why the Athens music “scene” emerged to become a cultural and global phenomenon can be told through the stories of three specific artists at the forefront of Athens music. First, The B-52’s, who represent Athens’ musical genesis in 1977, were a self-proclaimed party band that had little interest in the southern gothic writing that later emerged out of Athens through the lyrics of R.E.M. and Chesnutt. Only a few years after the B-52’s career peaked, R.E.M. burst onto the college radio airwaves and subsequently forged a new path for mainstream musical tastes. Thus, the second section will not only show what led to R.E.M. selling out stadiums across the world, but how they were able to create a whole new genre of music which is more dominant in popular music than ever. The third section will focus on Vic Chesnutt, who brought an artistic vision born out of Athens that is steeped in the southern gothic themes of the use of the “grotesque,” the prominent role of religion, and their regional sense of place. These three artists show how this small college town’s “diversity...is...unmatched anywhere for a city the size of Athens...making it the Alpha and Omega of the college music scene” (Smith).

Along with Rushing’s book, Karl Hagstrom Miller’s study of southern music,

*Segregating Sounds: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow*, successfully places music history within a global context. His main thesis that early 20th-century southern musicians and songwriters did not simply create music within an isolated cultural bubble, segregated from the rest of the world, is applicable to Athens musical history. For Miller, the music industry created the myth of cultural isolation to make it easier to sell southern music as “the genuine article”(100). But in reality, southern musicians were heavily influenced by the Tin Pan Alley songsters from New York City. And such was the case in Athens, where New York City’s rock music scene was so influential on Athens, and vice-versa, that it could be called “a rock n’ roll wormhole.” Athens musicians and artists were discovering new and exciting ideas coming down from New York’s underground into its local record shops. This rock influx of outside influence from New York happened in Athens, and no other place in the South was ready for it in the 1970s, when the undercurrent of punk rock was about to surface throughout the world. Rushing’s term, the “paradox of place,” can be applied to Athens, as well (1). Although New York proto-punk (pre-Sex Pistols) bands’ records made Athens the unforeseen place for a musical explosion, the B-52’s, who were the Big Bang of Athens music, had nothing to do with punk’s politics and social angst. It was, if anything, anti-punk party music demonstrated in songs such as “Rock Lobster” and, much later in their career, “Love Shack.” These songs were about having fun and dancing. The southern gothic lyrics heard in R.E.M. songs, especially off the album *Fables of the Reconstruction*, and in Chesnut’s writing several years later, represented a reaction to the “party-music” that was so popular in the late 1970s in Athens. But in the basements and backyards filled with art school kids from the University of Georgia, the B-52’s, along with Pylon, catapulted the Athens music scene on its long journey toward a mainstream global audience, which included a New York high school kid at a skating rink.

## 2. The B-52's

Just like the founders of Athens in 1800, the founders of Athens' modern music started over a "giant rum drink," as Keith Strickland, drummer for the B-52's tells it. He, along with "three other arty-party hangabouts—Fred Schneider, Kate Pierson, and the late Ricky Wilson—left...for a rum-buzzed jam session at a friend's house" (Hendrix). But instead of singing battle hymns and playing fiddles, they played on drums, guitars, and keyboards. And they did not don stirrups, holsters, and cowboy hats. They dressed in drag. Though the members of the band did not attend the University of Georgia's renowned Lamar Dodd School of Art, "our friends were more or less the art underground" (Bledsoe).

Three members of the B-52's were simply local high schoolers who hung around the older art schoolers. Ricky Wilson and Keith Strickland were friends, and Ricky's younger sister Cindy would sing along to his two-track tapes he made while writing and developing his songs with his uniquely percussive guitar style. It was the mid-1970s, and punk rock was still a twinkle in New York Dolls' manager Malcolm McLaren's eye. He left the Dolls in 1976 and took their thrashing guitar sound to England where he formed a makeshift band out of a London boutique called The Sex Pistols, who christened the era of "punk rock" with their anthemic single "God Save the Queen."

In Athens, Strickland and Ricky Wilson were a thousand miles away from the New York underground music scene, but at that very point in time in 1975, the two places would collide, creating a cultural bond that would change the sound of popular music. Before 1977 in Athens, FM rock radio stations' playlists were dominated by bands "such as Led Zeppelin, Styx, and Journey" (*Athens GA*). And the bands that played around Athens clubs and fraternity parties

echoed this music that radio stations now call “classic rock.” When Strickland and Wilson ventured to New York City as teenagers with an older kid from the Art School they befriended named Jerry Ayers, they were unaware that they were opening a conduit between the Athens and New York music scenes that would influence and profoundly change the small Georgia college town, thus separating it, and creating a unique sense of place from any other town in the South.

Jerry Ayers grew up in New York City and moved to Athens when his father became a professor of religion at the university. When he graduated from high school he moved back to the city and fell in with Andy Warhol’s Factory crowd. Warhol and his vast entourage popularized and sold his soon-to-be timeless “pop-art” from the lofts and basements of Greenwich Village and SoHo. And in the clubs at night, the sounds of bands with names like the Velvet Underground, Television, and the New York Dolls would play for them. Nobody really danced. They just “stood around in the clubs, posing, leaning against the walls...” (Brown, *Party* 51). But it wasn’t the music that the two future B-52’s took back to Athens with them. What is important here, as Rodger Lyle Brown notes, is that on their trip, Strickland and Wilson, through the Warhol art crowd, “met the coterie of transvestites who did drag, and who showed them how to do it right...Keith and Ricky came back to Athens, reeling with the possibilities. That was when they got the idea that even though they were living in a small Georgia town, remote from the centers of art and culture, world-class style was in their reach, just inside their mama’s closets” (Brown, *Party* 24).

Musically, the B-52’s first songs did not derive from the guitar riffs of Johnny Ramone, Syl Sylvaine of the Dolls, or Lenny Kaye from Patti Smith’s band. Ricky Wilson lifted his riffs from radio hits from the 1950s such as “Peter Gunn,” which is the opening for “Planet Claire” off their first album. And while many people mistook their name as having some kind of social



and political image of bombers and war, a B-52 was actually a kind of beehive hairstyle from the 50's that Pierson and Cindy Wilson bought at a vintage wig store in downtown Athens and wore onstage. Their fashion statement, as Gordon Lamb wrote in *Flagpole Magazine*, quickly appealed to their "artistic, musical, out-of-the-norm crowd... We liked to make a statement by dressing outrageously, and we liked to party" (Lamb 1). And their music would soon define "party music" not long after their first makeshift show on Valentine's Day, 1977 in a friend's living room. By December that year, they would drive straight to New York City and perform at the famed Max's Kansas City. It was the time for The B-52's and Athens, Georgia to "teach New York a thing or two" (Lamb 2). And they did.

Their first show at Max's on that December night of 1977 was on a Monday. Monday nights in the city club scene were usually showcase nights where club owners would let upstart bands play for free and half-price Millers or Buds, striving to get a foot in the door of the club scene. Anyone that has ever showcased at Max's, CBGB, Mudd Club or the dozens of others, would tell you that you have a better chance of hitting lotto than "making it," meaning, in this era before the internet age, getting a record deal. But the B-52's were the rarest of exceptions. They impressed the manager at Max's to bring them back for another gig, and just like in Athens, a buzz started to get around the club scene about this band with an exciting show and brand new sound. And by the spring of 1978, without ever touring the country and only a few local Athens parties on their resume, to the delight of owner Mickey Ruskin as he recalled in 1982, there were literally "lines around the block" to see them (Ruskin).

In that summer and fall of 1978, the B-52's claimed the prize for "starting the Athens music scene, ironically, by moving to New York and gaining recognition there" (Selvin). They took their show to the city and set it ablaze with a new spark of musical energy. They brought

that spark back with them to the Athens clubs, and not only created a new underground local scene, but a national and international movement that was more than just a concept in the minds of local artsies who listened to records from New York. But it was first and foremost the dance-crazy Athens art crowd who used the B-52's to create their own "scene," in their own place and time.

That is the difference between a movement and a "scene." A movement requires no sense of place, just an ideology, like civil rights or being against a certain war, that can take hold in any place. But a scene can be more musical, and have a sense of geographical meaning; where local social, cultural, and even economic forces play a huge role in determining why the music spurs a culture that seemingly takes on a life of its own, in its own peculiar spaces. In

ethnomusicological terms, a music scene can best be described, in Will Straw's words, as:

that cultural space in which a range of musical practices exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization. (373)

In the case of Athens, what created its "scene" was not only its particular cultural and socio-economic conditions, which led to a bunch of poor artsy kids hanging around and playing for university art-schoolers who were highly radiated by the New York underground music and arts scene. It was also the wide variety and "cross-fertilization" of artists from *within* Athens that were equally important. The main point of this chapter is that the confluence of local and global influences, as demonstrated by the B-52's, shows why Athens led the way in American influence across the world from the late 1970s up to the present day. And while the B-52's were exposing to the world a new style of music, dressed to the hilt and playing hits like "Rock Lobster" and "Private Idaho" to adoring young fans (including the kid at Wollman Skating Rink), a couple of

skinny kids in jeans and t-shirts from Macon, Georgia, moved to Athens with dreams of playing in a band. In 1980, they met up with an outgoing guitarist who could barely play three chords and a shy kid from the University of Georgia School of Art whom he had met up with at an Athens record shop, The Wuxtry. When these four individuals met, a crosscurrent with the force of a tidal wave hit the Athens “scene,” changing the course of popular music.

### 3. R.E.M.

While the B-52’s “touched the spark to the keg of dynamite, creating what is known as the Athens music scene,” they went down to Atlanta to play a party at Emory University in the winter of 1977. And one of the Athens fans to journey down for the show was Peter Buck (Fletcher 11). Like the proto-punk inspired musicians around him in Athens, being an accomplished musician was “almost a curse in Athens” (Brown, *Party* 68). It was an artistic mentality where songwriting was more important than firing your guitar with solos where notes fling like bullets shot from a Gatling gun. The Athens art scene spawned its music scene with the launching of the B-52’s, and R.E.M. was no exception to this rule.

In 1979, during the height of The B-52’s success, a freshman student enrolled at the University of Georgia School of Art named Michael Stipe. One of his teachers took him to see an art exhibit by a local folk artist by the name of Howard Finster, an untrained small town junk hoarder who would later become one of the most heralded southern folk artists of his time and after. Finster’s art, though from a completely different universe, struck up a symbiotic tone to the New York underground musicians. He, like most Athens bands would echo, “never had any ambitions about painting. I come out of bein’ a garbage collector...” He claims that he once saw a spirit named “Abbey...who was sayin’ to me “Howard, you are going to be a visionary artist,

and you are going to help cover the world with your visionary art.’ The Bible says young mens allowed visions, old mens allowed dreams” (*Athens GA.*). These words from an artist could have been those of a prophet for the Athens music world. And Finster, who would later design the album cover for R.E.M.’s breakthrough *Reckoning* album, was also employed by the Talking Heads, making him the king of New Wave Music artists. Stipe’s art teacher, Jim Herbert, was a huge influence on his students (not only in the classroom in the late 70s but at the wild parties) who has been “at the center of the art, film, and music scene in Athens for the last four decades” (McCommons 12–13): “One of the reasons we have a lot of creative things going on, a lot of music, a lot of painting, a lot of poetry...is that people are not thinking about taking it to New York...or the productions or objects...but for the process and the fun of the making” (*Athens GA.*).

Although New York’s underground influence is a main reason for Athens’ musical and fashionable tastes within the art crowd in the late 70s, the paradox here is that the Athens bands shunned the business side of New York as one of the music industry epicenters, along with Los Angeles. This allowed them the freedom and time to develop their songs and their craft without having to conform to music industry standards set by people who have little to do with making music and everything to do with making money. But the direct influence on Athens’ emerging music scene from records coming out of New York City is well-documented by the artists themselves.

As early as 1975, Buck had been getting copies of the *Village Voice*, the New York underground’s bible. And by the time he had arrived in Athens, a small local newsstand called Barnett’s would have the paper flown in because of the demand from the art crowd. In the late 70s, Athens influx of art and music journals was unique to southern college towns. The B-52’s’ Keith Strickland relates how he would go to Barnett’s and “read the *Village Voice* about what

was happening in New York. I ordered Patti Smith's first single from an ad in the back. We got the Talking Heads first single and got all excited about that. We were reading about new music and thought, 'we want to do that, too'" (Longino). Buck and Stipe similarly praised Patti Smith's work. In an interview with England's *New Musical Express*, Buck remembers how Smith's landmark album *Horses* of 1975 "killed. It was so completely liberating. I had these headphones...my parents' crappy headphones, and I sat up all night with a huge bowl of cherries listening to Patti Smith and going 'Oh my God!..Holy shit!....'" New York punk "immediately put into place everything everyone else in my school was listening to." Stipe was equally influenced as Buck by Smith's music (he joined the Patti Smith Fan Club as a 16-year-old) and both were "heavily influenced by the New York punk scene in general, and by Patti Smith in particular; and both had experienced a new emotional peak on discovering The Velvet Underground" (Fletcher 20). The two, along with their other two bandmates, Mike Mills and Bill Berry, all had shared a profound love of the music coming down from New York, especially these dark and mysterious Lou Reed-fronted-Warhol-art-crowd favorites. As Stipe noted in an interview in 1984 for *Notebook*, "nobody compared us to the Velvet Underground and that's probably the one group we all love."

R.E.M. was born in 1980 at a party thrown at an old Church near downtown Athens. Like The B-52's, they exploded onto the scene and within a couple of months were the new "hottest band in Athens." But both musically and the way they dressed, they could not have departed further from the B-52's. R.E.M. represented an underground current moving in the exact opposite direction from the art rock bands like The B-52's and Pylon that emerged only two years earlier. R.E.M.'s music was not upbeat party music, though it was certainly danceable, which was obligatory for all Athens bands. Dancing "was crucial to the Athens scenes and the

success of bands there; if an Athens band played and nobody danced, they never played again. Marc Cline, guitarist of...Love Tractor said: ‘It didn’t matter what you sounded like if they could dance to you’ (Aikin 31).

But R.E.M.’s music was generally (there are always exceptions to every “rule” in art) “minor key, mid-tempo, enigmatic semi-folk-rock-balladish things; ...to a certain degree that’s true,” according to Buck (Halbersberg). Like the New York proto-punk music that inspired them, rather than art-rock, they were playing “down-and-dirty rock and roll.” And they “were despised by the local art scene” in Athens, though paradoxically Stipe was an art schooler himself (Brown, *Party* 178). So while The B-52’s put Athens culturally on the map, R.E.M. redrew the map and expanded its boundaries. Whereas the former went straight to New York City and took it by storm, the latter toured relentlessly through small southern college towns, playing every venue, as Mike Mills recalls, from “pizza joints to house parties—there weren’t any clubs or a circuit that had bands like us yet, so we had to play wherever we could”—before heading to up North to the city (35). Yet although what the art rocker B-52’s took from New York was more to do with fashion than the actual music, like R.E.M., they both shared in the ethos from its underground. You didn’t have to play like Clapton or Hendrix to play in a band. Band members could use instruments to display their art, and what made Athens so special was that it was the place where they could explore their music freely without the industry’s pollutants of the big city, centered around “money, status, and fame” (Aikin 31).

