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CHASING THAT GHOST ON STAGE: THE HAUNTED CONTINENT AND ANDREW
BIRD'S APOCRYPHA

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

M.E. LASSETER

May 2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the various physical and metaphorical journeys south of Chicago musician Andrew Bird. Using what historical record is publicly available, I examine Bird's formal musical training. I then explore the years between 1995 and 2001, or what I call Bird's period of apprenticeship. Next is an exploration of the canonical narratives surrounding the blues of the Mississippi Delta, especially the music of Charley Patton. When Andrew Bird encountered a canon, or dominant histories and meanings of Southern music that influence how musicians play and how audiences interpret that music, he began to react against that canon in his own compositions and performances. Next I investigate this notion of a canon of Southern music with particular attention paid to Bird's album *Armchair Apocrypha* (2007) – apocrypha being narratives that exist alongside a canon. I also address certain technological shifts in Bird's performance methodologies in this time period that further the reach of Bird's apocrypha. I look at Bird's recent engagement with gospel music, where Charley Patton raises his head again, and argue that Bird adopts a gospel-inflected performance model that invites an invisible third, or a ghost, into the relationship between performer and audience. Using the work of Avery Gordon and Joseph Roach, I argue that Bird has taken on a condition of haunting in his recent recordings and performances, that his performances are spaces for his audiences to take on a similar condition of haunting, and that his performances are about, among other things, encountering and learning to live with the deep, unspeakable trauma of the colonization of the New World. I end with a forecast, looking at Bird's recent work in light of these patterns of haunting, and

suggesting some themes to keep track of in Bird's work – including Bird's symbolic return to Chicago in light of his journeys south.

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The ghosts that haunt your building are prepared to take on substance.
- John Darnielle

There are no trivial rituals.
- Joseph Roach

"I have not asked your name, sir, nor offered mine."

"Ci Gît," he said. "Monsieur Ci Gît -- a big family, a common name."

When he went away I felt a sweetness like music, if music could pleasure the skin with a little chill.
- John Steinbeck, *Travels With Charley*

INTRODUCTION

The view from Evanston

Wearing a heavy bag to tote various research materials, I stood on the campus of Northwestern University on June 14, 2012, and looked up at the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall. The Pick is a boxy-looking building dating to the mid-1970s. Its lower floor is all recessed glass, with the mezzanines upward constructed of concrete painted beige. The front of the building faces southeast. Emerging from the glass and concrete building onto the well-manicured traffic roundabout provides an unobstructed view of Lake Michigan. In summer, the lake is a glacial blue-green color, while the color of the sky goes deeper, and the breeze off the water is a welcome counterpart to the sun's warmth – a boon for the weary scholar who'd spent all afternoon in the music library.

There's a traffic roundabout in front of the Pick, giving access to the front of the building as well as the other fine arts buildings on either side. I walked from the front of the building onto the front lip of the roundabout, let my imagination run away with me – and stumbled onto a useful way to think about my afternoon's work.

Imagine standing just in front of the Pick in the center of the roundabout, your back to the hall, facing the lake. Imagine standing there with your eyes closed, feeling the breeze and the sunlight. Imagine opening your eyes to see the green lawn, the primordial expanse of Lake Michigan, and the deep blue, cloudless sky. And then look a little further south, where Chicago sits on the shore, as an interruption, or an intervention.

The area immediately around Northwestern University, in the town of Evanston, Illinois, is ordered and manicured. The houses, the lawns, and the speed limits seemed to me to be aggressively suburban. City of Evanston beaches cost money to enjoy; City of Chicago beaches, ten minutes south, are free. Few buildings in Evanston exceed four stories; the northern reaches of Chicago are chock-a-block with high-rise apartment buildings. Evanston is a town for intellectuals, families, and intellectual families – those who can pay \$8 per person to spend an afternoon on the beach in June 2012.

The space to the south along the lake shore is an intervention. It is difference. It is racially and socioeconomically diverse. To gaze upon Chicago from Evanston is to see a place of unknowns, where you might or might not be able to make a place for yourself, but you'll never know unless you make the decision to leave the world of Evanston and experience Chicago as an intervention.

This is a story about a musician from the North Shore, who was trained in Evanston, who looks south. This is a story about what he sees, and what he chooses to do. His name is Andrew Bird.

Bird was born in Illinois in 1973. While his family had roots in the western part of the state, just across the Mississippi River from Iowa, Bird grew up on the North Shore of Chicago, graduating from Lake Forest High School in 1991. He graduated from Northwestern University in 1995 with a bachelor of music degree in violin performance. Between 1995 and 2001, Bird played in a number of bands, most of which were headquartered in Chicago, all of which played music for popular audiences. While Bird's training is in classical music, the music he played (and wrote) between 1995 and 2001 encompassed many different varieties of jazz, blues, pop, and folk; this is the kind of music he put out as the bandleader of Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire for

a three-record deal with Rykodisc. Between 2001 and 2005, Bird's approach to composition and performance changed drastically, thanks to the addition of looping pedals, effect pedals that allow Bird to play a line of music and then stack successive lines on top of the first line. On stage (and on his records) he switched, and switches, between violin, guitar, glockenspiel, vocals, and whistling. One of a bare handful of male artists signed to the label, Bird put out two albums on Ani DiFranco's Righteous Babe Records. By 2007, Bird had transformed into a musician whose work was successfully marketed as indie rock, indie pop, indie folk, and baroque pop, which also marks the start of Bird's four years with Fat Possum Records of Oxford, Mississippi: Bird put out three albums on Fat Possum before moving to Mom + Pop Records, which is his record label as of this writing in spring 2013.

Bird is best known for this baroque pop and indie folk music. His broader recognition (which for better or worse has meant economic success) allows him to experiment. In the last three years, Bird has had installations at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Guggenheim in New York called "Sonic Arboretum," collaborations with Ian Schneller, who builds Bird's custom horn speakers. Bird scored a film, and wrote songs for the rebooted Muppet movie.¹ He has also started to work with contemporary African music and alongside contemporary African musicians.² He splits his time between Chicago and New York.

This thesis is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree in Southern Studies. One might wonder what's southern about Andrew Bird. It's not that he plays acoustic music that contains a few blue notes (though he does) or writes songs inspired by the 2010 Deepwater

¹ The film is *Norman* (2010), directed by Jonathan Segal. The Muppet movie is *The Muppets* (2011), with Jason Segel. When Walter whistles at the end of the Muppet Show telethon in the film's climax, that is actually Andrew Bird – including the backing orchestra.

² He's worked recently with the music of Konono N°1 and Sobanza Mimanisa from the Democratic Republic of the Congo for a 2010 compilation record called *Tradi-Mods vs. Rockers: Takes on Congotronics* (Crammed Discs) and collaborated on stage at the 2011 Edmonton Folk Festival with Etran Finatawa, a Nigerien band combining Western instruments with traditional Tuareg and Wodaabe music.

Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico (though he does).³ Bird's career history and musical output rest upon physical, metaphysical, and metaphorical journeys south from his home base of Chicago. These journeys, I argue, have an impact on Bird's more recent music. In return, Bird's work can, and does, provide ways to question dominant narratives and received understandings about forms of music (and history, and politics, and social life) often thought of as southern.

On that June afternoon in Evanston, which I'd spent sifting through the historical record for signs of his presence, I took an additional leap: I imagined Bird doing what I'd just done. I imagined him emerging from the front doors of the Pick, crossing the road, and looking south at the city. In my narrative, Bird's gaze carried with it desire for just such an intervention – a chance to step into other worlds that lived within the Chicago city limits, to try those worlds out until he found something more satisfying.

I don't know if Bird ever actually did anything like this – emerging from the Pick with a violin case slung over his back like my own bag slung over mine, walking toward the lake to get a better view of the Chicago skyline, thinking about what other worlds might exist to the south. But I've found this act of looking south for answers to be a useful way to consider Andrew Bird's music – because he keeps doing it. This narrative starts with a way to think about Bird's work: looking south. It also starts with a physical act of looking south – the view from Evanston, looking south to Chicago. From Chicago, Bird looks south again, tracing the Great Migration back to Mississippi, to New Orleans, and to what we might think of as Plantation America.

This narrative is one that I have crafted. While it is not necessarily at odds with the personal narrative that Bird has crafted for himself – and there are many places where his narrative and mine converge and cross over – Bird's own narrative and my narrative have different goals. We construct them for different purposes. Bird's narrative has more to do with

³ That'd be "Hole in the Ocean Floor," on *Break It Yourself* (2012).

public relations, the purpose being to construct a saleable tale that colors in enough details about why Bird is the way he is, to give customers enough of an explanation to buy what he sells, while still maintaining some sense of privacy. This is not a bad thing; this is a fact of the business Bird is in. At the end of 2012, Andrew Bird is a successful working musician, with ten full-length studio albums to his credit, even more EPs and short self-releases, and a robust yearly tour schedule.⁴ Bird doesn't only have a family to support; he also has various employees, including light, sound, and instrument technicians, a manager, a publicist, and at times a supporting band, not to mention transportation costs, the requirements of the record labels that promote and release Bird's work where applicable, and splitting ticket revenues with venues and the opening acts. Few musicians make enough money to sustain these kinds of operations, and if narrative is a tool in Team Bird's possession, that narrative means keeping many people in creative work that allows them to keep roofs over their heads.

My narrative originates from the audience's position – the consumer to Bird's producer. While what follows uses the tools and methods of scholarship – data collection and analysis, construction of arguments informed by cultural theory and investigation of primary and secondary sources – the genesis of my work comes from listening to Bird's music and watching his performances. I am interested in the patterns I have found in Bird's work, in how those patterns came to exist, what those patterns might mean, and what matters about what those patterns might mean. The patterns I see in Bird's work all have to do with this metaphorical look south, from the North Shore and Evanston to Chicago, and from Chicago even further south.

There are two important principles to keep in mind for what follows. First, while Bird's discography serves as the organizational linchpin for my chronology and analysis, I regard Bird's albums as units of compressed thought – thought that develops over months and years. Bird

⁴ The cutoff date for my look at Andrew Bird's work is December 31, 2012. I don't discuss anything after that.

frequently revisits topics, themes, songs, and ideas, drafting and redrafting, presenting and representing. Though these ideas continue to reappear in Bird's work, they never reappear the same way twice. As such, the album and its component parts become useful rhetorical nails on which to hang an argumentative hat, since Bird apparently felt enough confidence in that work to release and promote it through his own performances and through his relationships with other entities in the music industry. Fixed points are useful for someone doing critical work, but when it comes to Bird, who is still an active musician, these fixed points are not necessarily Bird's last word on any given subject.

The second principle is that while Bird may be actively aware of the patterns in his work that I'm writing about here, I don't assume that he is aware of them – and I don't think it matters very much whether he's aware of them, either. Put another way, I'm invoking death of the author prior to any critical discussion of Bird's music. I think it's likely that Bird may see some of these patterns, and he may intentionally place them in his work, but I also don't think that he's constructing a scavenger hunt for a proto-scholar (or super-fan) to solve while twirling a mustache, Snidely Whiplash-style. The patterns are there regardless of Bird's awareness or intent, and it's the patterns that I'm concerned with here.

In Chapter One, I look into the genesis of these patterns: using what historical record is publicly available, I examine Bird's formal musical training in childhood and at the conservatory at Northwestern. Chapter Two explores the years between 1995 and 2001, or what I call Bird's period of apprenticeship, with particular attention paid to Bird's physical journeys south and the styles of music he learned to play while he was building his career. If Chapter Two looks at what he picked up, Chapter Three looks at how that happened, which in this case means looking at the canonical narratives surrounding the blues of the Mississippi Delta, and especially the music of

Charley Patton. I argue that when Andrew Bird encountered a canon, or dominant histories and meanings of Southern music that influence how musicians play and how audiences interpret that music, he began to react against that canon in his own compositions and performances. Chapter Four investigates this notion of a canon of Southern music with particular attention paid to Bird's album *Armchair Apocrypha* (2007) – apocrypha being narratives that exist alongside a canon. I also address certain technological shifts in Bird's performance methodologies in this time period that further the reach of Bird's apocrypha. If this canon-apocrypha construction seems like an explicitly religious formulation, good; Chapter Five looks at Bird's recent engagement with gospel music, where Charley Patton raises his head again, and where I argue that Bird adopts a gospel-inflected performance model that invites an invisible third into the relationship between performer and audience. Chapter Six is about the implications of inviting that invisible third into that relationship. Using the work of Avery Gordon and Joseph Roach, I argue that Bird has taken on a condition of haunting in his recent recordings and performances, that his performances are spaces for his audiences to take on a similar condition of haunting, and that his performances are about, among other things, encountering and learning to live with the deep, unspeakable trauma of the colonization of the New World. Finally, I end with a forecast, looking at Bird's more recent work in light of these patterns of haunting, and suggesting some themes to keep track of in Bird's work – including Bird's symbolic (and somewhat ambivalent) return to Chicago in light of his journeys south.

In many ways, this is a thesis about Andrew Bird that isn't about Andrew Bird at all – and considering my first encounter with Bird on stage, I'm not surprised about that. I first saw Bird perform in the basement of a club in Aspen, Colorado, in 2008; I'd decided to come up from Denver because I was interested in the artist playing the venue the following night and

Bird's most recent album intrigued me. So I walked down the stairs into that darkened room, and I walked out feeling as though I'd received a charge. Watching Bird perform was like nothing I'd ever seen before. The way he moved on stage was completely familiar and yet brand new at the same time, and I couldn't put my finger on where or how or why I found what he did to be familiar. But I remember that when I walked upstairs and out into the pleasant chill of a July night in the high country, I felt wholly convinced that I'd just seen a mystic at work – someone who was summoning and then wrestling with big, invisible concepts and constructions, turning them inside out, and trying to tell me and everyone else in that room about them in the best way he knew how. That night in Aspen, I decided I wanted to know what was so familiar about those mysteries, and why Andrew Bird of all people was engaging with them.