There is an important yet overlooked reason why the B-52’s and R.E.M. emerged from the thousands of Athens bands that allowed them to become so popular around the world. Of course, it is due to talent, but the two groups shared a common gift for vocal harmonies. As with the vocal interplay between Cindy Wilson and Pierson, a unique and infectious harmonizing

between Stipe and Mills characterized R.E.M. recordings. On their first single to enter FM rock radio, “Driver 8,” the crossing harmonies, where the two singers actually sing different parts are more reminiscent of 60s vocal groups like the Byrds or the Mamas and the Papas (and yes, The Beatles) than any proto-punk bands, and was a major reason for their breakthrough. Two of their other signature songs, “It’s The End of the World As We Know it,” and “Superman” also exemplify this style of harmonizing, and are constantly on mainstream radio playlists still to this day all over the U.S., even though the band broke up.

R.E.M.’s music can hardly be branded “southern” in the classic southern rock sense, like the 70s southern boogie of the Allman Brothers and Lynard Skynyrd, whose music was quickly being eschewed by Athens’ college kids in the late 70s and early 80s. R.E.M.’s lyrics depicted the bands southernness, and were profoundly influenced by the southern gothic writing of Faulkner and O’Conner; something, in Rodger Lyle Brown’s words, “complex, murky...twisted, crazy-rooted, mystical”(Brown, *Party* 204). Yet their third release in 1985, *Fables of the Reconstruction*, also shifted the band’s lyrics *away* from the southern gothic identity of Faulkner and O’Connor, “which was largely a dysfunctional one shaped by the Civil War, Reconstruction, claustrophobic communities of grotesques, and an attachment to a mythologized agrarian past” (Brown, “White” 6). Songs like “Old Man Kensey,” a gothic story written in 1984 about an eccentric old man who was actually local artist Howard Finster’s assistant, and wanted “to be a sign painter,” offered a radically new approach to southern music and lyrics from the southern rock that preceded it (R.E.M.). But it also related the dark truths of southern heritage in a “post-South,” as Brown wrote in his essay “White Ethnicity and R.E.M.’s Reconstruction of the South” (4). The lyric “Old man Kensey wants to be a dog catcher” refers to the time he kidnapped dogs and held them for ransom. The lyrics to “Oddfellows Local 151,” off their next album *Document*,

gives a direct reference to O'Connor's short story "Why Do the Heathens rage Behind the Firehouse?" Stipe had a fascination with "O'Connor's flawed southern prophets—a more or less crazy outsider who turns out to be saner...than all the normal, practical people around him" (Shonk). When he saw Chesnutt playing at a bar in Athens one night and decided to record his songs, this "post-South" southern gothic connection was made.

#### 4. Vic Chesnutt: A Tattered Little Artist

In 1988, just after R.E.M. was featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine as "The World's Greatest Rock N' Roll Band," Athens producer/legend Michael Stipe ventured to the famed 40 Watt Club in downtown Athens, and was moved so much by an artist he heard and saw, he decided to bring him into John Keane's studio for one day to record 15 of his songs. He was a completely unknown singer/songwriter at the time, but would later be hailed internationally as "one of our greatest modern songwriters," compared by *Rolling Stone* to William Faulkner, and honored at The Kennedy Center for the Arts as one of the geniuses of his time (Kemp). Stipe himself said in an interview that Chesnutt's first recording session, which would produce his debut album, *Little*, "was as close to a field recording as I would get.... The marvel then and now is how these songs and his voice are so tattered and yet underneath is a songwriter's ability and heart to match the greats of our time...to Dylan and beyond, forwards and back" (Stipe, Liner Notes).

Stipe describes Athens in the liner notes as "a tattered little town with tattered little people," and no artist of Athens fits that billing more than Vic Chesnutt. By 1990, Athens was ready, as if on cue, for a new artistic force to send out to the world. It would not be an art rock band who liked to dress in glam and drag. And it would not be a dirty rock n' roll band bringing



the underground music of New York to the mainstream. This time it would be a singer/songwriter casting off an endless line of poetry to music from a wheelchair (due to a car accident), veering “from one thought to the next like an endless William Faulkner sentence” (Kemp). The one thing that connected him to the place of Athens was that he followed in the tradition of not being an accomplished musician. As Chesnutt describes in the documentary film, his partially paralyzed left hand would slide up and down the fretboard of his guitar, while the crooked fingers of his right hand graced the strings with elegantly simple melodies. Although Chesnutt’s acoustic folk-songs created an undercurrent running in the opposite direction from the “New Wave” of the B-52’s and the “alternative rock” of R.E.M., he followed in the tradition of Athens musicians who saw themselves as artists and writers who could barely play their instruments.

Chesnutt’s emergence supports the notion that, as Nick Marino wrote in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “the Athens music scene has had multiple boomlets since the famous late 70s/early 80s explosion that brought the world R.E.M., the B-52’s, Pylon, and Love Tractor. The scene was so important that it continues to reverberate today.” Chesnutt didn’t just happen to be in Athens, like the B-52’s, for example. He was drawn there from the music scene created by the art-schoolers before his arrival in 1985. Though he sounded nothing like any of those bands, it is amazing how he points to many of the same outside influences, especially from New York, which by that time had spread out from Athens to the more rural counties of Georgia, including Pike County where Chesnutt grew up. His first bandmate before going solo, Todd McBride, met Chesnutt at a chain record store in a strip mall in Zebulon, Georgia:

Todd: I’m workin’ at Turtles and I keep seein’ this character walkin’ in pretty much every weekend, and he’s usually wearin’ some Gilligan hat and an

old dirty Columbo overcoat, Keds, and these Donald Duck sunglasses.

Anyway, he never really said anything, but he always bought cool records.

And we were lucky enough...Turtles would dump cut-out records from a bin...

like three for a dollar. What'd we get...?

Vic: Velvet Underground ...

Todd: Anyway, we're tryin' to figure out what's goin' on with this guy. "This guy's

hilarious!" I had a friend...and we fancied ourselves songwriters...I could

write some words, and play guitar half-assed. I said, "We gotta start a band!

Vic: ...They come into my basement and we all sit around...and I was blown away!

I was like "Oh my God!," there are people that I know who write songs, '

'cause I was like the only guy in Pike County writin' songs...That was the

beginning of my deal in rock n' roll right there.

Todd: There was a couple of years that happened there. Then you had your

accident. He was laid up for a while.

Vic:...and then after I broke my neck and this kind of forced period of isolation...

I couldn't play. I could only listen. These are the things that changed my

lyrics...

Todd:...and we decided we were gonna be an Athens band.

Vic: Athens was a different world...We saw bands every night...When I discovered

punk rock was when I moved to Athens. It blew my mind. Then I decided

that the best way for music to be performed is like a solo guy with an acoustic

guitar. What we were doing was too polished. It needed to be stripped down.

And that was whole *Little* concept. It was little, as opposed to all the rest of the

bands. They were big, you know, loud and rockin.’ (Chesnutt *Interviews with* 11)

Chesnutt took Athens into a different musical realm of the existential balladeer, a previously forbidden zone of the art crowd. But once again, the paradox of this place called Athens surfaces through its music; because the art crowd *loved* Vic’s music and *Little*, along with his acoustic driven follow-up albums *West of Rome* and *Drunk*. When he departed into his heavier electric rock guitar albums, “a lot of the arty-farty types of fans really hated it” (Chesnutt *Interviews with* 33). But he won over a different generation of art-schoolers, ironically, from the ones that launched the B-52’s. So not only did Chesnutt’s music represent a mid-stream shift in 1990s Athens, but the art crowd changed with the current as if they were rafting down the shoals of the Oconee itself.

Describing Chesnutt’s music harks back to Elvis Costello’s famous quote about “dancing to architecture,” but John J. Sullivan in *The Oxford American* perhaps best related Chesnutt’s musical and vocal stylings in his songs off *Little* such as “Isadora Duncan” and “Rabbit Box”: “Forget phrasing, Vic has somehow turned *pronunciation* into an instrument. He’s constantly resurrecting and warping syllables that we have, through habit or sloth, nearly elided into oblivion...One day Bartlett’s will quote his worst lines in a misguided gesture meant to certify him as that rare songwriter of whom we stoop to say, ‘you know what? That guy’s actually a poet!” (Sullivan).

Chesnutt agrees, “It’s important for me to stretch out these syllables for dramatic effect ‘cause words are beautiful; but its the way you emphasize certain syllables. Words are sometimes very ambiguous and so I like to join in the exuberance of words by teasing and squeezing every little bit of emotion I can get out of these words” (Chesnutt *Interviews with* 6). His “elegant, beautiful, and dark” lyrics move like a sea in constant torment (Hilton). Ian

MacKaye of the Los Angeles punk group Fugazi nails Chesnutt's music on the head when he says that "he was a very funny guy, but he was also extremely dark, so it makes sense that his songs would reflect that" (*Interviews*).

Yet Chesnutt's "haunting lyricism," in songs like "Danny Carlisle," to be discussed in the next chapter," or "Square Room," reflect not just this dark and complex artist. They also reflect the darkness of the Athens music scene not emoted as deeply by The B-52's or even R.E.M., which is mostly why Chesnutt never received the commercial success that they did. Danny Carlisle was actually a classmate of Chesnutt's in grade school named Bernie whom Chesnutt labeled "the retarded kid" (Miller 185), who "once used a pocketknife to kill a garden snake" (*Little*).

The B-52's were the purist form of a party dance band. R.E.M. carried more of the contemplative southern gothic torch, and scorched it into pop songs. Chesnutt is the existential hero of Athens; the Van Gogh-ish and Nietzsche-esque songster who could reach down to the darkest depths of the human soul and make it entertaining to all who went along with his vision. Chesnutt shares the dark corners of his soul in so many songs, such as "Square Room," which so eloquently bares it, off of his later album, *The Salesman and Bernadette*. The song was written in a house on Meigs Street while he was in the early stages of contemplating his suicide. He dreamed of resting in "the cozy coffin" which would be a warm and comforting place away from the cold dark reality of his existence. He will finish this historical peek at Athens, in the first section of the song as it was founded; with a drink of rum:

Sitting in a square room, my voice is freezing. And the beams  
that are bouncing off the moon are hanging from my window  
like icicles. A tired old alcoholic waxing bucolic, shivering and homesick

staring at a wooden floor. Last night I nearly killed myself chasing rum with rum. (*The Salesman*)

## 5. And They Could Barely Play Their Instruments

Navigating through all the musical crosscurrents of Athens since the emergence of the B-52's in 1977, and later R.E.M. and Vic Chesnutt, would be like charting all the eddies and currents of the Oconee. By focusing on these three most acclaimed artists to come out of Athens, it is easier to get a close-up view of not only how vibrant and creative the once sleepy little college town has been, but how varied. But why Athens? Rodger Lyle Brown, who wrote the definitive book, *Party Out of Bounds*, on the Athens music scene, reveals the difficulty in analyzing “what counts as a ‘scene.’ How can you measure a thing in motion? Can you tack an intangible to a board? Dissect it? Analyze it?...The kids... on the dance floor get close to an answer, they feel they’ve got it figured out, but when they stop to explain it, it evaporates like sweat from a satin party dress. They conclude: Forget it. Just *feel* it” (Brown, *Party* 198).

These views reflect Elvis Costello’s mantra that written analysis of music is like “dancing about architecture.” And again, he is right. But regardless of the vast array of musical styles emerging from Athens, there *is* something about its “sense of place” that has led to its position at the forefront of American culture. First, it is southern, which from a local standpoint separates it from any place outside the South, regardless of any outside influences, as say from New York City, whose music had profound influence in cities and towns all over the world. As Camilla Ann Aikin writes, “down South, bands had space to explore and grow on their own... There was an awareness that staying away from those major cities was beneficial to them, and what made them special was where they lived, where they could do something truly new and different” (33).

Yet, as Karl H. Miller, referring in his case to blues and “hillbilly” music of the 1920’s, writes in *Segregating Sound...*, “American music is a product of globalization,” locked in a perpetual tango with “the local music paradigm” (185). This relativity of global and local influence on the artists of a given place is what gives each and every village, town, or city its own unique place in the world. While each individual occupies his or her own space, one cannot create in pure isolation simply because *all* things, as a universal law, are affected by the gravitational forces from the things that occupy the spaces around them.

The B-52’s arose from the local art crowd of Athens, which was drawn together by the gravity of the University of Georgia’s Lamar Dodd School of Art. And it was these artists who drew in the outside influences from New York City’s art and music underground, as well as from the punk rock scene in England and other upstart American music scenes such as Minneapolis (even Hoboken, New Jersey, as the base of Coyote Records, played a huge role in the early 1980’s). As opposed to the views of Brown, Buck, and Stipe, *Flagpole’s* tribute to the B-52’s is more objective on why Athens *is* the “Land of a Thousand Dances.” As Gordon Lamb writes, referring to life in Athens before the Big Bang of The B-52’s from one of the artsies who was there:

While the art party crowd was always itching for something—anything—to break the boredom, Athens itself was dealing with its own identity crisis.

The town was in a race against the clock, struggling to improve conditions downtown rapidly to counter the business-draining mall development...

There’s a tendency to attribute significance to mere coincidence, but things were changing around the time that spawned the B 52’s. A kind of grace descended upon Athens...We were a part of a massive collaborative spirit

where each person's effort urged the next person on. We knew it could not last forever, but it lasted longer than any of us individually deserved. (Lamb 4)

Kate Pierson herself agrees with Lamb, as she magnifies clearly how the B-52's explosion was ignited by the connecting of local and global live wires. She credits:

the lack of recreational opportunities in Athens and the well-stocked music library at the University of Georgia as contributing to The B-52's sense of music and style. The band listened to world music, James Brown, mambo master Prez Prado, soundtrack composer Nino Rota, and anything you could dance to.” (Bledsoe)

The Athens “scene” encompasses, as Holly Kruse writes in *Site and Sound: Understanding Independent Music Scenes*, “both the geographical sites of localized musical practice, and the social and economic networks that exist within these contexts” (145). In other words, Athens, like any place, “consists of a unique combination of assets such as geographic location and proximity,” where individuals combine their own local way of everyday life and culture with more global interventions to create a unique sense of place, within its own wrinkle in time (Rushing 118–120). In a town where it is said “you can't swing a guitar without hitting a musician,” Athens was ripe for leading the nation through its musical renaissance so needed after the onslaught of disco in the mid-70s (Gross).

So the town which gave birth to The B-52's was given in return the rebirth of a music scene out of whose undercurrents came the rise to the mainstream of R.E.M. and at the height of their popularity and acclaim, its singer uncovered from the dimly lit 40 Watt Club on a summer night one of the most acclaimed songwriters of his generation, Vic Chesnutt. Mainstream success would never come to him, but his music, like the “tattered little town“ he called home, as local Athens historian Vernon Thornsberry stated, “will truly go on forever.”

The focus of this thesis is on Chesnutt as a writer who, along with the works of R.E.M. and Billy Bob Thornton, help to forge a new southern gothic movement. They incorporate the themes of the “grotesque” through their characters who are either physically deformed or just outsiders who challenge the societal norms of the South. These writers have exposed these norms and the conflicts that arise when they are challenged. And its themes have shifted away from post-bellum issues of race, class, gender, with the evolving of the older rural South into the newer South, born after the Civil Rights Movement and the cultural changes of the 1960’s. Chesnutt carries forward the tradition of Faulkner and O’Connor by depicting through his storytelling the characters who emerge from the fringes of their societies into the daily lives of its people, thus creating conflict within those who are deemed “normal.” And though Chesnutt places less emphasis on the themes of race, class, and gender, he, as a southern artist, cannot ignore them, for they were still influential in his life and songwriting.



## CHAPTER TWO

### VIC CHESNUTT AND THE SOUTHERN WRITER

In studying great southern writers, the literary lens is invariably focused on those realities that made the South a distinct and peculiar region set apart from the rest of the American landscape. In the tradition of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, as James C. Cobb relates in *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity*, the assumptions that the South was economically backward, defeated, and unable to emerge from under the spell of the curse of slavery “had seemed very much alive (if not well) during the first two decades after World War II...” (236). Although the South has undoubtedly transformed itself into a more modern democratic society with the death of Jim Crow and the rise of the middle class from the entrenched poverty left over from the days of slavery, there is still a distinctive “southernness” to the great minds of today’s South. Many of the South’s peculiar institutions including, as C. Vann Woodward reflects, “the one-horse farmer-one-crop agriculture, one-party politics, the sharecropper, the poll tax, the white primary, the Jim Crow car, (and) the lynching bee,” have faded into history; but that very history can never be taken away from the “collective experience of the southern people,” and thus the “mind of the South” still perseveres through its writers,

whether through prose, film, or songs (25).

The extraordinary changes that have taken place throughout southern society since World War II have forced southerners to confront their new world, as the doors of their “closed society” were pried open economically and socially (Silver). The movement that has carried these southern voices through the South’s entrance into the American mainstream has been placed in the tradition of southern gothic writers and their stories’ characters that are forced to confront the changing South in their daily lives. As Robert Ray Pearson states, “the Southern Gothic writer, having witnessed such individuals dealing with change...is able to produce a realistic fiction that examines the violence and perversity of individual confrontations with change” (Pearson 18).

Most definitions of southern gothic center around “the grotesque, macabre, or fantastic incidents” that relate to and shift away from the supernatural gothic themes of Edgar Allen Poe and the European horror icons such as Frankenstein and Dracula (Pearson 10). What gives the southern gothic movement its separate identity is that its characters dwell in the real world of the conflicted southern hearts and minds. When the aristocratic southern novelist Ellen Glasgow coined the “Southern Gothic School” in 1935, she was actually denigrating the new writers such as Faulkner whose “shocking representations of sex, violence, religious excess, rural poverty...and the legacy of racial hatred undercut traditional romantic images of the South” (Shaw). One of these southern gothic characters can be found in the reclusive Emily Grierson in Faulkner’s pre-Hitchcockian lament, *A Rose for Emily*. Flannery O’Connor is also viewed as a major writer in the southern gothic school with her portrayal of the ruthless murderers in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. The mentally handicapped hero, Karl Childers, in the Billy Bob Thornton film *Sling Blade* represents one of the most acclaimed examples of southern gothic from the end of the 20th century, as more realistic everyday speech supplanted the ornate and mystical prose

of Faulkner and O'Connor.

One of the most powerful and enduring southern gothic writers of the modern era displayed his literary might through song. Vic Chesnutt has been hailed as “one of the greatest modern songwriters,” and has been honored by the Kennedy Center for the Arts for his songwriting (Kemp). His first album *Little*, released in 1990, contains a seamless flow of songs which veer, as Mark Kemp writes in *Rolling Stone*, “from one thought to the next like an endless William Faulkner sentence.” Though Chesnutt’s writing is steeped in the tradition of the great southern gothic writers, he does not necessarily follow in their footsteps. His images and use of language are unique, and he created an extensive body of work (18 albums in 20 years) of over 500 songs that set him apart from his predecessors, while still creating his own place amongst the most acclaimed writers of the southern gothic movement.

Thus, this chapter will explore the music and writing of Vic Chesnutt, who creates fictional characters to relate his experiences and conflicts growing up in rural Georgia, and tells his own story through song. His life is in itself a story filled with the very themes, images, and visions of a southerner who, in the tradition of southern gothic, “often deals with the plight of those who are ostracized or oppressed by traditional southern culture...” (Foster). Being deformed and in a wheelchair was reason enough in America, where how one looks is so prioritized in the media, to feel like an outsider. But in the South, Chesnutt’s atheism, which he proclaimed on the sidewalks of the University of Georgia campus, was the real culprit of the ostracization from his friends and family. Like Faulkner, O'Connor, and Thornton, Chesnutt depicts the lives of the people “who arrive out of that geography, out of the place where I live...The landscape creates the people” (Brown, qtd. in Cobb 259). Chesnutt, confined to a wheelchair after a car accident left him permanently paralyzed from the waist down, was forced

to endure the hardships that made him an “outsider artist whose southern gothic sensibilities seep deep into his songs and stories...” (Heim). On his critically acclaimed second album, *West of Rome*, Chesnutt goes into the details of his characters and their influences growing up in the rural South. His vocal delivery and distinctively witty lyrics are “endlessly clever and inventive in rhyme, (and) always sincere in emotion; this (masterpiece) functions as the musical successor of Faulkner and O’Connor, and is a work of genius” (Vic Chesnutt: At). When asked how he felt about his small town Georgia childhood, Chesnutt shows why his southern upbringing played such a large role in his work. And an exploration of his songwriting, along with the way he vocalized it, will show in this paper why his name belongs to be included with the southern gothic writers. Chesnutt relates his feelings about his childhood in rural Georgia:

Well, it affected my whole life, my whole personality. You know I am the way I am. I was a little different from the people in my hometown, so I always felt like an outsider a little bit. And also there was a big conflict between my redneck heritage and my bohemian aspirations, and my personality started gelling.

That shaped the way I am a lot. Just growing up in the South, a lot of my songs are filled with this kind of stuff. I love Pike County. I love Middle Georgia. It was beautiful, and it was a great life for a kid. I hunted and fished and was a racist until I got to be a certain age, and I realized that that wasn’t how it was... (Chesnutt *Interviews with*)

## 1. Feels Like Vic Chesnutt

Vic Chesnutt was born in 1964 in Jacksonville, Florida, but was adopted and brought up in the small rural town of Zebulon, Georgia. His father, Thomas Chesnutt left his job at Eastern

Airlines and the bustle of the city to expose himself and his family to country life. As his son Vic relates, “he was fascinated with the outdoors, and so he immersed us in it. I went fishin’ and huntin’...I loved it. It was a great thing to do with my father, you know, killin’ things. It was wonderful” (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). Chesnutt explores his rural southern upbringing throughout his first album, *Little*, recorded in 1988 after Michael Stipe, on break from touring with R.E.M., brought Chesnutt into the studio to record. And on his second record, *West of Rome*, Stipe would “take on a more active role as producer...; seeing these songs realized in an honest unpasteurized way that still allowed Vic to stretch out” (Cohen).

While most artists, especially Chesnutt, shy away from categorizations such as southern gothic, his songs on *Little* provide him with an immediate entrance into this genre, as he sings out the stories of his childhood. In the song “Rabbit Box,” he gets nostalgic for his Pike County “rural Georgia landscape...and I was interested in bringing my kind of outsider status to these rural country themes,” continuing:

They’re a very rudimentary trap. It’s a long box with a door in the front, and  
you have that little stick that goes down and...the rabbit trips the stick  
and the door falls down. I built these things myself and every morning  
before school in the winter, I would go out and check ...to see if I caught any  
And I killed them with my bare hands. They’ll be shaking and then you just  
karate chop them...so it breaks their neck. Sometimes it takes a few whacks  
to kill ‘em. Rabbit stew; that’s pretty much the only way we ate ‘em... (Cohen).

He writes in the song, “While I was still in elementary school/I discovered daddy’s tools/and amassed a small pile of scrap lumber/and I built a rabbit box” (Chesnutt *Little*). In the second verse, he romances about his dove-hunts. Donning camouflage and hiding in his neighbor’s cow

pasture, Chesnutt would watch birds “huddle on the power line” and shoot them. They were in fact pigeons, but, he sings, “they sure looked like doves to me.” He balks at the stupidity of this childhood act, because “you don’t go shooting birds off the power lines...that just isn’t done” (*Interviews*). The haunting image of Chesnutt violently breaking the necks of helpless animals not only presages his later darkly humorous and gothic outlook in his lyrics, but forebodes his helplessness as he lay in a ditch with his broken neck after his car wreck. In the song “Danny Carlisle,” Chesnutt reveals his outsider status as a child, long before his car wreck. He felt ostracized by the people around him even in his youth, and he conjures up the “powerful events” as he “peoples his songs with vivid, often amusing characters and images quite unlike much else in pop music” (Lewis 145–147). Danny Carlisle’s real name was Bernie, and he was “a retarded kid” in Chesnutt’s sixth grade class. In the song, Chesnutt paints the macabre portrait of his character who:

Once used a pocketknife to kill a garden snake

He chopped that evil serpent into fours

And when he raised his eyes to heaven as a soldier

He wiped the blood of bad snake on his shirt

Danny Carlisle, he don’t give a shit about the Contras. (Chesnutt, *Little*)

Chesnutt tells the story of the time he got in a schoolyard brawl with Bernie to prove his mettle to his classmates. “I was fat, and everybody picked on me...they hated me... I was thinkin’ about this kid who was retarded and didn’t care about the silly things we all are obsessed with. He’s the kid who’s just ridin’ his bike, but he doesn’t care about the Contras...or anything. He just wants to dream...a blissful little kid, unlike me. I’m traumatized by beatin’ up the retarded kid” (*Interviews*).

Chesnutt's "haunting lyricism" is combined with his unique vocal phrasing to emote a feeling that irresistibly draws the listener into his "own little world" (Brute, *Nine High*). His vocal phrasing places emphasis on certain syllables in an unpredictable way that "always keeps you on your toes"; for example in his first song off *Little*, titled "Isadora Duncan" (*Interviews*). As Chesnutt, sounding like a poet, states, "The words are the most important part of the song. The phrasing comes if I can shove it in a certain space. I'm not gonna change the words if the syllables aren't the perfect meter. I can shove 'em in no problem. I'm not sure where it comes from. It is an exuberance! The joy of language!" (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). His "elegant, beautiful, and dark" lyrics portray a songwriter in perpetual conflict (Hiton). As Ian MacKaye of the punk group Fugazi aptly states, Chesnutt "was a very funny guy, but he was also extremely dark, so it makes sense that his songs would reflect that" (*Interviews*).

But what his songs really reflect, confining him to his world as an outsider and involuntarily placed among the writers of southern gothic, is his life after his car accident in 1983 at the age of 18. In a 1993 documentary *Speed Racer*, he told filmmaker Peter Sillen "that in essence all his music is about his accident." Paralyzed and laying in a hospital bed for a period of several months, Chesnutt was in a:

forced period of isolation...I couldn't play. I could only listen. These are the things that changed my lyrics...After I broke my neck, I was embarrassed to show my face in Pike County anymore. Then I moved to (Athens) in 1985. I didn't read until I broke my neck."  
(*Interviews*)

When asked if performing in a wheelchair affected the way people in the audience viewed him, Chesnutt accepts his fate. He could not help but be viewed:

negatively. I mean, I know how it is. It's got to be that way with humans. It's built in,

very animalistic. When people see people who are different from them, there's a physical response. They can't help it...When people see people who aren't normal, or broken, they have a physical reaction. It's like when a chicken is sick, the other chickens will peck him to death. It's the same things with humans. That's just the way it is." (Chesnutt, *The Onion*)

If the southern gothic writer focuses on more earthly monsters, then Chesnutt starts to see himself as a songwriter in the light of the grotesque images he paints through his music. As he writes in "Sultan, So Mighty" off his *Silver Lake* album, "I'm here because I'm a eunuch. I am no threat." He addresses the macabre of his suicidal tendencies most eloquently and poetically in the last section of "Square Room" off his sixth album, *The Salesman and Bernadette*, released in 1998:

It's funny how I alienated those who I was trying just so, so hard to  
impress. Now half those fuckers hate me and I'm just a fool to all the rest.

Why do I insist on drinking myself to the grave? Why do I dream about the cozy  
coffin?

His sixth and most ambitious album to the date of its release in 1998, *The Salesman and Bernadette* shifts away from the acoustic sparseness of his earlier albums such as *Little, West of Rome, and Drunk*, towards a more "stylistically expansive" work "brandishing clarinets, vibes, brass, and pedal steel." In this character study depicting the sadly romantic salesman and the object of his love, Bernadette (the part sung by Emmy Lou Harris on the song "Woodrow Wilson"), Chesnutt's tour-de-force of his southern voice "deserves to permanently shift his status from wily alt-country eccentric to Great American Pop-Art Storyteller—a wistful Tom Waits for the leaky New South" (Hermes 43–47). John Jay Sullivan, in *The Oxford American*, perhaps



summed up best the future place-setting of Chesnutt at the table of southern writers when he proclaimed “that guy’s actually a poet!” Yet, because of his uniquely emotive style of phrasing, the words “don’t mean quite the same thing when they’re not in the act of leaving his mouth” (Sullivan). His method of twisting and elongating words in his exaggerated southern drawl can only be experienced through the legacy of his recordings, along with the documentary film on his life and music that will serve to remind the world of his work. As Todd McBride, his first bandmate from Athens and co-writer of Chesnutt’s first recorded song, “Isadora Duncan,” so aptly puts it, “he may not have believed in the afterlife, but guess what, he’s gonna have one” (*Interviews*).

Although his writing is acclaimed in both the underground music press and high society artistic award circles, Chesnutt’s work also deserves notoriety in the scholarship and study of great southern writers. William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Billy Bob Thornton (through his screenplay, *Sling Blade*) represent key examples of southern gothic writing that have not only transformed the American literary landscape, but brought it to a global audience, as well. A discussion of Chesnutt’s work with these three distinguished and acclaimed visionaries and innovators, who helped move and foster southern culture and its literature, will place Chesnutt within the framework of the tradition they carried. However, to truly understand the raw emotive and visceral qualities of Chesnutt’s work, one must listen to his records, and hear his words “leaving his mouth.” Historian Shelby Foote said of Faulkner’s genius that his writing had the ability “to make you feel,” and not just think about his characters’ emotions. Thornton echoes this quality in relation to Chesnutt’s music, calling it “a certain feeling... Oh that feels like an egg yolk; oh that feels like sadness; oh that feels like Vic Chesnutt” (*Interviews*).

## 2. Vic Chesnutt and Billy Bob Thornton: Modern Keepers of the Southern Gothic Flame

If there is one modern work that epitomizes the southern gothic tradition, portraying “the grotesque” and macabre characters who confront the South’s normal citizens with the conflicts of social change around them, it is Billy Bob Thornton’s film, *Sling Blade*. Released in 1995, and even billed by Miramax Films as “a southern gothic tale,” it tells the story of Karl Childers, a mentally handicapped man who has just been released from a psychiatric ward in Arkansas for the criminally insane. He had been placed there as a young teen for murdering his mother and her lover Jesse, whom the 12-year-old Karl had mistakenly thought was raping her. After killing the lover with a kaiser or sling blade (a long, sharp, banana-shaped blade with a long handle used for hacking brush), Karl “had come to find out my mother didn’t really mind what Jesse was a doin’ to her...I takened the kaiser blade, some people call it a sling blade, I call it a kaiser blade, and hit my mother upside the head with it an’ killed her” (Thornton, *Sling Blade*).

After his release 25 years later, Karl befriends a young boy named Frank through an act of kindness by helping the boy carry a heavy bag of laundry home. Frank, traumatized by his father’s suicide, returns the favor by convincing his widowed mother Linda to let Karl stay in the garage. And this is where Karl confronts Doyle, Linda’s boyfriend and the movie’s monstrous figure who represents the prejudices of society against those deemed as outsiders; in this case, the “mental retard,” as Doyle calls Karl, and the homosexual best friend of Linda’s, Vaughan; as well as practically all the other characters who enter Linda’s household throughout the film.