What follows is an attempt to articulate those answers. Let's get started.

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Early childhood education

To understand what Bird sees when he looks south, it is necessary to start with Bird's early years. Bird's narrative also starts here: the press kit for Bird's album *Noble Beast* is perhaps the best example of a constructed narrative for public relations purposes.⁵ It takes the form of a partial biography presented as a reverse timeline, covering the release of *Noble Beast* on January 20, 2009 through Bird's first exposure to the violin at age four. The press kit describes Bird's early education as follows:

A four-year-old Andrew Bird picks up his first violin at the age of 4. Actually, it is a Cracker Jack box with a ruler taped to it, as the first of his many Suzuki music lessons involve simply bowing to the teacher and going home. So begins a formative period soaking up classical repertoire completely by ear followed by a teenage expansion into Hungarian Gypsy music, early jazz, country blues, South Indian music and more, as well as the discovery of an uncanny whistling ability.⁶

On stage and in interviews, Bird has also credited his early Suzuki training as fundamental to the way he currently plays music.⁷ With this in mind, Bird's Suzuki training bears some exploration.

Dr. Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) developed the Suzuki method of music education in Japan at the close of World War II and began to disseminate it in the United States in the 1960s.⁸

⁵ *A Reverse Chronology of Selected Significant Dates and Events*, Andrew Bird, 2009, PDF in the author's possession; Andrew Bird, *Noble Beast*, Fat Possum, 2009, compact disc.

⁶ Bird, *A Reverse Chronology of Selected Dates and Events*, PDF.

⁷ Andrew Bird, audience concert recording on September 3, 2008, Millennium Park, Chicago, IL, audiovisual file in the author's possession; "Unfretted/Unfettered: The Evolution of Andrew Bird," by Sarah Montzka, *American Suzuki Journal* 40.2, 2012, 41-43.

Whereas other pedagogical approaches to teaching music depend on teaching students to read music on the page, the Suzuki method waits to introduce sight-reading, instead teaching students to play a set curriculum by ear – the idea being that once students can play by ear, with attention paid to good technique and good tone production, they will understand written music not as arcane symbols telling them what to do, but as a means of writing down knowledge they already have. As a pedagogical method, the ideal Suzuki education is holistic: the point is not necessarily to produce talented musicians, but instead to create warm, welcoming, friendly environments in which children can learn to make music. According to the Suzuki method, every child has the capacity to become a good musician; the key is patience, repetition, and the belief that children can develop musical ability in the same way they learn language.⁹ Suzuki’s observations are the foundation of this method. Rather than depending on data gathered from academic research into early childhood and adolescence, his ideas derive largely from anecdotal sources and ideas he developed over years’ worth of his own work with children. The popularity of his ideas appears to be a result of successful concert tours in which up to 1500 Suzuki students, some as young as three, played Bach in unison.¹⁰ While the universality of Dr. Suzuki’s approach to music education is not guaranteed, his approach certainly bore results for Andrew Bird.

Beyond the 2009 press kit, Bird lauds his Suzuki education in a 2012 interview with *American Suzuki Journal*.¹¹ In this interview, Bird describes learning violin as a four-year-old alongside his mother, as well as the less quantifiable aspects of music education:

Not many kids have that kind of [Suzuki] environment and I think it’s unfortunate because it came in really handy during the rough “Who am I?” years to have something

⁸ John Kendall, *The Suzuki Violin Method in American Music Education*, Suzuki Method International, Princeton, NJ, 1985.

⁹ Shinichi Suzuki, *Nurtured by Love: The Classic Approach to Talent Education*, Exposition Press, Smithtown, NY, 1983, 1-15.

¹⁰ Kendall, *The Suzuki Violin Method in American Music Education*, 10.

¹¹ “Unfretted/Unfettered: The Evolution of Andrew Bird,” Sarah Montzka.

that you're good at. Something that's unique. So I think when school budgets are getting cut – what is seen by a lot of people as being esoteric (music and arts programming) is anything but. People miss the point. It's not that we're training future musicians. That's not it at all. Music makes your life richer. It's the reason to work so hard, to get up in the morning. ...[Music] creates different people with different values. Values that go deeper than the pursuit of money and material things. I think that can go as far as people communicating better, resolving conflicts – you know, just general social grace. And it's just, again, unquantifiable.¹²

The idea of music as communication that Bird describes can and should be connected to Shinichi Suzuki's idea that the acquisition of musical ability happens in the same way as early childhood language acquisition. For Bird, music becomes a system of communication – a language to be considered alongside verbal language. He comments on this in the interview, saying that “since I didn't learn to read music right away, I made a direct connection to what was in my head. That allows the music to not just go in my ear but also come out of my head and onto my instrument. And as a writer, composer and improviser – when I made that leap from classical rep to folk music or jazz over the years, it was not a big leap. And I saw other musicians around – people at conservatory – that couldn't move left or right without the written notes.”¹³ Bird's Suzuki training did two things that affect his later work. First, Bird's exposure to an environment oriented around acquisition and production of relatively unmediated sounds allowed Bird to become comfortable switching performance styles and registers – it makes him a more flexible musician. Second, Bird's early musical education was a democratic experience that was relatively free of hierarchal competition common in other pedagogical approaches to learning music in the United States. Suzuki literature stresses that “[c]ooperation, not competition, is the motivation” for young musicians – a stance often at odds with American approaches to secondary and post-secondary musical education, where competitions within and among

¹² Ibid., 42.

¹³ Ibid., 41.

ensembles are frequent.¹⁴ Certainly it was at odds with Bird's own later experiences in high school and at Northwestern University; Bird acknowledges that he found the transition from Suzuki music education "to the high school orchestras, all-state, competition or Interlochen [competitive art camp in Interlochen, Michigan]" to be difficult, specifically citing the sight-reading and competition for chair orders within ensembles as difficult experiences.¹⁵

While they may have been difficult experiences, Bird nevertheless participated in music in high school. A 1991 graduate of Lake Forest High School, Bird appears as a soccer player and a member of the string orchestra in the 1988 through 1991 editions of *Forest Trails*, the Lake Forest High School yearbook.¹⁶ These offer valuable glimpses of the milieu in which Bird's secondary education took place. The 1988 yearbook declares, "It is widely known that we here at Lake Forest High School are sharp dressers. This is not money. This is taste." The 1989 edition asks, "What's the reality of Lake Forest High School? It certainly can't be captured by reciting facts or by listening to stereotyped comments. Yes, we do live in a physically beautiful city and attend a school that resembles a Georgian mansion surrounded by manicured green lawns. Yes, there are some Beemers and Mercedes in our parking lot, and across the tracks, and some of us are hoping to go Ivy League. But outward beauty and upward mobility are not what we're all about." Perhaps not. But the focus on class and hierarchy suggested by these supposed self-definitions also seem to be at odds with the sort of cooperative environment that Suzuki education is supposed to create for students. If Bird cites this adjustment from a non-competitive to competitive pedagogy as difficult, he still appears to have made it work, given that he moved from Lake Forest High School to Northwestern University to pursue a degree in violin

¹⁴ Kendall, *The Suzuki Violin Method in American Music Education*, 15.