Karl, being mentally challenged, bonds with Vaughan, who is openly gay, in that they are both ostracized in their small rural society; and are both the subject of relentless verbal abuse by Doyle, who also physically assaults Linda and her son Frank. As Vaughan tells Karl over lunch, “you and I are a lot alike, strange as that may seem. I mean not physically or even mentally

really, just, well, maybe emotionally or actually the hand we've been dealt in life" (Thornton, *Sling Blade*). Though Karl's mannerisms and deformed appearance could place him in the realm of the gothic or "grotesque," his inner kindness towards his new friends, who are all facing Doyle's wrath, really places him as the misfit hero triumphing over the oppressively monstrous Doyle. He plays the role of the normal citizen who meets his tragic end at the swinging edge of the heroic Karl's sling blade. And these characters' roles define Thornton's writing as southern gothic.

Thornton uses Doyle's character to juxtapose the unjust rules of society with those who live outside the social norms. Doyle's ironhanded fist held over his girlfriend Linda's household, which isn't even his own, shows the arrogance and unfairness which ostracized figures must deal with daily. When threatened by Linda's neighbor that he will call the law on Doyle if his garage band, during a late-night jam session, doesn't turn down the volume, the brutal and overbearing Doyle shouts back, "the law's on my side. I play cards with...the chief of police" (Thornton *Sling Blade*).

His conflict with those around him eventually leads to Doyle's mental anguish, and he breaks down. With all the story's characters present, all of whom dwell both mentally and physically outside of proper southern small town norms, Doyle lashes out, "you are just losers. Am I the only sane human bein' around here....?" (Thornton *Sling Blade*). This conflict between the past, where those on the fringes of society stayed and held no sway, and the changing world of the New South where the old authoritarian rules start to dissipate, create the angst-ridden tug-of-war within the soul of the "normal" people represented by Doyle. And his struggle, as Ray Pearson unknowingly portends Thornton's symbolism of Doyle, is one "in which this character almost invariably loses, and in which he is often destroyed in this defeat" (17).

As Charles A. Riley II wrote in his article, “Disability and the Media: Prescriptions for Change,” “When it comes to accuracy and understanding the feelings of people with disabilities, the achievement of (*Sling Blade*) is in part its attention to the feelings of people with disabilities and how they are perceived” (199). Vic Chesnutt actually appears as one of these outsider figures as the wheelchair-bound bass player in Doyle’s garage band of misfits. And it is Chesnutt’s character, Terence, who gets thrown into the door during Doyle’s rage during the jam session. But Chesnutt not only connects with *Sling Blade*’s southern gothic themes of ostracization because of his appearance. As Simon Hattenstone wrote for an article in *The Guardian* in 1998, Chesnutt, even “before his car wreck...felt ‘like an outsider. My philosophies of life are not in the American norm,’ he says in that rolling redneck accent. Somehow the accident gave him the confidence to press on with the obstreperous tunes and obscure lyrics that only he understood.” His songs, such as “It Is What It Is,” and “Speed Racer,” to be explored in the next chapter, reflect the very images and conflicts, especially religious, within the hearts and minds of the changing South that the documentary film so visibly projects.

As Chesnutt echoes in his songs such as “Speed Racer” and “It Is What It Is,” the role of religion is often front and center as a major theme throughout the works of southern gothic writers, as seen in O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. Chesnutt is passionate about his devout disbelief in God, while Thornton uses the character of Karl, who carries a Bible with him at all times, to show *Sling Blade*’s audience an outsider’s view of society and its misuse of religion. For example, Vaughan, though a believer in Christ, is banned from attending church for being gay. Yet Karl craves absolution through being baptized, and when he mentions his wish to Doyle, the conflicts between religion (and the heavenly afterlife it promises) and the evils found in the hearts of earthly sinners collide head on. And the debris of these contradictions comes

shooting out of Doyle's mouth in full force: "Baptized? Well get baptized then. I don't give a shit. Call a fuckin' preacher, goddammit!" (Thornton, *Sling Blade*).

### 3. Vic Chesnutt in the Southern Gothic Tradition: Setting His Own Place at the Table of the Southern Writers

Vic Chesnutt, by his own admission, has often:

been compared to Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor. I was always inspired by their work, but I can't say that I emulated them because...they portrayed the South in a way that I was not going to do. My work is more a reaction to Faulkner and O'Connor...

I'm a reaction to them. The South in my songs is more naturalistic and a less mystical place. I like to deal with these small vignettes that have a power beyond mysticism. A plot is not important a lot of times in my songs unlike O'Connor or Faulkner where the language is gorgeous but the plot is intricate. And the thing about the mystery in my songs is that...there's not enough there to have a plot.

It's kind of like these snapshots instead of a narrative kind of thing. (*Interviews*)

Yet Faulkner and O'Connor also offer "snapshots" of the world and its characters they portray through their use of the short story. Each author offers a perfect example of southern gothic literature, spotlighting the themes of violence, a macabre view of the world, and the archetypes of the outsiders who physically and mentally dwell on the fringes of society's norms.

O'Connor's short story *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* is a dark, though strangely light-hearted, account of the brutal murders of an innocent family on vacation by a band of escaped convicts.

Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* is a classic southern gothic tale set in an old decaying mansion where Emily, in Norman Batesian fashion, keeps, and even sleeps with, her dead ex-lover, Homer Barron. She becomes a loner who descends deeper into seclusion, and into the black hole of homicide. These two short stories serve as prime examples of the literary fire called "southern gothic," and although the modern carriers of this torch such as Thornton and Chesnut go off in their own separate directions stylistically, their stories still carry on thematically in the tradition of Faulkner and O'Connor. They are more important than ever as keepers of the southern flame of "some sort of distinctive group identity" (Cobb 328). As O'Connor, as a southerner, complained in 1957:

The anguish that most of us have observed for some time now has been caused not by the fact that the South is alienated from the rest of the country, but by the fact that it is not alienated enough, that every day we are getting more and more like the rest of the country, that we are being forced out, not only of our many sins but our virtues. (qtd. in Cobb 246)

When she later comes home to the South, and states, "It is great to be at home in a region, even this one," she echoes Faulkner's emotions towards the South during a speaking engagement in Japan: "I love it and I hate it. Some of the things I don't like at all, but I was born there and that's my home, and I will defend it even if I hate it" (qtd. in Cobb 139). Contrary to C. Vann Woodward's notion that "everything about the South might change but its history" in his landmark book, *The Burden of Southern History*, perhaps the one other entity left that cannot be taken from the "homogenized" and vanishing South is the southern writer (qtd. in Watson 277).

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In *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, O'Connor narrates the "grimly humorous" tale of the murders of a family of six on a rural Tennessee road where their car had flipped over into a ditch (Orvell 134). The focus of the story is on the grandmother of the family, who symbolizes the lost ways of an older South she knew in her romanticized image of a heavenly place, where Jesus himself presided over a trustworthy and honorable southern people. She is constantly evoking memories of "better times" in contrast with the present, where "people are certainly not nice like they used to be" (O'Connor, *the Complete* 122). But the search for her love-longed past ironically ends up in tragedy, as she convinces her son Bailey to pull off the main road in search of some old plantation home, representing her desperation to return to her Old South childhood.

Sitting dazed and stranded by the side of the road after the car accident, the family's lives become entangled with a group of escaped convicts who happen to pass by. The leader is known as The Misfit, and after ordering his two cronies to shoot the rest of the family, he is left alone with the grandmother. O'Connor uses the grandmother's religious beliefs to confront the cruelty and evil of The Misfit. As she begs for mercy looking down the barrel of his gun, the well-mannered and "bespectacled" The Misfit, who hails from a proper Christian family and even "been in the arm service," represents "the ultimate grotesque, for he simultaneously embodies the stability of her beloved old South, as evidenced by his manners and background, and the violence and disruption that characterizes the new South that she fears..." (Pearson 45). The grandmother has no choice but to turn to Jesus to help convince The Misfit not to kill her:

"If you would pray," the old lady said, "Jesus would help you."

"That's right," The Misfit said.

"Well, then, why don't you pray?" she asked, trembling with delight suddenly

"I don't want no hep," he said. "I'm doing all right by myself." (O'Connor, *the*

*Complete* 130)

After shooting the grandmother at point blank range through the chest, like some cold-blooded monster, all The Misfit has to say to one of the other murderers, who gets delight from the cruel acts, is “Shut up, Bobby Lee...It’s no real pleasure in life” (O’Connor, *The Complete* 133).

For Vic Chesnutt, there was little pleasure toward the end of his life, as well. In discussing his writing next to that of Flannery O’Connor, the song “Speed Racer,” off of *Little*, thematically jumps out for two reasons. First, the song speaks directly to his views on religion and, like O’Connor, their emphasis in his life and work. And second, the starring role of Chesnutt’s grandmother, who represented in his life a connection to the bygone days of the old South in his songs, is a symbiotic reflection, albeit a funhouse mirror one, of the grandmother in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*. As Chesnutt reminisces, “When I was looking at some of my songs about my childhood, I was realizing that...God...my granny inspired a million songs. She wins the prize for inspiring the most Vic Chesnutt songs” (*Interviews*). And his songwriting has been compared to O’Connor by music journalists as well. Russell Hall, in *Goldmine*, acclaims Chesnutt “for putting together a body of work that combines vulnerability, vitality, and Southern gothicism in ways that have much in common with Southern storytellers such as Flannery O’Connor” (67). Her character The Misfit shares Chesnutt’s atheism. And though they are both outsiders looking in on the world of the “well-adjusted” Christian South, they differ in that The Misfit doles out the bounty of life’s random cruelty, while Chesnutt is the object of the unforgiving world he cites in his pre-suicidal requiem as “This Cruel Thing” (*Widespread*).

The song “Speed Racer” is one of Chesnutt’s most honest and compelling tracks, lashing out against the religious orthodoxy thrust upon him by his parents and everyone around him in the small town of Zebulon, Georgia. He lashes out against the notion of original sin and that we



are all God-fearing “victims” who must kneel before Jesus in total devotion to His truth as the son of God. Religion, as will be discussed in relation to O’Connor’s work in the next chapter, “is essentially crazy” for Chesnutt in his “atheist gospel song,” “Speed Racer:”

I’m not a victim; I know the system. I’m intelligent. I’m intelligent.

I’m not a victim. I’m an atheist

The idea of divine order is essentially crazy... (Chesnutt, *Little*)

Chesnutt’s grandmother is not only the focus of songs such as “Aunt Avis,” but her life stories and advice provided the inspiration for his lyrics (Chesnutt, *Drunk*). She brought an older South gentility and approach to Chesnutt’s life and music. In “Sewing Machine,” he depicts her in a classic pose of an old South household when he writes, “Granny wrote a letter up under the table lamp, said her thumbs hurt ‘cause all the beans she had to snap” (*Brute, Nine High*). “I’m proud to pass it along because Granny had some good sayings” (*Interviews*). And when he had first started writing songs, she was the one who gave the common sense advice to “go in the studio and record them, because ‘when the bug hits, that’s the time to scratch it” (*Interviews*). On his second album, *West of Rome*, the resulting song, “Bug,” is a dedication to his grandmother. Her influence on Chesnutt created a strong supportive strand that bound him and his songs to her South, which it turned out he would need in the face of his parents’ feelings towards his first performance of “Speed Racer:”

It was like a coming out party as a solo artist; my new batch of songs. And I was gonna play ‘em for my parents. It was in a Unitarian church, not a rock club...

The first song I did was “Speed Racer.” When I hit the chorus, “I am an atheist!” my parents started blubbering crying. Everybody in the audience could hear ‘em. I could hear ‘em on stage. They were crying, sobbing

out loud...But I had to do that. I had to come out as an atheist before my parents. It broke their hearts, and they were never happy again. I talked to ‘em after...and all I remember is my granny leaned over to me and she said, ‘Vic, there’s things that everybody does it, but you don’t have to sing about it.’

I thought that was brilliant advice. Granny is one of my huge inspirations.” (*Interviews*)

Miles Orvell writes in “*Flannery O’Connor: An Introduction*,” that “in The Misfit’s accented account of his past, O’Connor mixes just the right elements of classic American drifter and morbid sophisticate to lend credibility and authority to an essentially enigmatic figure,” and the same could just as easily be stated about Vic Chesnutt (132). He was the archetypical wanderer/poet throughout his career, though only violent towards himself through his suicide attempts; and his dark and morose humor made him truly difficult to pin down as an artist. And while the grandmother in O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard To Find* is fictional, she represents the same southern past as Chesnutt’s real grandmother. They are both kind and caring, and believers of the good that can exist within people through their devout Christian views. And they both in their own way use religion to reach out to those they endear, those who ironically lack faith in God or Jesus. The grandmother in O’Connor’s tale even murmurs to The Misfit, “Why, you’re one of my babies. You’re one of my own children” (O’Connor, *The Complete* 132). Of course, for her, faith in man was nothing more than wishful thinking. For Granny Chesnutt, her faith helped spawn one of the South’s most prolific and acclaimed songwriters.

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As Susan V. Donaldson writes, “Faulkner has often been hailed and condemned as the founding father ...of Southern gothicism in modern literature” (359). Of course, his body of work

is so extensive, it would be critical folly to pin him down into one specific genre as opposed to another. His writing created a world unto itself, complete with all the complexities and conflicts that define us as humans. Yet one of his short stories serves as a snapshot, reading like a song with five verses (or in this case, chapters), serving as a vehicle through which to discuss Vic Chesnutt's writing.

Written about 1927 (but not published until 1930), "A Rose For Emily" shows why many of Faulkner's "earliest reviewers ...were inclined to regard Faulkner as the founder of the 'School of Cruelty' and southern Gothicism, defined by its penchant...for hatred, passion, and frustration" (Donaldson 58). Inventively narrated by an unknown citizen representing the small southern town of Jefferson, the story unfolds with Emily Grierson, a woman of means who grows more isolated within her old relic of a decaying mansion, symbolizing the crippling rust as it gathers on the romantic notions of the Old South, eroding its delusions of grandeur. Emily's overprotective father refuses to approve any of her suitors growing up, and his death in the first chapter of the story starts her downhill slide into her withdrawal from society.

In the second chapter, neighbors begin to complain about a dank odor, the origin of which Faulkner leaves to the reader's imagination, emanating from the house. The scene is meant to depict Emily's descent into going "completely crazy at last." The people of the town were thus none too surprised "when the smell developed. It was another link between the gross, teeming world and the high and mighty Griersons" (Faulkner, "A Rose" 437).

In the third section, Emily, who is becoming more and more "a tragic and serene" character, meets a construction foreman from the North named Homer Barron; and they strike up a relationship that Faulkner purposely steeps in mystery. He leaves open to question the prospect of Emily and Homer ever getting married "because Homer himself had remarked—he liked men,

and it was known that he drank with the younger men in the Elks' Club—that he was not a marrying man” (Faulkner, “A Rose” 440). When she goes to her druggist to buy some arsenic, it is seemingly for her own suicide, but we later find out in the fourth chapter that she uses it to kill Homer, who simply disappears into the house, never to be seen again; whether it was because he was gay, a “Yankee,” or dark-skinned is not clear. But he was definitely an outsider to the Jefferson community in any case.

Once Homer is poisoned, Emily confines herself to the house, becoming a total recluse until the day she died. In the final scene, the townspeople come into her house after her death and discover the shockingly gruesome skeletal remains of Homer in an upstairs bed. But even more grotesque in pure southern gothic horror is the discovery of “a long strand of iron-gray hair” belonging to Emily on the pillow next to Homer’s skull. In the end, she becomes Faulkner’s southern gothic femme fatale. Literary critic Cleanth Brooks noted in the prized literary guide, *Understanding Fiction*, that the members of the Jefferson community “might well have felt that in some sense Emily Grierson was more sinned against than sinning. She had not willed the great warping of her life; it had been imposed upon her” (64).