¹⁵ "Unfretted/Unfettered: The Evolution of Andrew Bird," Sarah Montzka, 42.

¹⁶ *Forest Trails*, Lake Forest High School yearbooks 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, Lake Forest Public Library, Lake Forest, IL.

performance – and Northwestern’s conservatory program bore little resemblance to Bird’s Suzuki education.

1.2 The conservatory by the lake

The Northwestern University School of Music, now the Bienen School of Music, is a nationally known conservatory that prides itself on producing working members of symphonies and philharmonics. Andrew Bird is a working musician, and a financially successful musician, but he is not a classical musician. He can play Western art music, but chooses not to play Western art music. He plays other music. What Northwestern trains musicians to do is not what Andrew Bird does. It is important for Western art musicians to have a grasp on Western art repertoire – which is something that the conservatory has in common with the Suzuki violin method, which consists of seven books of curriculum, to be learned in strictly chronological order. Where Suzuki and the conservatory part ways, however, is in the playing by ear – recall that Bird says he knew people at Northwestern who were dependent on written music – and the noncompetitive environment.

Given that Bird’s early life and early musical career spans the mid-1970s through 2000, YouTube- and smartphone-era footage of Bird’s development is not publically available. Indeed, Northwestern University did not start regularly recording its performance ensembles until late 1995 – after Bird graduated. Thus the best way to find out what Andrew Bird did while he was at Northwestern is to examine the paper programs saved and archived by the Music Library, and to make conjectures about Bird’s interests based on the data set derived from those programs.

Andrew Bird shows up in these programs between October 1992 and May 1995, thus indicating that he spent three years in the Northwestern University School of Music.¹⁷ In that time, Bird participated in the University Symphony Orchestra, the University Chamber Orchestra, and various experimental, jazz, and chamber ensembles. Chair order, according to the programs, was competitive – and Bird was regularly at the bottom, playing the Violin 1 part only once in three years, in the University Chamber Orchestra. This ensemble was less than half as large as the Symphony. More, Bird’s chair order in the Violin 2 section often fell in the bottom half; his high point as a second violin in the chamber orchestra came in a March 1995 performance, where he sat 2 of 8, and his best effort in the symphony came in October 1993, where he sat 8 of 13. Yet this should not automatically be considered a reflection of poor talent or musicianship. It is important to take into account the repertoire of the ensembles – and then contrast it to what Bird performed when left to his own devices.

The repertoires of the University Symphony Orchestra and the University Chamber Orchestra during Andrew Bird’s tenure as a member were heavy on German and Russian 19th- and early 20th-century composers. It appears as though a concern of the School of Music was to produce graduates with experience playing well-known compositions that partially comprise the canon of Western art music. Bird may not have felt creatively challenged by playing this music, as he suggests in retrospect:

Bird resented the conservatory’s self-gratifying ethos, the prevailing view that the headier the piece of music the better, even if it alienated the audience. He wanted to improvise rather than play written notes. “There is something comforting about going into a practice room, putting your sheet music on a stand and playing Bach over and over again,” he told me one night at a hipster dive bar in Chicago’s Wicker Park neighborhood. “But at the same time, it’s not demanding much of you.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Student and ensemble concert programs, 1992-93, 1993-94, 1994-95, Music Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

¹⁸ Jonathan Mahler, “Andrew Bird Discovers His Inner Operatic Folkie,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 2, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/04/magazine/04bird-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

A Western art repertoire was too comfortable, according to Bird, and not improvisational enough. The tension between Bird and Northwestern's approach to music started early, as he discusses in a 2005 article:

When I was at the conservatory I had this owly music history professor who – on the first day of class – scowled at us. He said something like: "You with your unsophisticated ears. You listen to music as if it were some sonic jacuzzi, letting these waves of sound just wash over you (still scowling). Now you listen like a filthy commoner. When you finish this class I will have you listening like an academic. Only the educated can appreciate great music."

I spent the next four years trying not to let them educate me to where I could no longer take that sonic jacuzzi, and I still have a healthy distrust of music academia.¹⁹

Regardless of whether or not this owly music history professor really said any of this, the way Bird presents it says a great deal. Bird reacts against what he perceives to be the exclusionary, intellectualized, and classist indoctrination of Northwestern University – that only academics know how to listen to music, that common people know nothing about music, that a lack of sophistication, as determined by the academic and intellectual, is a barrier to doing music right.²⁰

The data set of programs obtained from the Northwestern University Music Library backs up what Bird says in print about the experience of operating within the confines of the conservatory. If Bird's experiences in the University Symphony Orchestra and the University Chamber Orchestra were designed for a career path that he chose not to take, Bird was not limited to these ensembles. He could and did take part in small student ensembles that allowed him to exercise more control over his own repertoire, to say nothing of his junior and senior

¹⁹ Andrew Bird, "Ten Songs or Albums That Still Bust My Bunker," *Pitchfork*, April 11, 2005, <http://pitchfork.com/features/guest-lists/6014-andrew-bird-ten-songs-or-albums-that-still-bust-my-bunker/>.

²⁰ It pays to be careful when considering Bird's interviews. In that *New York Times Magazine* piece, Jonathan Mahler describes Bird as "accustomed to micromanaging" his own career, and this piece was published alongside the release of *Noble Beast*. In other words, it is not safe to assume that Bird is always a reliable narrator, given that he has the dual motivations of profit and privacy to consider when speaking. Bird has the right to construct his own narrative any way he pleases. My narrative, especially in these early chapters, must lean on his, both by necessity and by choice – I'm a scholar, not a prosecutor.

recitals. These ensembles and solo recitals say more about the tension between the expectations of a top classical conservatory and Bird's own musical proclivities than Bird himself ever could.

The programs show that Bird had solo recitals for his junior and senior years. The front halves of both recitals feature more standard classical repertoire. After the intermission in both recitals, however, Bird plays folk music. The Western art selections have their own idiosyncrasies, as well, that suggest Bird may have had particular reasons for selecting these pieces to learn and perform. In his junior year, the two more mainstream pieces – defining *mainstream* in the context of nationally renowned music conservatories – were Antonín Dvořák's Violin Concerto in A minor, Op. 53, and Johan S. Svendsen's Romance, Op. 26. The violin concerto is the only one Dvořák ever wrote, and many classical music critics, when speaking of the piece, comment on the fact that it is generally regarded by people with opinions about Dvořák's oeuvre as inferior to Dvořák's Cello Concerto. Thomas McClain claims that “[a]udiences love it. But for years it was ignored because it wasn't as good as the cello concerto. Well, what is?”²¹ Edith Eisler describes the piece as “original in form, rich in harmony, overflowing with golden melodies masterfully orchestrated,” and describes the third movement as possessing “spiky, idiomatic cross-rhythms.”²² As for the Svendsen piece, Steven Haller writes that “Svendsen's music is well in the romantic mainstream; grounded firmly in the Leipzig school, with due obeisance to the legacy of Mendelssohn and Schumann, Svendsen was nowhere near as intense a nationalist as Grieg, and yet much of his melodic output could easily pass for actual folksongs. A number of these pieces reveal Svendsen as the consummate cosmopolitan, pulling together melodic reminiscences of trips abroad with more home-grown references to

²¹ Thomas McClain, Review of *Dvorak, Violin Concerto, Glazounov, Violin Concerto, Schubert, Symphony No. 2*, Nathan Milstein, violin, with Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, conducted by William Steinberg, 1999, compact disc, *American Record Guide* 63.2 (March 2000): 106.