In Brooks’ light, Emily is reminiscent of Vic Chesnutt’s life and music in several ways; for not only did he become the “tragic” figure living in constant pain from his injuries, but Chesnutt, like Emily, was the outsider who knew that most people in normal society saw him in the macabre or grotesque, “as a monster, like Quasimodo.” Where Chesnutt really walks hand in literary hand with Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” though, is in their infatuation with death. Chesnutt’s earlier lyrics from *Little* hark back to his lost childhood and a fondness for his past, though in a darkly humorous light. But in his later songs, Chesnutt wrestles with the reality of death in foreboding and heart-wrenching honesty. Emily, in her death, “had gone to join the

representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson” (Faulkner, “A Rose” 433). Like Emily, Chesnutt withdraws into a dark and lonely place, and begins to write his own eulogy that he imagines placed next to some eroded and illegible Confederate tombstone.

“This Cruel Thing” never appeared on one of his albums, but Chesnutt lifted the lyrics and melody from an old Civil War ballad, “Weeping Sad and Lonely, When This Cruel War Is Over.” Written by Charles Carrol Sawyer, the song “sparked numerous musical replies...and became popular on both sides of the battlefield” (Fontaine). Vic uses the haunting melody and lyrics to relate his own inner battles and outer conflicts with the world around him, and he belies the bittersweet saga of his life with a seeming “foreknowledge” of his suicide on Christmas day, 2009:

When this cruel thing is over

Hopes and fears...How vain?

When this cruel thing is over

And often dreams I see you

On the battle plain

Sadly breathing, falling

When this cruel thing is over

If amid din of battle

Nobly you should fall

I'll whisper words in your honor

When this cruel thing is over.

Weeping sad and lonely.

While Chesnutt saw his work as “a reaction against Faulkner’s...,” the Georgian songwriter’s life fit the southern gothic mold set forth by Faulkner in “A Rose for Emily.” Chesnutt’s longing for the past came into direct conflict with his future that, as he called in song, was “Free of Hope” (Chesnutt, *Is the Actor*). And what Faulkner loves, as Edmund Volpe writes in *A Reader’s Guide to William Faulkner: The Short Stories*, “is the tragic figure of the Southerner, trapped by his pride in his heritage and tormented by conflicting needs to conform and to defy, struggling vainly and helplessly to escape from the past and exist in the present” (99). Faulkner himself could not have pinpointed the hopes and dreams of the southern writer better: “We seem to try in the simply furious breathing (or writing) span of the individual to draw a savage indictment of the contemporary scene or to escape from it into a make believe region of swords and magnolias and mockingbirds which perhaps never existed” (qtd. in Donaldson 359). For Chesnutt, in his final triumph of despair over hope, he succumbs to his tragic fate of his death, which he conflictingly embraces, both in his thoughts of suicide as well as of religion, in one of his last songs, “Flirted With You All My Life:”

I am a man

I am self-aware

And everywhere I go

You’re always right there with me

I flirted with you all my life

Even kissed you once or twice  
And to this day I swear it was nice  
But clearly I was not ready

When you touched a friend of mine  
I thought I would lose my mind  
But I found out with time that  
Really I was not ready, no no

Oh death, oh death, oh death  
Really I'm not ready

Oh death you hector me  
Decimate those dear to me  
Tease me with your sweet release  
You are cruel and you are constant

When my mom was cancer sick  
She fought but then succumbed to it  
But you made her beg for it  
Lord Jesus, please I'm ready

Oh death, oh death, oh death

Really I'm not ready. (Chesnutt, *At the Cut*)

Death was a constant companion of Chesnutt's since his time in the hospital after his car wreck. He lived every day "on the edge of death," as he states in the documentary film. When he sings "even kissed you once or twice," he is referring to his suicide attempts which failed, so clearly he "was not ready" (*Interviews*). The third verse commemorates the many friends he had lost in Athens to AIDS in the 1980s. Many of his songs, such as "Dying Young" and "Withering" off of *West of Rome*, eulogize his friends who succumbed to the disease. It was the early 1990s, "and it was freakin' us all out...People that I know were startin' to croak." And due to his near-death and time in the hospital, he includes his "own life experience...even though I wasn't dying of AIDS." He thus sings to death "I am not ready," though it cruelly teases him every day as if the Grim Reaper were a conjoined twin. His flirtations with death tormented him throughout his life, reflecting in his songs the darkly-tinted windows of his soul. His stepmother was deeply religious (calling her "mom" shows the close bond they kept in spite of his atheism), and when she succumbed to cancer, Chesnutt quotes her "Lord Jesus, please I'm ready." Her pain made her beg for death. But Chesnutt's pain was not yet at the point where he was ready for death; that would not come until Christmas Day, 2009.

Only six years before William Faulkner claimed his Nobel Prize for literature in 1950, he had only one of 17 books in print (Anderson 7). It actually took those who believed in the greatness and timelessness of his work, such as Malcolm Cowley, who edited *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946, to revive the author's body of work, and shed light on its brilliance. And for Vic Chesnutt, it will take members of his "absurdly loyal following," including the thousands living in Europe, to achieve for him what Cowley did for Faulkner (Pegoraro).

By the time Flannery O'Connor emerged in the 1950s, southern gothic had broadened to



include those writers who added their own images and use of language in seen in stories such as “A Good Man Is Hard To Find.” And by the late 20th century, the most acclaimed personifiers of southern gothic, such as Billy Bob Thornton and Vic Chesnutt, were able to form a new class of writers who, through film and song, rooted their own individual works in the landscape of southern writers.

It can be said that the term “southern gothic” has been tossed around academic and journalistic circles so much that it begins to lose meaning. But merely writing of the grotesque and macabre is not what separated Chesnutt, Faulkner, O’Connor, and Thornton from the myriad of southern writers who employ the gothic themes of violence, religion, sexuality, and horror in their work. It is not enough to shock the audience with these images, for the success of any writer is to engage our sensibilities and our morality. The writers discussed not only draw open the curtains to our morbid curiosities as humans, but appeal to our group conscience, and awaken it to the harsh realities of inhumanity. Maybe their works can lead others to question man’s penchant for inflicting pain and suffering on those who are deemed, like Chesnutt and his characters, as the outsiders, freaks, and existential loners who must forge their own path through life’s injustices. For Chesnutt, “everyday was suffering—burning in hell” (*Interviews*):

Yeh Look at me in my thirties  
plowing forth unsteady and unsturdy but  
I’m still alive, I’m still alive, I win a prize, I’m still alive  
Yeh look at me, pushing forty  
Suiting up for another sortie and  
I’m still alive, I’m still alive, I win a prize, I’m still alive  
It may not be pretty my life up to here,

But something bold and beautiful occurred, I'm not interred

You look at me as a tragic figure

One frivolous moment, I beg to differ 'cause

I'm still alive, I'm still alive, I win a prize, I'm still alive

It may not be pretty my life up to here

But something bold and beautiful occurred, I'm not interred. (Chesnutt, *Left to*)

The irony here is that Chesnutt did not believe in hell, to spite all those around him, growing up in Georgia, who did. There was no God, no Jesus, and no concept of original sin in his life, and he conveyed his atheism forcefully in his writing. In Flannery O'Connor's South, on the other hand, Christian faith should be the dominant force in everyone's life as it was in hers. Yet Chesnutt rejected her view of the South, and created his own place at the opposite end of the table of southern writers.

## CHAPTER THREE

### VIC CHESNUTT AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR: FAITH AND DEATH

#### 1. A Zealot and an Atheist

After his parents gave him up for adoption, Vic Chesnutt was quickly whisked away to Zebulon, Georgia and raised only 75 miles from Milledgeville, where O'Connor died in the summer of 1964. Though Chesnutt's work had been compared to hers by critics enamored with the overused "southern gothic" angle of the 1990s, it was only superficially in music magazines like *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*. A more in-depth study of their work shows a close yet paradoxical relationship between the two, both in their lives and in their writing; as if Chesnutt grew right out of O'Connor's literary house, only to later rebel against her fanatical papal brand of "hard hard religion" (Coles 61). By the end of his life, when he confronted in his songs his depression and impending death, Chesnutt actually becomes like O'Connor's heroic figures (especially Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* who blinds himself at the end of the novel), through committing his final violent and voluntary act—his suicide on Christmas Day.

There are three themes, which weave through the bonds that so strongly tie O'Connor's and Chesnutt's lives and writing. First, the role of faith and religion will be explored in order to

bridge the sharp divide between her Catholic faith, which borders on the medieval expectations of pre-Protestant Europe, and Chesnutt's devout atheism, which he called his "faith." In the rural southern town of Zebulon, as his sister Lorinda Crane relates in the film, "I didn't even know that was an option... You've got to believe in something!" (*Interviews*). The two southern writers' religious views tie in directly with their upbringings in the rural South. Yet their sense of place and regional history, the second theme of this chapter, goes well beyond their childhoods into the many places they've seen, the sounds they have heard, and the people by whom they have been touched. Though their writing builds on the universal themes of faith and death, it is their communities, their surroundings, their language, and their characters born from their native southern soil that give their writing the structure and foundation needed to make it stand out on its own; and as Chesnutt states, to "make it last forever" (*Chesnutt Interviews with*).

The third theme not only sets their place at the southern gothic table, but more specifically, is seen in their use of the "grotesque" in their characters, and their shared "darkly comic humor" (*Interviews*). Their morbid fascinations frame their outlook and philosophy of not only their work, but of their personal experiences as disabled and diseased, and constantly, as Chesnutt states, "living on the edge of death" (*Interviews*). Knowing their lives would be short puts death at the forefront of their minds, and their harsh realities are forcefully displayed in their writing. They each found solace in their humorous portrayals of faith and death by staging their characters in the light of the "grotesque" outsiders, such as The Misfit or the eunuch in Chesnutt's song "Sultan So Mighty." Such characters are not the insane sinners whose mug shots might appear on the evening news. Often, O'Connor's heroes, such as the one-legged Hulga in "Good Country People," or the club-footed delinquent Rufus Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First," are physically deformed. In her stories, the people around them who occupy what society

tends to call the “normal” seats in church pews, office buildings, and at suburban kitchen tables are the folks, steeped in hypocrisy, in need of a slap-in-the-face spiritual awakening. Those who compromise their true faith in order to fit in with their society’s norms are for O’Connor, characters in need of a redemption, which can only come from their epiphany through a violent or horrible act. Chesnutt glorifies and relates himself to monstrous characters like Quasimodo (the hunchback of Notre Dame) in another atheistic anthem, “It Is What It Is.” He is the “adopted son” (*Little*), left by mother in a plastic covered hospital crib with all the other “bastards in bubbles” (*Brute, Nine High*).

Chesnutt really has two epiphanies, which are both related to “Speed Racer,” his “atheist gospel song” written right after high school. The first comes not only from the violent and tragic consequences of his car wreck, where “I thought I was going to die every day for two months,” but from the irony in his driving into that ditch on Easter Sunday right after proclaiming his atheism in public (*Interviews*). His 15-month ordeal in the hospital was his cathartic transformation into the songwriter he would become. He didn't read...

until I broke my neck. And then, when I read, I was like, ‘oh, this is what words do...they're powerful!’ They’re not just there to tickle you. My favorite songs before that were psychedelic Beatle songs; and, of course, Dylan. Dylan blew my mind. But Dylan’s full of crap. Half of his songs don’t mean anything. They’re just kind of lines...like one-liners...like Rodney Dangerfield. ‘The sun isn’t yellow, it’s chicken’...doesn’t mean anything. The sky ain’t chicken! It's relentless and...fearless. The sun is fearless, so it doesn’t mean anything. (*Interviews*)

Chesnutt was intent that his lyrics would have meaning, where “every word is important.” When speaking of playing “Speed Racer” for his parents for the first time at church

as a teenager, Chesnutt later appears somewhat remorseful because “they were blubbering, crying...it broke their hearts...and they were never happy again--ever!” (*Interviews*). Yet he felt obliged to sing about it. On the song’s vocal track, Chesnutt stretches out syllables in a kind of primal southern drawl to emote the anguish of his rebellion against his religious upbringing:

I’m not a victim. I’m not a victim

Oh, I...I...I...I am an atheist. I am an atheist.

The idea of divine order is essentially crazy.

The laws of action and reaction

are the closest thing to truth in the universe,

so don't try to spray me with your archaic rites of soul.

Your vision is biological one.

I can dodge the thunderbolts

and scratch out an existence on this glorious but simple plain.

I’m not a victim. I’m not a victim

Oh, I...I...I...I am intelligent. I am intelligent (Chesnutt, *Little*)

In the song, “the closest thing to truth” lay in objective reasoning about our perceptions of those realities. When he writes that a vision based on faith in God is “biological,” he is emphasizing religion’s importance, less on a person’s individual faith and more in the context of an anthropological study of why peoples have needed religion throughout history; because he feels it helped us as a society to live together under a higher power or God and accept death as part of His will. Religious ceremonies cemented the bonds between people that allowed societies to exist and flourish. Religion is in our DNA, especially in the South. Chesnutt’s understanding of Christian faith was grounded in the notion that even though we as a species needed religion and

its “archaic rites of soul” to occupy the center of human existence at an earlier point in time, it was no longer necessary given modern man's triumphs through science and reason. His faith is devoid of original sin, where man is free to “scratch out an existence” on this earthly plain. “Speed Racer” depicts a modern world where death awaits without faith, and is, as he later writes, “free of hope/free of the past/Thank you God of Nothing/I'm free at last” (Chesnutt, *Is the Actor*).

Chesnutt's faith in a hopeless world represents his existential rope-a-doping with the God-fearing people around him in Georgia; like a prize fighter taking punches as long as possible until he can no longer stand. His life and songwriting were centered around his belief that “there is no original sin... I am not a victim. This is my faith. This is heavy-duty stuff” (*Interviews*). As he relates about writing “Speed Racer” in his interviews for the film:

I wanted to write a gospel song for atheists...

The first verse is talking about an epiphany in the classroom in college where I realized suddenly that “Dang, I'm the only atheist in here...Everybody's a freakin' Christian here, and at the time I was reading Kierkegaard. I was really into Kierkegaard at the time and existentialism was kind of blowing my mind. And I realized that human existence wasn't as dismal in my world as it was in Kierkegaard's Christian world...like the original sin... that humans are just born into this...Where you're a victim of the original sin. I am *not* a victim. There is no original sin and I'm scratching out beautiful existence. Atheism is a glorious worldview and very joyous. That's what “Speed Racer” is about. (*Interviews*)

The tenet of original sin in her Catholic faith was also an obsession for O'Connor in her works such as *Wise Blood*, as well as in her short stories such as “Good Country People” and “A

Good Man Is Hard To Find.” For her, everything in life centered around her Catholic faith, though “she sustained a complex relationship between her intellectual and religious life” (Coles 97). She paradoxically turns what most ordinary people around her would consider good decent Christians, such as the grandmother, into those in need of salvation by exposing their hypocrisy. They are condemned in her stories to ruthless acts of violence through which they achieve a “state of grace” or redemption. These epiphanies, undergone by the grandmother and Hazel Motes, are gained through the violent acts that lead to their deaths. For O’Connor, as Andrew Richardson writes in the Christian journal the *Times-Transcript*, sin was her:

great obsession. She writes about the sin of decent and upright people. Her stories reveal the hidden sin residing in the human heart...(They) seem grim and depressing and yet each holds out that redemption and grace are possible...God’s providence was realized not despite our sins but through them.