²² Edith Eisler, Review of *Dvorak, Violin Concerto Op. 53, Piano Quintet Op. 81*, Sarah Chang, violin, 2003, compact disc, *Strings* 18.3 (Oct 2003): 100.

make a well-integrated whole.”²³ Most damning for Svendsen as a writer in the style of others, however, is Stratton Rawson:

He wrote a Romance for violin and orchestra so popular on concert and recital stages as to make his name a household commodity. Even the fictional Sherlock Holmes mentions him. Transferring the panache, intelligence, and savvy stage presence that would have helped to make him a dominating violin virtuoso to the conductor's platform, Svendsen became one of the star conductors of the late 19th century. ...Svendsen does not attempt any intellectual depth, and for that reason these works will never be proclaimed important works of art. Still, each communicates with a refreshing directness, a startling and uplifting range of emotions. The works may not meet the exacting standards of music historians, but my simpler needs--to be moved, to be surprised and satisfied, even delighted--are amply fulfilled.²⁴

All of this music criticism says less about the pieces commented upon than it does about the system of values through which classical music reinforces its own importance. The Dvořák violin concerto is “not as good” as the cello concerto, despite its original form and despite the fact that audiences respond well to it. The Svendsen piece is, in contrast, too mainstream; Svendsen’s music “could easily pass for actual folksongs,” his name was “a household commodity,” and he “does not attempt any intellectual depth” – and therefore his music is not important, except as it fulfills a critic’s “simpler needs.” Based merely on two selections from Andrew Bird’s junior recital, it is possible to make a conjecture about why Bird did not fit in at Northwestern: the Western art music paradigm devalues the opinions of audiences, regards popularity and ubiquity as something dangerous at best, and demands brilliance within the confines of established norms. Andrew Bird, as a financially successful working musician who deals primarily in popular music, does not fit this value system – and, as the back half of his junior and senior recitals makes clear, he never did.

²³ Steven Haller, Review of *Orchestral Works*, Trondheim Symphony, 1996, compact disc, *American Record Guide* 59.6 (Nov 1996): 218.

²⁴ Stratton Rawson, Review of *Svendsen: String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 1; Octet in A Major, Op. 3*, perf. Kontra Quartet, 1998, compact disc, *American Record Guide* 61.2 (Mar 1998): 210-11.

In both solo recitals, he played popular music – but popular music that was respectable, popular music that was acceptable by conservatory standards. This generally meant it was music on masquerade, music that used historical context as a disguise that conveyed respectability. The program for his junior recital bills the back half as “Music from the Civil War Period.”²⁵ Some of these pieces had composer attribution, and some did not. The program appears as follows:

Lorena
The Wind That Shakes The Barley
The Tramp’s Reel
Scottish Airs
Johnny Has Gone For A Soldier
The Blackbird
Kathrine’s Reel
The Old Pine Tree (Stephen Foster)
My Old Kentucky Home (Stephen Foster)
Weeping Sad and Lonely (Henry Clay Work)
Marching Through Georgia (Lament) (Henry Clay Work)
Shenendoah [sic] (Patrick Gilmore)
When Johnny Comes Marching Home (Patrick Gilmore)
The Yellow Tinker (Patrick Gilmore)
Real Beatrice (Patrick Gilmore)
Ashokan Farewell (Jay Ungar)²⁶

It is worth mentioning that Jay Ungar’s “Ashokan Farewell” is not actually of the Civil War period. Rather, Ungar’s fiddle tune, written in the 1980s, was selected as the theme for Ken Burns’s *The Civil War* on PBS, which aired approximately three years before Andrew Bird’s junior recital on November 30, 1993. The point in the performance, therefore, was not historical veracity or accuracy in the repertoire, but to play something that his audience might associate with the Civil War. The above list, after all, is not an exhaustive list of fiddle tunes popular between 1850 and 1870 that survived in some form through the 1990s. Bird may have picked “Ashokan Farewell” because he liked it. Bird may have picked “Ashokan Farewell” because he thought his audience would recognize it. Regardless of the reason, at the point this program was

²⁵ Student concert program, November 30, 1993, Music Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

²⁶ Ibid.

set, Bird drew from a documentary from the 1990s that used music from the 1980s and billed the whole thing as a set of music from the 1860s.

To the degree that the Civil War is synonymous with southernness, the first place the historical record shows Andrew Bird looking south is by means of what passed for permissible folk music at the Northwestern University School of Music. (Western art music also has a long history of incorporating folk tunes into compositions: Tchaikovsky, Bartok, Grieg, Dvořák, Johann Strauss, and many others all did it.) The existence of *The Civil War* permitted Andrew Bird to play music perceived as surrounding the Civil War – not least because the work of Ken Burns was something Bird could point to if necessary as a scholarly source for his music. Historical folk music is acceptable; what is less acceptable is folk music incorporated into more modern – and more contemporary popular – music.

Between Bird's junior and senior recitals, he also served as a supporting musician for some of his fellow students at their own recitals. Mostly this meant playing violin or fiddle for flautists playing traditional Irish music. Over the course of Bird's career at Northwestern, this appears to have become one of his specialties. The recital at the end of his first year where he served as support on June 2, 1993, is billed simply as "Irish Dance Music," credited to "Traditional," and Bird's own role is credited as "fiddle." He also played fiddle for another recital on April 29, 1994, but this time the tunes were spelled out: "She Moved Through The Fair," "The Grey Cock," "The Death of Queen Jane," "Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow," "Rocking the Cradle," and "High Germany." Helping other students with their recitals was a very common occurrence for Northwestern music students while Bird attended; the part where Bird seems to have been pigeonholed as a fiddler is less common.