While Chesnutt's existential hopelessness echoes the secular Nietzschean cry that “God is dead!,” O'Connor’s work displays what Robert Coles terms in *Flannery O'Connor's South* “her Catholic existentialism” (Coles 93). She believes in a Kierkegaardian Christian ethic which calls for a total devotion to Christ, but this should not lead to a state of fulfillment or happiness. For her, a complete commitment to Christ is filled with anxiety, fear, and isolation. She sees the world as a place where man's original sin blinds him from his truthful condition in his natural state--kneeling before a God whose followers, such as The Misfit, tend to show no mercy. As Joyce Carol Oates writes in her 1966 article, “The Visionary Art of Flannery O'Connor:”

Kierkegaard...calls for a complete commitment to Christ. But this commitment is not to be in terms of a comfortable, joyous communion but in terms of personal anxiety. For to Kierkegaard, man's natural state is one of anxiety. Man is alone, isolated. The



world...blinds man to his real state, which is that of fear and trembling before God...

He rejects the modern, or pagan, notion that 'to be a man is to belong to a race endowed with reason'...The Kierkegaardian Christian, could he exist, would be a misfit in the world of man. Indeed, to be anything else but a misfit and an "individual" would be a betrayal of his destiny. (16)

A true Christian in O'Connor's fictional world, as Kierkegaard thought impossible in the real world, is depicted through the darkly comic character of *Wise Blood*'s Hazel Motes. Haze, as he is called in the novel, is a 22-year old returning to his small rural hometown of Eastrod, Tennessee, after an extended tour of duty in the army. He sees his house "in the dark the store boarded and the barn leaning...the porch gone and no floor in the hall" (O'Connor, *Wise* 101). Eastrod, representing the more traditional values of faith and community, was all but abandoned. Haze's faith was similarly stripped bare as a soldier by the cynicism of the others in his unit. The life and people he knew growing up were gone, and he was alone. So he caught a train to the city of Taulkinham. In the city, he encounters the trappings of the modern urban world. He consorts with a prostitute, and his days are spent trying to convince himself that the teachings of Christ he learned as a child were lies. In this endeavor, he decides to go public with his new beliefs and starts preaching from the hood of his new car to enlist people into his newly formed Church Without Christ. His epiphany occurs near the end of his life when he decides to repent and give up on his Church and his preaching that sin does not exist; that "Jesus was a liar" (O'Connor, *Wise* 101). He walks with broken glass in his shoes and blinds himself with quicklime in acts of redemption. Through his newfound faith in and acceptance of Christ, he even exposes, after his epiphany, "three strands of barbed wire, wrapped around his chest" to his flirtatious landlady Mrs. Flood, symbolizing the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the way to the cross" (O'Connor,

*Wise* 228). His Church Without Christ had been founded on the premise that His resurrection was a lie. "I believe in a new kind of Jesus," he said, "one that can't waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him" (O'Connor, *Wise* 119). But in the end he becomes the novel's heroic character through his final violent act of redemption, right before his death in the back of a squad car from a strike to the head from a policeman's club. Hazel Motes represents, as she stated to a friend in 1961, her Catholic firebrand of hard religion that "blindness can be a religious condition...(and that) faith is blindness" and only those who are blind can really see the truth of God's will (Coles 159). After Haze blinds himself through his ultimate act of faith in Christ, he says to the nose and eyeful Mrs. Flood, "mind your business. You can't see" (O'Connor, *Wise* 226).

O'Connor's "liberal religion", as she referred to it, echoes Kierkegaard's view that, as she wrote in a letter to a nun, "ideal Christianity doesn't exist, because anything the human being touches, even Christian truth, he deforms slightly in his own image. Even the saints do this. I take it to be the effects of Original Sin..." (Coles 98). It was not "the southern freaks," or outsiders like The Misfit or Hazel Motes that were the villains to be feared in her stories (Coles 131). The hypocrites of the urban industrialized modern world, what she sometimes referred to in her interviews as "men in gray flannel suits" (Magee 30), were the real threat to the South she loved. She was perhaps mentored by Faulkner, "on the decline of individual liberty...and of mass conformity and the intimidation that went with it." As Charles Reagan Wilson writes in *Flashes of a Southern Spirit: Meanings of the Spirit in the U.S. South*, Faulkner concurred with O'Connor that the worst danger of their time in the post-Industrial homogenized world was "the man in the gray flannel suit," not the outsiders and "grotesque" characters they worship in their work (78). They both railed against "the furious and immunized high priests' of America, the

theocratic celebrants of the civil religion, for 'bellowing the words and phrases' which had been emptied of meaning: "'Security.' 'Subversion.' 'Christianity.' 'Prosperity...'" (Wilson, *Flashes* 84). O'Connor's view of original sin in relation to Chesnutt's comes from an opposite vantage point, yet she would recognize the value of his writing "Speed Racer" when she writes, "the serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character. Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not" (O'Connor, *Mystery* 167).

If O'Connor had known Vic Chesnutt, born so close after her death right down the road, the Athens songster would have gained her admiration as a writer obsessed with original sin, though she would have kept him at a distance. As she wrote in a letter to a priest in 1959, "The Catholic finds it easier to understand the atheist than the Protestant, but easier to love the Protestant than the atheist" (Fitzgerald 341). The South is called the Bible Belt, and for good reason: because religion plays such a large role in the everyday lives of most who live there. As for the rest of America, O'Connor writes, "I don't believe that our present society is one whose basic beliefs are religious, except in the South" (O'Connor, *Mystery* 166). And for its writers, as Charles Wilson reiterates, it has been "a central theme in the creativity that emerged from many southern places and genres. Preachers, revivals, baptisms, church services, and other aspects of religious life are abiding topics in southern writing" (*Flashes* 129). O'Connor believed, as well, that the "the fact that the South is the Bible Belt is in great measure responsible for its literary preeminence" during her life (Magee 87). But the rural South she wanted to conserve was "under assault by the processes of industrialization," encroaching on the place she loved, and called home (Magee x).

## 2. The Sense of Place in Their Writing

On the heels of the release of *Little*, Chesnutt was starting to travel more, “so I wasn't so much fascinated by my rural past or these weird little youthful epiphanies like ‘Speed Racer’ or ‘Rabbit Box’ ...I was into seein’ the world and movin’ away from the South.” In a 1996 interview for *Rolling Stone*, he said, “I don't feel at home down here anymore” (Kemp 62–64). After his father died in 1990, he moved to Venice Beach, California, spurring him into one of his most prolific periods, and writing the songs for his next album, *West of Rome*. His obsession with religion and his rural southern stories were replaced by the themes Los Angeles exposed him to. In the song, “We Are Mean,” Chesnutt echoes O'Connor’s views on big city life, while also sharing her dark comic outlook on the rural characters, such as the grandmother, who “hear screams” in her stories:

In the city it is grey/in the country it is green.

In the country we are happy/In the city we are mean.

In the city we hear laughter/In the country we hear screams

In the city we are social/In the country we are mean.

And I declare that everywhere

We are mean, we are mean, we are mean.

I explain, we're all the same,

We are mean! We are mean! We are mean!

In the country we are healthy/In the city we are lean

In the country we are smiling/In the city we are mean. (Chesnutt, *Dark Developments*)

Chesnutt deconstructs the city/country dichotomy stressed by O'Connor. *Wise Blood*

displays her fears of the encroaching urban/ northern way of life. When Chesnutt writes “that everywhere we are mean,” he represents the post-South writer who grew up around developing suburbs and shopping malls. It was too late for southern writers like Chesnutt to stem the tide of urbanization from the rural South O’Connor had desperately hoped to preserve. But like O’Connor, he believed that “all fiction is about human nature,” which is universal. But the actual “subject matter has more to do with region...” (*Conversations*). What the people in their stories are feeling, the role of faith and how one comes to terms with death, are universal. But what people know, how they manifest those beliefs in their communities, comes from their sense of place. This is an important distinction in storytelling that both writers highlighted in their work.

In *Wise Blood*, Eastrod and Taulkinham are juxtaposed by O’Connor to display her feelings on the dangers of modern city life on her community, which for her thrived on faith and spirituality. Eastrod symbolizes the goodness of simple rural life without the carnal temptations kicking down doors in the big city. Shortening the name from “East Road,” O’Connor takes us down her path toward a rising sun, where the stabilizing light of Christ shines over the people of the small rural towns that still dominated the southern landscape. But Taulkinham, which lured the homeless drifters to the shadowed streets filled with prostitutes and con-men, was the place for “lost souls” who were more interested in man’s “stupid preoccupations” with commercialism and material over spiritual wealth.

The character of Enoch Emery highlights O’Connor’s yearning to conserve the religious life she cherished. He is an 18-year-old orphaned street urchin who latches onto Haze when he gets to the city. Enoch had only been in Taulkinham a few months, but relates to his unwilling friend “all they want to do is knock you down. I ain’t never been to such a unfriendly place before” (O’Connor, *Wise* 43). Indeed, the first warm hand “that had been extended to Enoch

since he had come to the city” was from a stranger dressed as an ape promoting a film at a local theater (O’Connor, *Wise* 181). In the following chapter, Enoch paradoxically kills the stranger in order to wear his gorilla costume. In Taulkinham, symbolizing Atlanta, all the characters are comically “grotesque,” and talk for the sole purpose of manipulating or conning people out of their money, especially the various “preachers” who come through town. One preacher con man, Asa Hawks, pretends he blinded himself to get money from people through selling potato peelers. And another, Hoover Shoats, attempts to rival Haze’s Church Without Christ to collect a quick dollar from gullible passers-by. They are all faithless—only Haze is blinded by the light at the very end--and occupy an urban place, which depicts O'Connor's vision of hell.

Chesnutt’s rejection of his rural southern past would be temporary. He would, after a few years in Los Angeles, yearn for his home in Georgia, and return to Athens in 1992. He was inspired to write the song “Expiration Day” for the second album with Widespread Panic (*Brute Co-balt*). In it, through the character of a machinist forced to work up North to support his family, he painfully longs to go “back down South,” and to reclaim his roots in the farm life he had known:

I’m a machinist in the Springfield Armory  
frankly ahead of my time. But I don't make much money,  
so I sell eggs and chickens on the side.

I’m good at what I do and I take great pride. But I don't  
make much money. So I sell eggs and chickens on the side.

And my wife does love me, but she can't realize

Why I won't move back down South and leave the armory behind (Brute *Co-balt*)

The paradox with Athens is that by the mid-1990s, it was morphing from the little southern college party town in which he came of age in the 1980s, full of life and artistic vision, into a much darker place. New York City's punk scene not only exported its music to Athens, but everything that came with it. And after the construction of Highway 316 in the mid-90s, Athens had a direct conduit to Atlanta. Within a few years, the small "bohemian enclave" of the previous decades was engulfed by Atlanta's rapid growth and development—O'Connor's hell was expanding outwards to the countryside unabated, just as she had predicted and feared (*Interviews*).

Living in Athens during this period was like being thrown into the abyss. No other southern college town experienced the darkness that clouded over Athens during this time. It was all about receiving "the call" from a local friend. When the phone rang on a Monday morning, it could only beg one question: So who overdosed or killed themselves last weekend? Was it Zack the roadie...or Joey the Second Baseman...or John Boy who just went to prison...or was it Vic? He wrote "Stupid Preoccupations" in Athens, a song "that was a funny way of saying that I was a drunk and a dope addict" (Chesnutt *Interviews with*), and as a lament on how much the music "scene" had crawled, seemingly overnight, into the shadows. As Chesnutt's producer John Keane states in the film, "we were all waiting for the call," about Chesnutt, because he especially was outspoken about his impending suicide, and had survived several failed attempts (*Interviews*). He expressed a darkly humorous outlook on death. As he stated with comic nihilism in interviews, "maybe I should just kill myself. Piss and get off the pot" (*Interviews*).

Of course, the urban exports O'Connor so feared had nothing to do with music scenes over thirty years after her death. The darkness she feared lay in an urban industrialized society

moving into the rural South and replacing its highly religious “solid rock” core with a materialistic and spiritual-less “medicated goo.” This fear represented the black cloud that was moving in and threatening her southern way of life through pushing out her notions of faith. But, like Chesnutt, her obsession with death and her dark comic spirit were prominent in her life and stories. In an interview for *Jubilee Magazine* in 1963, just before her death, she stated, “I’m a born Catholic and death has always been brother to my imagination” (qtd. in Magee 107). And she relates this to *Wise Blood* when she describes it as a “comic novel about *malgre lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death” (O’Connor *Mystery* 43).

O’Connor and Chesnutt were fully aware that death was always close at hand. She knew lupus would overtake her body in death, but her faith would save her soul. By 2008, he, on the other hand, was in the final stages of planning to take his own life. His album released earlier that year, *At the Cut*, was his “final breakup with death.” He tried through his music to find reason to live when he sang in “Flirted With You All My Life,” “Oh death, really I’m not ready” (Chesnutt *At the Cut*). But the paralysis in his hands got so bad he could barely play melodies with his fingers; he could only strum stiffly. He had recently divorced his wife and caregiver Tina. And his debt to the hospital was overwhelming him. Collection agencies were calling, and he was facing homelessness. After his final tour in support of the album, he tried to hang himself in early 2009.

Yet, he clearly struggled with atheism and death throughout his life. In the interviews conducted for the film, he confided about his song “Sad Peter Pan,” when in the end “I’m thinking I swear something’s gonna happen where I feel I’m about to crack a little bit...It’s a hope for redemption...I swear I’m gonna change” (Chesnutt *Is the Actor*). Then he writes in the song,



“a sad transformation/ I swear it will occur.” But he later states, it “didn't work out all. It didn't happen” (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). By Christmas Eve 2009, all hope was lost. And the people of Athens, as they were celebrating the birth of Jesus, yet again, got “the call.”

### 1. Their Use of the “Grotesque”

O'Connor's and Chesnutt's writings are steeped in the "grotesque," and sometimes autobiographical, portrayals. So many of O'Connor's characters, such as the grandmother or Hazel Motes, are killed under tragic circumstance at the end of her stories. Haze's death was directly due to the fact that, like Chesnutt, he was in debt. He owed money to the landlady Mrs. Flood, and before the policeman struck the final blow to his head, the final words Haze heard were "you got to pay your rent first...Ever' bit of it" (O'Connor *Wise* 235). Though the people in O'Connor's stories are comical, really bad things often happen to them. And this darkly comedic approach to storytelling defines "grotesque." Both writers scoffed at being labeled gothic writers (O'Connor *Mystery* 38). For O'Connor, the label simply did not apply to her Christian emphasis on faith. And for Chesnutt, the term had basically lost its meaning by the late 1990's because the Northern press, of whom O'Connor was so highly skeptical in her time, labeled just about everything that was southern "Gothic," even jam bands such as Widespread Panic.

The short story *Good Country People*, is partially autobiographical, for O'Connor, through the heroic figure Hulga Hopewell, and, like Hazel Motes and the grandmother, achieves her grace at their tale's end. Hulga legally changes her name from Joy because she was distraught from her deformity. Her leg had been shot off in a hunting accident at a young age, and replaced it with a wooden one. O'Connor was also disabled and barely able to walk from circumstance. And Hulga also was sickly and facing a shortened life, maybe until 45 years, according to her

doctor.