Bird was not only interested in folk music; he was also interested in jazz and experimental music. One program from February 10, 1994, describes student jazz chamber ensembles and, in all cases, says that the pieces to be performed are to be determined. Bird participated in a violin-piano-bass trio. The nature of the jazz the trio played is unknown. The other notable student chamber ensemble that Bird participated in at his time at Northwestern gave a concert under the auspices of the Electronic Music Studios. The ensemble was called “Chaos yet...” and the name of the piece was “Jack Kerouac.” The program notes are illuminating:

Chaos yet... is a group of musicians/composers affiliated with Northwestern University interested in performing music which incorporates freedom of style and syntax, is concerned with the present, and combines dissimilar sounds without the restrictions of notated music. The writings of Jack Kerouac is [sic] a driving force, as well as other poetry and individual focal sounds. Both of the improvisations heard this evening are the result of the performers reacting to one another and/or completely disregarding sounds that are heard. Chaos yet... is a reference to Chaos Theory which some people call a new branch of science. What the group does in molding an improvisation is related to that way of thinking about systems: their creation and organization.²⁷

Their manifesto involves freedom from restrictions that would have normally been placed on Bird as a classical musician in training – notation, harmony, form, discouragement to improvisation, paying homage to past traditions enforced by music history. This ensemble performance – and there is no indication in the Northwestern Music Library that this ensemble lasted for another performance – was an opportunity for Bird to show out, to indulge himself, and to experiment.

By the time Bird reached his senior recital, he appears to have felt more comfortable with his own identity as a musician – something reflected in the personnel listed on the front of the program. Whereas his junior recital featured a cast of five accompanists who mostly disappear from Bird’s involvements at Northwestern after his junior year, his senior year features only

²⁷ Student concert program, April 3, 1993, Music Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

three: Shirley Trissell, a piano accompanist, Kevin O'Donnell on percussion, and David Dieckmann on guitar. Bird continued to work with O'Donnell and Dieckmann after graduation, but at Bird's senior recital, the program included a performance of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres* and ten songs billed as "Traditional instrumental dance music."²⁸ Irish traditional music took up five of those songs: "The Blackbird," "Green-Gowned Lass," "The Exile of Erin," "Sean Sa Cheo," and "The Coolin." Two were listed as Andalusian folk songs: "Song of my foot" [sic] and "The Parchement" [sic]. At least one of these songs – "Song of my foot" – shows up on Bird's 1996 demo *Music of Hair*; thus, while it may have been derived from an Andalusian folk song, it later became Bird's own song, credited to Bird.²⁹ This was not Bird's only composition in his senior recital. He also composed something called "Grey Matter," which shows up on his later collaboration with O'Donnell and Dieckmann, and Dieckmann composed something called "Dispossessed" [sic] which shows up on the same album. Again, no publicly accessible recording of Bird's recital exists, so it is impossible to analyze the differences between the recital version and the later versions with Dieckmann and O'Donnell on the album they put out in 1995.³⁰ Nevertheless, the titles are the same, and since Bird's senior recital occurred in April 1995, it does not seem likely that these were wholly different compositions.

The last piece of traditional instrumental dance music remaining to touch upon at Andrew Bird's senior recital is credited to Haiti, and it is called "Danse Juba." It's the only folk song in the collection of concert programs from Northwestern that originates from a country whose people are primarily of African descent. The rest of these songs are either European or from the United States – specifically, the white United States. Without a recording of Andrew Bird's rendition of "Danse Juba" – something that is not publicly available – it is not possible to

²⁸ Student concert program, April 20, 1995, Music Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

²⁹ Andrew Bird, *Music of Hair*, Wegawam, 1996, compact disc.

³⁰ Charlie Nobody, *Soup*, Clay Dog Records, 1995, compact disc.

determine Bird's source and hypothesize about Bird's reasons for including a Haitian folk song in his senior recital.

That said, the presence of Juba at all is suggestive, as it is the first glimmer of a pattern that continues to show up over the course of Bird's career. Juba was a practice of slaves who came from West Africa, a dance performed to percussion by means of the dancer or dancers clapping their hands and slapping other parts of their bodies, as whites fearful of slaves who could use drums to communicate forbade African slaves from using drums and certain other musical instruments.³¹ Slaves responded to this deprivation with innovation, continuing use of percussive dance rhythms by changing the instrument – and in so doing, slaves retained some autonomy over their bodies. The slave trade to the Americas consisted, among other things, of centuries' worth of denial of physical and reproductive autonomy. Music is one way that cultures originating in Africa crossed the Atlantic. Juba is but one example.

Juba also became a staple of minstrel shows – lowbrow entertainments aimed at white audiences that were very loosely sourced in white observations of slave cultures. They involved musical numbers and comedic sketches celebrating or lampooning white perceptions of slave cultures. Minstrel shows were extremely popular in the 19th century. They were also the source of songs still widely known today – “Dixie” and “My Old Kentucky Home” among them. Master Juba became a stock character in minstrel shows, a character who could perform an approximation of a juba dance, and eventually became a character that minstrel show audiences expected to see from the performing troupe.³²

³¹ Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War*, 2nd ed. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 141-44.

³² Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 55-56.

The presence of a piece titled “Danse Juba” in Bird’s senior recital at Northwestern University, rendered in French and credited to the country of Haiti, in some ways reflects this dual history broken down by race. The concert hall at Northwestern likely was not subjected to a minstrel show-style performance of juba on April 20, 1995 – Andrew Bird’s solo recitals were about how much he could get away with in a conservatory aimed at training Western classical musicians. In addition to being racially offensive, however, performing a minstrel-style number would have been too lowbrow for the standards of the Northwestern University School of Music. The formality and ritual involved in the performance of Western art music do not readily lend themselves to humor, which is precisely what minstrel shows were about – humor, nostalgia, and sentiment purveyed by mostly white entertainers in the business of cultural appropriation. Bird’s attribution of “Danse Juba” to Haiti, in the amalgamated language of colonizer and colonized, renders juba safe for a senior recital, while still pushing that boundary of what folk music is acceptable by conservatory standards.

Apparently it was acceptable. Listed in the program for the School of Music’s commencement convocation on June 17, 1995, under the heading of candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Music, is Andrew W. Bird.³³ His is the fourth name on that list. Bird appears to have received no honors of any sort, but he got out with a degree. The commencement convocation occurred at the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall on the shores of Lake Michigan, where emerging from the front door gives that exceptional view to the south of the Chicago skyline. Chicago was Andrew Bird’s first southbound stop in 1995; it would not be his last.

³³ Ensemble concert program, June 17, 1995, Music Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 The sonic Jacuzzi

In 1995, Andrew Bird, freshly minted graduate of Northwestern's conservatory, moves south to Chicago. The easy answer for why he makes this move is economic opportunity: more jobs for musicians in a bigger city. Yet knowing something of the nature of Bird's musical education – disinclined toward competition, inclined toward folk music – it should not be surprising that Bird did not pursue employment as a performer of Western art music. Rather, having received his conservatory credential, Bird turned toward exploring different forms and styles of music. Since his conservatory education was based around classical music, he would have to spend time learning to play other styles of music. For this, Bird would have to become an audience member.

When we talk about music, we mostly talk about musicians. We talk about their histories, and their processes, and their recording gear, and their politics, and their circumstances, and how all of that and more affects what they do. When we do talk about audiences, it is easy to treat them as a homogenized lump of passivity whose role is to support musicians – an act consisting solely of rewarding musicians' work with money. In this model, music becomes a commodity: is the audience buying what the musician is selling?³⁴ Successful musicians are wealthy musicians.