Hulga, whose last name foreshadows the hope O'Connor has for her through an epiphany, walks the line that leads to her redemption. A travelling Bible salesman and con artist using the false name of Manley Pointer enters the home, and for O'Connor, is the devil in disguise. Hulga, who has a PhD in philosophy, also represents the author's mistrust of intellectuals and lack of spiritual faith in favor of earthly trivialities. Hulga's mother echoes O'Connor's skepticism of pseudo-intellectuals when she says Hulga "was brilliant, but she didn't have a grain of sense" (O'Connor *the Complete* 270). Her spiritual blindness, and her mother's naiveté in her blind faith in Manley as "good country people," is used by the Bible salesman to get Hulga to remove her wooden leg and show it to him, which he then proceeds to steal from her and run off. Hulga, who proclaims "I don't even believe in God," represents the "grotesque" figure of a deformed, secular, and darkly comic woman in need of redemption (O'Connor *the Complete* 285). And O'Connor leaves the reader with the hope that she will find it through the final act of Manley, or the devil, stealing her leg, the symbol of her deformed spirit.

O'Connor preferred the use of the term "southern grotesque," in her essay "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" (O'Connor *Mystery* 43). As Jane Carter Keller writes in her dissertation, "The Comic Spirit in the Works of Flannery O'Connor," "the master of the grotesque is an artist who sees the beautiful from which the actual so often deviates, and at the same time a depth of ugliness to which the actual rarely sinks. This paradoxical view of the world leads the artist into a creation that will reflect...the abysmal truth of folly" (Keller 56). For O'Connor and Chesnutt, growing up and living in the South, what is "actual" and real is the starring role of religion in their lives and in those around them. The grotesque, through the eyes of her fanatical faith and his lack thereof, is a result of the fear and anxiety in their view of faith

and death. The two themes of Original Sin and death “are not only to be feared; they are also to be treated as ugly and unnatural, and the man who falls prey to the flagrant vices and so gives up his immortal soul is a frightening and ridiculous figure” (O’Connor *Wise* 94).

For O’Connor, the spiritual deformities she sees becoming more pervasive in the world around her are shown through the physical deformities of her characters. Everyone in Taulkinham, for example, could be called “grotesque.” They combine those very traits of the secular, the darkly comic, and physical deformity that apply to the works of O’Connor, as well as Chesnutt. In *Wise Blood*, the ridiculous antics of Enoch Emery combine all three traits. His latching on to the heels of Haze and his Church Without Christ sets up one of the most darkly comic scenes, lifted from her short story, “In the Heart of the Park.” While working at the zoo there, he discovers in the park’s museum a glass case a mummified “shrunken man...about three feet long. He was naked and dried yellow color and his eyes were drawn almost shut...” (O’Connor *Wise* 94). The mystery of this figure sent a foreboding through Enoch’s “wise blood” that something “was going to happen, but he hadn’t known what” (O’Connor *Wise* 129). His epiphany would come through stealing the shrunken man and presenting it to Haze “to take the place of Jesus” in the Church Without Christ (O’Connor *Wise* 140). The absurdly comic episode, ending with the mummy being simply tossed out a window, shows O’Connor’s use of “the grotesque” through Enoch. He has poor eyesight and is at least partially mentally retarded. He tries to replace a Christian faith in Jesus with a shrunken mummy, a gothic image of horror to most. In a later scene, from the short story “Enoch and the Gorilla,” where he murders the actor in the gorilla suit and sets out to frighten Taulkinham’s citizens, he is again portrayed through the absurdly dark humor of O’Connor.

Many of Chesnutt’s songs lurk in the grotesque such as “Isadora Duncan,” the ballerina

whose long flamboyant scarf got caught in a car wheel and choked her to death. She visits Chesnutt in a dream in which he fantasizes about their relationship, but she rejects him. The song “is very symbolic...where your fashion is your downfall, and so I was fascinated with that” (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). Writing “Isadora Duncan” was “a revelation” for Chesnutt, drawing “a clear line that separates my childhood songs “from the songs he started before reading, while laid up in the hospital, the works of poets such as Stevie Smith, whom he credits as his greatest influence on his songwriting (*Interviews*).

I wanted to have these deceptively sad-sounding songs that had humor in them...sneaky humor in my sad songs inspired by (Stevie Smith). Here was Isadora Duncan, who was a great artist. She said, “I’m not a dancer, I’m a poet.” She was a great thinker and innovator of the new collective communist world view in that she was an atheist. (Yet) her fashioned killed her. (Chesnutt, *Conversations with*)

The tragic irony of “Isadora Duncan” starts Chesnutt into his dark yet humorous songwriting, seen through the lens of his secular views (he was also a professed “commie” at a show he did on Wall Street). The theme of her rejection of the subject's love is autobiographical, and runs through many of Chesnutt’s lyrics, such as “Soft Picasso,” from his earlier albums (before his marriage to Tina at the Texas gas station) on the way home to Athens from Los Angeles. And the dancer’s religious and political stances were no doubt attractive to Chesnutt, as well.

Another humorously cynical take on religion, “Miss Mary,” off of *West of Rome* jokes about the birth of Jesus, and is “pretty heavy when you think about it. It’s about the Virgin Mary, and it's pretty much from Joseph's point of view” (Chesnutt *Interviews with*):

Miss Mary took a shower and she showed herself to me. She said that God and all his

glory was revealed to her carnally.

She said she'd been with no man, but she must have been with me. And when I felt her with my finger, the proof burned my belief. So how much can I stand, I'm just a mortal man... (Chesnutt *West of Rome*).

Joseph cannot understand how Mary became pregnant. So Chesnutt depicts what his own reaction to the news would be if he were in Joseph's sandals: "Look, you're pregnant! I don't know, it must've been me... I must've been drunk? Did I do you? And I don't remember? ... But you're still a virgin!" So it blows his mind. He was like, 'you went over my head. Bummer!'" (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). So Chesnutt, as Joseph as a blacked-out alcoholic, faces the rejection of Mary who carried the child of another whose prospects were far better.

Chesnutts most comprehensive use of the grotesque is plainly heard in the lyrics of "It Is What It Is," from his 2009 release, *At the Cut*, his final album. He combines all the elements that place his work in a southern gothic light, and is also autobiographical. He enlists deformed characters and his atheism to show himself as the outsider, the "grotesque" hero of the story of his life he sings about. When asked in one interview while lying in his bathtub about why he does not sing about his wheelchair, he relates, "all my songs are about being in a wheelchair. What rhymes with 'wheelchair' anyway?" (*Interviews*). In the song, he casts himself as the fictional "grotesque" characters and alienated beings with whom he shares so much in common. However, in the final chapter of his life, he sees "the looming blackness of death" as the dark comedy so pervasive in his earlier songs turns to solemnity. His death would be no laughing matter:

I am a monster like Quasimodo

Or Caliban the natural man

Giving Wild ripostes to my reflection.

One ugly morning in a rage

Father threw an apple into my carapace.

And like the invisible man directing traffic

I'd be ineffective no matter how enthusiastic.

Amid the masses' frenzy, participation

In this massive separation

Appearance is everything. Nothing is how it seems.

And civilized society is calm civility

I'm the phantom of the opera singing beauty and at ease

Or Henry Darger's autobiography

And that is curt clues to my essence

Planned obsolescence

Appearance is everything. Nothing is how it seems

In a market economy, it's called marketing

And not exactly clawing my way to glory

Nor whimpering in the wind. But once positively

I'm teetering on the brink of an all-out breakthrough

But sometimes clear-headed, sometimes a doofus.

Sometimes very cordial and sometimes aloof.

I am syrupy optimistic one moment

Then gravely pessimistic the next.

Irritable as a hornet sometimes, then agreeable as it gets.

I'm not a pagan. I don't worship anything.

Not Gods that don't exist nor the sun which is oblivious.

I love my ancestors, but not ritually.

I don't blame them or praise them

For anything that they passed along to me.

I don't need stone altars to help me hedge my bet

Against the looming blackness.

It is what it is. (Chesnutt, *At the Cut*)

All the characters actually reveal Chesnutt's infatuation with European gothic figures by relating them to his "grotesque" self-portraits in his songs. "It Is What It Is" contains all the elements of southern grotesque: the dark humor, the deformed characters, and the role of religion; and they all die young. Even the theme of his adoption is explored. In the first verse, he compares himself to Quasimodo, a hunchbacked orphan from the Victor Hugo novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), who is adopted by the archdeacon of Notre Dame, and named from Quasimodo Sunday, one week after Easter. His love is rejected by the beautiful Esmeralda, even after the famous scene where he rescues her from her hanging by swinging down on a rope

and taking her to the top of the Notre Dame Cathedral. He later escapes an angry mob that fears and hates him for his deformity, though he is kind. The deformed and misunderstood “monster” dies alone in a graveyard, clutching Esmeralda’s corpse.

Chesnutt then takes on the role of Caliban, the freckled monstrous son of an evil witch in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. He is depicted as deformed, pagan, half-human, who like Quasimodo, is misunderstood as an outsider trying to “scratch out an existence.” And when Chesnutt, in the same verse, refers to his father, who “threw an apple into my carapace,” he is revealing the influence of another of his existential heroes, Franz Kafka. Chesnutt relates himself to Gregor, the salesman who turns into a cockroach in *Metamorphosis*. A member of the arachnid family that has a shell on its back called a carapace, the cockroach squirming on his back, unable to even stand on his feet and having “scraps of food” thrown at him, is a dark and powerful image for Chesnutt. Again, Gregor is deformed, faithless, and “grotesque” in the true gothic splendor that Chesnutt adorned in his lyrics. He then comically compares himself to the invisible man directing traffic, an absurd image of pure hopelessness in the face of good intentions.

In the chorus, he sings “Appearance is everything/ Nothing is how it seems” to depict his outsider status, where the deformed are alienated and misunderstood simply because of the way they look. As Victoria Williams, a singer/songwriter who worked extensively with Chesnutt, and was confined to a wheelchair from her bout with multiple sclerosis, so eloquently states in her interview for the film, “no one looks at you when you're in a wheelchair. It’s strange” (*Interviews*). That alienation partly leads to Chesnutt’s dark outlook, which conjoins his brand of humor.

The Phantom of the Opera is the next tragic grotesque figure Chesnutt imagines himself



as in the song. A deformed organist and musical genius whose love is rejected by the young singer Christine whom he tutors, the phantom discards his mask to reveal his true monstrous face. He is misunderstood and alienated through his deformity from his society, and outcast into the sewers below the Paris Opera House. His frustration and despair from Christine's and the world's rejection leads him to his tragic death. And then Chesnutt, in the same verse mentions Henry Darger, an American-born writer and painter from the early 20th century who was orphaned and institutionalized at a young age. Chesnutt relates his feelings of isolation from society to Darger's, though he really was not so crazy, just autistic. He was also a fanatically prolific writer, churning out hand-written autobiographical manuscripts over 15,000 pages long. He had tried many times to adopt a child, but authorities rejected his requests. Children inspired his paintings, but the images were grotesquely violent, such as the portrait of a five-year-old murder victim and others of children being tortured. Like Chesnutt, Darger, in his book, *In The Realms of the Unreal*, views the world as cruel and Godless. Yet, as in much of O'Connor's work, he portrayed those who suffer, representing the children from the asylum of Darger's youth as heroic martyrs, whose violent murders can be seen as the redemptions O'Connor's characters achieved through their early deaths.

Chesnutt admits that in his childhood "I was a racist until I got to be a certain age, when I realized that that wasn't how it was" (Chesnutt *Interviews with*). And though he does not emphasize race in his songwriting, this crucial southern theme is explored in certain songs like "Woodrow Wilson," about a girl he knew from Athens whose father resembled the former president. In the song, Chesnutt is inspired by the girl when "she said her brother wished he was a negro/went to school in African American Studies/Once he had a picture taken with Adam Clayton Powell" (Chesnutt *The Salesman*). This portrayal of a southern man which shunned the

racial bigotry of the South is reminiscent of one of O'Connor's characters in her short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

Julian is a young writer in the story that takes place in the South during the early 1960s, as racial integration was becoming a fact of southern life. He is the arrogant liberal, college-educated son of a racist mother who longs for the days of segregation where white supremacy was the accepted norm. But as she rides an integrated bus with Julian, a black woman, symbolically wearing an identical purple velvet hat to the mother, boards with her young son who sits next to Julian's mother. Julian, whose paternalistic (what we today call "knee-jerk liberal") meddling annoys a black man trying to read the newspaper, is paradoxically copying his mother's condescending behavior when she tries to give the black woman's son "a bright new penny for you" after they got off the bus. The black woman was so insulted that she shouted "in frustrated rage... 'He don't take nobody's pennies!'" (O'Connor *the Complete* 418).

Julian tells his mother, after being stricken by the woman with her pocketbook, that "that was your black double... from now on you've got to live in a new world and face a few realities for a change. Buck up... it won't kill you" (O'Connor *the Complete* 41). Then his mother falls on the pavement and dies from the woman's blow. But the rise and convergence of southern blacks into white society, and the resulting conflicts, is only part of the story O'Connor is trying to relate. Like Chesnut, she was detached from the issues of race though they each acknowledged them in their writing. As Miles Orvell writes, her concern in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" was less:

with uncovering the tensions in race relations... than with uncovering the self-deceptions and evasions that keep us from recognizing our identities... Julian's entry at the end... is thus not into the world of the rising Negro, but, rather, (as O'Connor writes at the end)

‘into the world of guilt and sorrow.’” (10)

Chesnutt also refers to his “whitey-boy guilt” in the song “Vesuvius,” as he streams the consciousness of his early childhood, before changing his racist notions (Chesnutt *Ghetto Bells*). Though the large majority of his work steers clear of race, it cannot be ignored if he is to be considered a southern gothic writer. In “It Is What It Is,” Chesnutt uses the grotesque and macabre elements that are essential to southern gothic writing to offer a self-portrait in his hopeless world of sorrow. The role of religion in his life and work, as shown in the songs “Speed Racer” and “Free of Hope” is also a major theme that places his work in the southern gothic movement, which is clearly shown when compared with Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. And Chesnutt’s rural Georgia upbringing, depicted in his songs off *Little*, such as “Rabbit Box” and “Danny Carlisle,” both inspired and haunted him. After his car wreck, which was his epiphany as a songwriter, he found a bohemian oasis in Athens where he could delve into these southern gothic themes through his lyrics. And due to Athens, fate intervened when Michael Stipe’s fascination with the southern gothic writing of Flannery O’Connor collided with Chesnutt’s songwriting at the 40 Watt club.

Chesnutt's gothic self-portraits are certainly mired in the “grotesque,” but he uses characters from popular culture, not southern culture, in “It Is What It Is.” In the final verses, he relates these figures to his own life and family, and his rejection of their religion. Though he loves them, he does not “need stone altars” or “Gods that don't exist.” And with his final breath on Christmas, 2009, perhaps the faith of those who surrounded him will turn his tragic end into the kind of epiphany that O’Connor required for his final state of grace, and his redemption in the very afterlife he believed never existed.