³⁴ Hence the importance of a saleable narrative, for a musician.

Yet regarding music as a solely economic transaction does not provide a full picture of what, how, and why audiences listen to music. Therefore, analysis of audience preference measured only by how many records an artist sells – often the only public means of measurement available, given the scarcity of public information about whether or not touring musicians break even – is not a good measure, because the recording industry is a middleman. The recording industry is a means by which musicians reach audiences, and that primary relationship between musician and audience is of paramount importance. The audience, not the industry, is the reason the musician can make a living. You can be a musician and an audience member at the same time, since it is impossible to be a musician without taking on the other role. Exchange is inherent to music: even if a musician plays with no one in earshot, she can still hear herself – and can still form her own opinion about how she sounds. This is ultimately the problem with determining audience preferences using economic measurements alone: it can tell us *what*, but it cannot tell us *why*. And this is ultimately the problem with talking about audiences on a broad level: the *why* is not always the same.

What happens, then, when we consider a specific musician as an audience member? We talk about musicians as originators of technique and form and, sometimes, political movements – but the vast majority of musicians are not originators. The vast majority of musicians are members of the audience, with influences, quirks, and proclivities that can be traced to other musicians, and other interests.

Andrew Bird in 1995 is an educated young man from the North Shore who knows a little something about art, who knows what he likes, and who has the luxury and privilege of experiencing Chicago as a possibility, rather than as an obstacle. If that “sonic Jacuzzi,” as Bird’s owly music history professor put it, is what Bird was after when he came to Chicago after three

years in Evanston and a childhood on the North Shore, he found it.³⁵ Bird's first chance to make music free of the strictures of the Northwestern University School of Music reflects this first opportunity to record anything he wanted to play.

The group is called Charlie Nobody. The album is called *Soup*.³⁶ The personnel include Bird, David Dieckmann, and Kevin O'Donnell – all Northwestern alumni. The first track, entitled "Philbilly," is representative of *Soup*: some technically proficient fiddling tricks with intonation best fitted for Western art music from Bird, loud and enthusiastic electric bass from Josh Hirsch, and passably in-tune vocals from Dieckmann. O'Donnell, the drummer, rushes. The subject of "Philbilly" is a young man in the woods of the Upper Midwest with a book contract for his research on black-footed ferrets. The young man has a sudden epiphany that he is meant not to do research within the confines of an institution, but to work in a diner for the good of humanity. It is possible to imagine that recent conservatory graduates experiencing a lack of musical supervision for the first time may identify with the protagonist of "Philbilly."

The rest of *Soup* follows a similar trajectory: enthused electric bass, flashy violin tricks from Bird, periodic distorted guitar from Dieckmann, and rushed drumming from O'Donnell. The overall effect is of a jam band that thinks too much, preventing them from actually jamming. Other notable tracks on *Soup* include an early version of "Nothinduan Waltz," which shows up on two of Bird's later albums (*Music of Hair* and *Thrills*), and the aforementioned "Music of Hair / Grey Matter" and "Dispossessed," from Bird's senior recital.³⁷ Charlie Nobody did not put out a second record and does not appear to have survived past 1995.

³⁵ Andrew Bird, "Ten Songs or Albums That Still Bust My Bunker," *Pitchfork*, April 11, 2005, <http://pitchfork.com/features/guest-lists/6014-andrew-bird-ten-songs-or-albums-that-still-bust-my-bunker/>.

³⁶ Charlie Nobody, *Soup*, Clay Dog Records, 1995, compact disc.

³⁷ Andrew Bird, *Music of Hair*, Wegawam, 1996, compact disc; Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire, *Thrills*, Rykodisc, 1998, compact disc.

The members dispersed into other groups with interchangeable personnel. Two of these groups fit similar organizational models, and are notable for their adherence to learning and performing older jazz and blues standards, as well as writing and performing new material in the style of those standards. The two groups are Kevin O'Donnell's Quality Six, and Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire. Both groups recorded albums simultaneously – the two Quality Six albums were released in 1999 (*Heretic Blues*) and 2000 (*Control Freak*), and the three Bowl of Fire albums were released in 1998 (*Thrills*), 1999 (*Oh! The Grandeur*), and 2001 (*The Swimming Hour*). The two Quality Six albums were released on Delmark Records, a Chicago label devoted primarily to jazz; compared to the Bowl of Fire, the Quality Six was much stricter about playing only one style of music – jazz.

As a bandleader, Kevin O'Donnell took responsibility for penning the liner notes, which consist of long narratives about the music and his bandmates. While O'Donnell casts himself as the proverbial straight man around (and at) whom others can or should laugh, even he admits that his second record is called *Control Freak* for a reason – namely, that he is one. Andrew Bird's role in the Quality Six consisted primarily of playing violin, though he also contributed vocals.³⁸ Bird's violin work on *Heretic Blues* and *Control Freak* is less ostentatious and a little easier than his work on Charlie Nobody's *Soup* – although the segments of his work that sound as though they are derived from scales, arpeggios, and assorted warm-up exercises still sound technical, as opposed to effortless. Bird's vocals, on the other hand, cannot fairly be described as effortless;

³⁸ A characteristic example of O'Donnell's take on himself and on Bird from the liner notes to *Control Freak*: "By the way, Andrew insisted on breaking with the incredibly well-thought-out plan and recording his vocals live [on "Tight and Long"]. But I countered by 'suggesting' he not play any violin. I realize I have a problem."

rather, his accent and inflection are affected, and nothing at all like what he would sing like after the dismantling of the Bowl of Fire.³⁹

The Bowl of Fire was Bird's own effort as a bandleader, and it came about as the result of Bird's first record deal.⁴⁰ In 1997, Andrea Troolin, then an A&R representative for Rykodisc, selected Bird's demo *Music of Hair* (1996) out of a pile of unsolicited submissions and signed Bird to a three-record contract as her first artist signed to Rykodisc. Troolin also became his manager – a role that she has held ever since.⁴¹ The Bowl of Fire is the group that Bird formed to make those three records for Rykodisc, and the group utilized the bandleader-band model also followed by Kevin O'Donnell's Quality Six. Unlike the Quality Six, however, the Bowl of Fire's members fluctuate, nor was the group bound by a single genre. While jazz is a heavy presence on all three albums (though especially on *Thrills* and *Oh! The Grandeur*), there are more varieties of jazz on the Bowl of Fire records than on the Quality Six records. Swing, gypsy, and New Orleans styles are all discernable in the Bowl of Fire oeuvre – as is a pasillo, a traditional form hailing from the northeastern part of South America, as well as prewar/country blues, Chicago blues, prewar string and jug band music, and the chorus-sermon-chorus form found in gospel music. Ultimately Bird found that this model of making music did not elicit results he wanted, describing the work he put into the Bowl of Fire as “pretty guerilla-style touring – pile in a van, with a band or without a band, and drive around the country and play every night in a different

³⁹ In range and tone, Bird's vocals then and now are comparable to Jeff Buckley. Then, however, Bird's accent and inflection resembled a didactic Billie Holiday gone German cabaret. This artistic choice begins to change with the final Bowl of Fire record, *The Swimming Hour* (2001).