## CONCLUSION

### *INTERVIEWS WITH VIC CHESNUTT: AN OVERVIEW*

The opening segment to *Interviews with Vic Chesnutt* could be called, just as the Introduction to this paper, “Romancing Vic Chesnutt.” It sets the stage for relating his life and songwriting through the use of title cards which showcase the kind of critical acclaim Chesnutt received from the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express*, and *NPR*. These quotes were chosen in particular because they establish the notion of Chesnutt as “one of our greatest modern songwriters,” while also placing him within the context of southern writers such as William Faulkner (Kemp). Chesnutt’s “darkly comic songs” are a reflection of Chesnutt’s life, and the interview segments with those he had worked with such as Ian Mackaye, Billy Bob Thornton, Jonathon Richman, and Shirley Manson were chosen to portray his uniqueness as an artist (*Interviews*). As Mackaye states right at the outset, “nothing else sounded like Vic.” And Thornton describes Chesnutt's music as just “a feeling” outpouring from the raw emotion in his writing and his sound. The song “Look At Me” leads the film into its next segment focusing on Chesnutt’s childhood. When Chesnutt sings “I’m still alive... You may see me as a tragic figure/ but one frivolous moment I beg to differ/ I’m still alive,” it is juxtaposed with the previous

mention of his suicide by Mackaye (Chesnutt *Left to*). And although Chesnutt's story can be viewed as tragic, his music and his humor throughout the film are so uplifting that, whether the viewer is a fan or is being introduced to him for the first time, *Interviews with Vic Chesnutt* allows us all to enter into the dark corners of his mind and paradoxically find the humor there. In the film, while tracing his path to his suicide, he has the viewers laughing along with him to the very end. And with the use of NPR's listing Chesnutt as one of the top five greatest living songwriters in 2006 alongside Dylan, Waits, McCartney, and Springsteen, romancing his legacy through his songwriting would set the film in motion (Hilton).

David Byrne of the Talking Heads is the perfect choice for the first interview, conducted during his show *Sessions*, to begin the body of the film with Chesnutt's childhood. In this segment, Chesnutt talks about the prevalence of music in his family. His grandmother and grandfather wrote songs together, and Chesnutt's first song, written when he was five, is ironically called "God," which forebodes his later conversion to atheism. In the interviews with Chesnutt that guide the film's content, he mentions the huge influence of his "Granny" on his life and music. As noted in Chapter Two, "she wins the prize for inspiring the most Vic Chesnutt songs." As the film moves into the song about her, she, like so many southern grannies, is "making up some pimento cheese" (*Interviews*). She had also written songs, mostly about the places she had known such as Waycross, Georgia, and Jacksonville. The refrain of "Granny" where he sings of her telling him "you are the light of my life and the beat of my heart" is the most touching part of the film, largely because of his visceral style of vocal phrasing which is heard throughout (Chesnutt *At the Cut*).

The film then moves to the theme of his adoption, which he wrote about in the song "Gepetto." His sister Lorinda Crane, who was also adopted, was interviewed but she refused to

be shown on film, so pictures of Chesnutt's childhood are shown over her remarks. He associates himself with Pinocchio, the adopted puppet who turns into a boy, and was a childhood fascination for Chesnutt growing up. The song “Danny Carlisle,” as discussed in the second chapter of the paper, “Vic Chesnutt and the Southern Writer,” was one of his favorite childhood stories about “the retarded kid” he fought in Pike County Georgia Middle School. He describes himself as “the evil ogre,” and relates how it was “a powerful event” for him growing up (*Interviews*).

Todd McBride is enlisted to take the film into Chesnutt’s high school years when they met and started a band, The Screaming Id. McBride was Chesnutt’s earliest mentor into discovering new music and pursuing songwriting, which would soon lead them to travel to the “bohemian enclave” of Athens, Georgia. Kevin O’Neill, who would become Chesnutt’s manager, met him at the famed Wuxtry Record Store where R.E.M. met years earlier, and got to know him soon after “when he was downtown protesting the existence of God” (*Interviews*). The role of religion in Chesnutt’s life and his conversion to atheism are paramount to the film, and discussed through “Speed Racer,” his “atheist gospel song.” Patterson Hood of the Drive-By-Truckers shows how important an issue atheism is in their home state of Georgia when he talks about Chesnutt telling his Granny about being an atheist: “I cry just thinking about it; that’s some intense heavy stuff” (*Interviews*). And Chesnutt’s parents also started “blubbering crying” when Chesnutt first played “Speed Racer” at his church, and went into the chorus, “I’m not a victim. I am an atheist.” The irony of his car wreck happening on Easter Sunday sets the transition to the next scene of Chesnutt at the hospital, and the powerful footage of him there with Granny in the background.

Being so “close to the edge of death...every day for two months” catapults Chesnutt into

the darkness that would consume his life and work from then on (*Interviews*). It was his time in the hospital “that changed my lyrics.” As David Pisner from *Spin* magazine shares, “he had all this pent up energy...and when he broke his neck, that energy had to go someplace else.” The car wreck became his epiphany because from that point writing became a duty or a calling for Chesnutt. In documenting the works of Chesnutt and the other southern writers discussed in the paper, this sense of obligation became a recurring theme. Being confined to a wheelchair, as singer/songwriter M. Ward relates in the film, “he really devoted his life toward songwriting. He looked at songwriting very much as a duty.” For O’Connor, her, “vocation... was an internal spiritual calling,” which she felt was “a gift; it’s God’s gift” (Orvell 74). Every morning she awoke early on the farm run by her mother outside Milledgeville and fed her peacocks (an ancient symbol of Christ) and would religiously write “three hours, but consistently cautioned that there is no magic formula. The writer writes because it is a necessity, a calling” (Coles 70). As Richard Gilman wrote for the *New York Review of Books of Mystery and Manners*, “no writer I’ve known had such devotion to her art, felt so much a conduit rather than a source...” which for her flowed from her faith (qtd. in Magee 57). Chesnutt’s shares her sense of duty to write, though his source came from the darkness within him after he broke his neck. Perhaps the mortality that stared them in the face each morning egged on this calling to write. As Mackaye notes, Chesnutt “was a pathological songwriter. It was weird” (*Interviews*). And then Thornton drives home the point that “there’s something about writers from the South...It’s just in the DNA, I don’t know what it is. People in the South know how to tell a story.” This section on Chesnutt as a southern songwriter leads to the song that would separate his work before the wreck from what came after: “Isadora Duncan.” Her neck was broken when her long flowing scarf got caught in a moving car wheel. His songs would use either fictional characters and media figures in popular

culture, such as Louis Farrakhan, or the people he knew with whom he felt a shared experience.

And then Chesnutt moves to Athens. Though the film documents briefly “the different world of Athens,” the first chapter “Why Athens?” of the paper expands upon the sense of place and geography of “the tattered little town,” and its large influence on Chesnutt, and on the world stage of popular music. In Athens, when Chesnutt plays his songs solo one night at the 40 Watt club downtown, and Michael Stipe brings him into the studio to record his first album *Little*, “my real career started” (*Interviews*). Again, the film shows the relationship between Chesnutt’s writing and his rural southern upbringing in songs like “Rabbit Box” and “Speed Racer.” And he starts to develop his singing style, which as he describes, “walks the fine line between singing and speaking” (*Interviews*). The example used from the song “Sponge,” where he stretches out the word “world,” epitomizes this style. One of the most important reasons for telling Chesnutt’s story through a documentary film is that there is simply no way to describe in words the conjoined bond between his writing and his voice, though John Jay Sullivan in *The Oxford American* came as close as it could get.

The film briefly mentions Chesnutt’s influences, and there is a nod to Faulkner and O’Connor, relating his work to theirs that is explored more in-depth in the paper. For Chesnutt, they “portrayed the South in a way that I was not going to do” (*Interviews*). He felt that his work “was a reaction to them,” as a writer who reflected what Rodger Lyle Brown called the “post-South” fraught with the suburban evils of fast food chains and shopping malls which Chesnutt’s predecessors feared. Yet Chesnutt shares so much else with Faulkner and especially O’Connor, such as the role of religion in his youth, his sense of place and geography as a Georgia writer in Athens, and his use of the “grotesque” in his fiction. It was important to set his place both together and apart from his peers from the “southern gothic” table before moving on to his flight



to Los Angeles.

He enters an extremely prolific period of writing, as well as drinking, out West, where he would create the songs for his second album *West of Rome*. Before passing out one night, he penned “Lucinda Williams,” which is chosen for the film because it reflects a greater sense of melody than before on *Little*, and the haunting lyrics that would define his work going forward. L.A. was “a very creative time” in Chesnutt’s life (*Interviews*). But his yearning for home took him back to Athens, and on the way, at a “truck stop in Dallas,” he marries Tina, who would become his bass player. The song “Rabbits Cooking Breakfast” relates his feelings about his marriage, which was an uplifting epiphany in his life. “Everything changed,” Chesnutt says, and “everybody was kind of shocked...nobody expected me to get married” (*Interviews*). In the song, the fog of his life clears, “and turns fragrant” for him, “the disgusting vagrant” outsider, who leaves the confines of his wheelchair to enter into the most “normal” and allegedly happiest of institutions: marriage. He is no longer at this brief point of the film the tragic figure of the tattered existential songwriter. He is deeply happy. Love will do that sometimes.

Then Chesnutt goes on tour for three months with Bob Mould, former singer for post-punk pioneer Hüsker Dü. Nothing has the potential to shed light and let the darkness cloud back over one’s life more than the road. The film abruptly shifts to this period, where his mind shifts “into a real dark place,” and he takes it to the stage to “torture the audience” (*Interviews*). He solos dissonantly with his teeth for 45 minutes or longer, spits at his audience, and rants and raves about anything he can think of. He wanted his audience to feel “uncomfortable,” and in succeeding, he began the habit of sabotaging his career. The story told by Sam Mixon about Chesnutt’s run-in with Allen Ginsberg sets up one of the best punch lines in the film. When Chesnutt seeks a bonding solace in the fact that all the great writers “of our generation” were

drunks, Ginsberg turns on him: “Dude, we’re all sober now.”

The original intention was to interview Chesnutt about all his songs, and in January of 2010, Scott Stuckey and I were to spend a month in Athens discussing all his later albums, 18 in all, but his suicide forced us to focus on his first two, *Little* and *West of Rome*. His earliest work highlighted most of his southern upbringing and those themes discussed in the third chapter on faith and death. The songs on *West of Rome* “are well polished,” and as Mackaye states, “he could sing almost anything, and it would work” (*Interviews*). This is the point where Chesnutt’s lyrical wordplay and vocal inflections emote the power of language that became his obsession as a writer. And this is why no other writer “sounded like Vic.” While others try to fit the words into the melodies of their songs, Chesnutt “can sing anything and shove it anywhere” (*Interviews*). He stretches out “syllables for dramatic effect,” and the songs off *West of Rome*, such as when he is shown singing “little, little Miss Muffitch,” reflect that (*Interviews*). When Sam Seawright said that “he was exaggerating this southern speech pattern,” it supports the emphasis of Chesnutt’s sense of place as a southern writer. The way he “stretches the ‘oo’ in Chattanooga is great, as Patterson Hood tells it (*Interviews*). Chesnutt, according to M. Ward, “didn’t have these limitations that mere mortals have” as songwriters because of the way he could play with syllables and words.

Being confined to a wheelchair made Chesnutt “different from all other musicians,” and casts Chesnutt as the outsider peeping through the keyhole at mainstream musical success (*Interviews*). But that did not stop him from trying, and he almost succeeded if not for the penchant for self-sabotage he carried with him. He was “sweatin’ it out in the hotseat” of his wheelchair, and in the film’s attempt to get the audience to empathize with his plight, Victoria Williams’ (handicapped from Multiple Sclerosis) poignant interview is most revealing, when she

says, “when you're in a wheelchair you see what people go through. A lot of people won't look at you when you're in a wheelchair. They walk by and they won't look at you... It's a strange strange thing” (*Interviews*). Though being in the chair defined Chesnutt's image, “that voice went way beyond that wheelchair.”

Then Chesnutt, after the release of *West of Rome*, “gets a taste of this weird celebrity” (*Interviews*). He went from being a “bum to a dude with a fax machine,” and gains fame through the *Sweet Relief* album in which mainstream artists from Madonna to R.E.M. to Smashing Pumpkins recorded his songs. After his appearance in Thornton's *Sling Blade*, Chesnutt gets signed to Capitol Records, and releases his career ambitions “which I'd never felt before” (*Interviews*). Suddenly the film confronts the question why a guy in a wheelchair could not become a rock star? And with Chesnutt, there is no real answer anymore. He had “a taste of success, and I wanted the Grammy!” He could have had it, too, but while on tour supporting *Is the Actor Happy?*, he disappears and gets dropped from the label. Without Capitol, mainstream success would be almost impossible. As Thornton says, “he's still a guy I have to explain to somebody who he is when I hand him the record.”

Being dropped from Capitol “was in no way the end for Vic.” At this stage he turns from a prolific to a “pathological songwriter,” churning out a number of songs that would require volumes of tattered notebooks. And he begins to record with local Athens bands on his next albums. Collaborations with Lambchop, Elf Power and the Amorphous Strums, and Widespread Panic are briefly discussed before going into the final section of the film, which depicts the paradox of Chesnutt's bout with depression and suicide and his “love of laughter and humor” (*Interviews*). All those who knew him express their desire to let people know that working with him “was not a downer.” Indeed, you could be “wallowing in the misery with him, and you

would be laughing” (*Interviews*). His dark humor slaps the audience when he sings, “You have one friend who’s fighting cancer/and one friend who's into feet...sexually” (Chesnutt *Skitter*). As M. Ward says, he had the ability “to take a subject to a very dark place, and you realize it’s actually a set up for a punchline” (*Interviews*). He “sneakily” mixes “pathos with comedy” to achieve his goal of making people both laugh and cry, and even with the tragic last minutes of the film leading to his suicide, Chesnutt still has this strange ability to make the audience feel uplifted, for reasons that are difficult to comprehend. But why try? This is a case where, in making a documentary film, it just takes on a life of its own, and the filmmakers just have to go along with it though there are sometimes no explanations.

As Thornton states, “some of the most beautiful things in the world come out of pain, and...Vic tapped into that” with *At the Cut*, Chesnutt’s final album (*Interviews*). He had attempted suicide three or four times, and the song “Flirted with You All My Life” would be his “breakup song with death,” as he openly sings about his depression and suicide. The humor fades on this album, which reveals the despair and hopelessness he was feeling at this juncture in 2008–2009. Recorded with Montreal band Thee Silver Mount Zion, Chesnutt goes on the road with them to support the record, and his bout with self-sabotage went into remission. He was professional, the band was tight, and Chesnutt was in a positive state of mind. But right after the tour ends “Vic’s struggle with depression starts up again” (*Interviews*). A week later, he tries to hang himself, but fails, and he agrees to seek help at a facility in Atlanta. His most heart-wrenching song about death, “Free of Hope,” is the soundtrack for Chesnutt’s final days, as trouble with insurance and his mounting debt pile the tonnage on top of his depression. He went into a “place so dark, it is unimaginable.” Yet, Chesnutt manages to find a grain of Abilify-induced humor on Stuckey’s answering machine the night before he plies himself with muscle

relaxers in his final act: “Now I’m HAPPY...so great. If I had a shotgun in my mouth I’d probably try to fuck it!” (*Interviews*).

Yet Chesnutt was “not a victim,” and he managed to “scratch out his existence” through the pain and the beauty. Many of those who have ever been inspired by his work have become devoutly loyal followers, which this film and paper seek to expand. The irony that envelops the film, of course, is that after pronouncing his disbelief in God and the concept of original sin, his epiphanies of his car wreck and suicide occurred on Easter and Christmas. His primal scream at the end of “Free of Hope,” before he jokingly says “you can all clap now,” symbolically releases all the anguish that had built up within him through his life, and channels it through the hearts and souls of the audience, releasing our angst in the process (*Chesnutt Is the Actor*). And then those that knew and loved him around Athens and beyond got “the call” on Christmas Day. The song “Degenerate” is his most haunting melodically and lyrically, which is why it is used as Chesnutt’s final requiem for *Interviews with Vic Chesnutt*.

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