⁴⁰ Bird played in O'Donnell's band; O'Donnell was Bird's drummer in the Bowl of Fire.

⁴¹ Xan Aranda, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year* (Chicago, IL: Wegawam Music Co., 2011), MPEG video on Vimeo, private link provided by Ekonomisk Management; Andrea Troolin (owner/manager, Ekonomisk Management), in discussion with the author at Ekonomisk offices, Chicago, IL, January 10, 2013.

dive bar. There were just years and years of playing the same places with no press, no radio, no support. And you get the same forty people that knew about you.”⁴²

2.2 *The apprentice comes south*

How, then, does Bird become an audience member, given his prodigious musical output and touring efforts between 1995 and 2001? He learns by hearing at the same time as he learns by doing. His studio albums from the beginning of his career through to the present can be considered as compressed, sometimes only vaguely organized units of thought. The thought that makes up the units is thought about music and the nature of performance. As Bird’s thinking about music evolves, so do the styles he engages on his studio albums. It is easy to group the three Bowl of Fire records together because Bird’s approach to music does not evolve very much over these three albums. So what else did Bird do during this time?

In Bird’s case, being a member of the audience means being an apprentice. The purpose of the sonic Jacuzzi, according to Bird and his professor, is to let sounds wash over you – to let music become a whole environment, along the lines of Shinichi Suzuki’s approach to music education. Bird has said that his purpose in listening to the music of others this way during this period was to listen broadly and use what he found interesting: “My first three records, I was still in that student state of mind. Any time I hear a record, I was like, what can I glean from this? What can I take from this?”⁴³ This mindset was not limited to listening, but also included performing. Bird’s collaborations with Jimbo Mathus during this 1995-2001 apprenticeship

⁴² Aranda, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

period – these collaborations occur simultaneously with the Bowl of Fire records – introduced Bird to a whole new environment.

Mathus, a native of Mississippi, is best known for his swing-revivalist work with a band called the Squirrel Nut Zippers. Mathus and his then wife, Katherine Whalen, were the leaders of the Zippers; Mathus and Whalen also played on Bird's demo, *Music of Hair*, as well as the Bowl of Fire's *Thrills*, and Mathus was a multi-instrumentalist on *Oh! The Grandeur*. Bird appears on the Squirrel Nut Zippers albums *Hot* (1996), *Sold Out* (1997), *Perennial Favorites* (1998), and *Bedlam Ballroom* (2000).⁴⁴ While the Zippers' music played with genre and form akin to Bird's work in the Bowl of Fire, Bird ranged farther afield, geographically, to get his sounds – and the Bowl of Fire sounded less polished and more improvised than the Squirrel Nut Zippers, who usually depended more on rhythm to evoke genre than instrumentation or intonation.

But the Bird-Mathus collaboration with the most lasting consequences for Bird's career has little to do with furthering Bird's career in terms of record sales. Rather, it is one in which Bird appears to learn by immersion – when his technique changes, in an environment that is not Chicago, devoted not only to history but to tradition, with a connection to a living scion of a musician who still surfaces in Bird's work on a regular basis. The album, recorded under the name of James Mathus and His Knock-Down Society, is called *Play Songs For Rosetta*, and it has an origin story – an origin story that literally serves as the cover art for the album:

Growing up in Clarksdale Miss. I had a babysitter named Rosetta Patton. Her daddy was Charley Patton – the legend of Delta blues. Rosetta loved her daddy. So did Leadbelly, Howlin' Wolf and Willie Dixon. I put together this band and recorded these here songs as a benefit for my friend Rosetta and as a tribute to her father Charley Patton. Enjoy it. – Jimbo Mathus, Squirrel Nut Zippers⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Squirrel Nut Zippers, *Hot*, Mammoth, 1996, compact disc; Squirrel Nut Zippers, *Sold Out*, Mammoth, 1997, compact disc; Squirrel Nut Zippers, *Perennial Favorites*, Mammoth, 1998, compact disc; Squirrel Nut Zippers, *Bedlam Ballroom*, Mammoth, 2000, compact disc.

⁴⁵ Jas. Mathus and His Knock-Down Society, *Play Songs For Rosetta*, Mammoth, 1997, compact disc.

The last page of the liner notes provides another, lengthier origin narrative:

I found out about Rooster Blues when I was down in Mississippi in the summer of '96. I was hanging out in Clarksdale, specifically at Abe's Bar-b-que out on Highway 61. I'm the third generation to do so. I noticed a blue vinyl 45 r.p.m. record in a frame on the wall. Closer examination revealed it to be on the Rooster Blues label in Clarksdale. I was astounded. I had no idea that such a place existed, and I know some out of the way places. I copied the address, quickly finished my chopped pork sandwich and left.

The address was Sunflower Ave., right around the corner from my Papa's shoe store. It was in a little building shaped like a riverboat and the sign was dangling off the bow precariously. This business had been called the Ice Cream Boat when it was conceived and had gone out of business a while back.

I went in and started gabbing with the person I found there, who that day happened to be Nancy Kossman. The joint was filled with blues records, juke joint posters, publicity photos, King Biscuit flour sacks and etc. "My kind of people," I thought. We talked while I poked around.

"Yea, I've always thought Charlie Patton was the greatest Delta blues musician," Nancy said, "I can never get enough of his music." I agreed with her and mentioned that I had just come from Rosetta's house out in Duncan.

"Oh, you know Rose?" she said.

"Why Lordy yes," I said, "she practically raised me."

While we talked, several local musicians came through, some to pick up instruments they had stored in the back, others to pass along where the gigs would be later that night and who would be playing. I found out that Terry Williams would be playing at a club called Crossroads.

I agreed to meet Nancy there to enjoy the house specialty – tall boy Budweiser and a fish sandwich.

"The moon rose high in the midnight sky on the road to the bottomland." – Jim Dickinson

That night was quite an eye-opening experience. Some friends came down from Memphis and we all were mightily moved by the good blues we heard. The band found out I was a musician and I gladly accepted their offer to sit in. We did "Come Back Baby" and "Honeybee Sail On" and others. Somehow, the whiskey was free from the bar and I didn't complain about it. It was then that I made a solemn but garbled vow to record in Clarksdale.⁴⁶

The cover claims that this is a benefit for Rosetta and a tribute to Charley; there is nothing about why Rosetta might need benefiting anywhere in the liner notes. The back intimates that as late as 1996 there was a secret Clarksdale that existed separate of traditional commerce such as shoe stores – a secret Clarksdale where the good blues knowledge travels by word of mouth, dependent on the shared meaning of decorative flour sacks and recognition of publicity photos,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

where the rewards are free whiskey and experiential good vibes. These are the gifts Clarksdale has to offer outsiders, according to Jimbo Mathus's notes, even those third-generation residents of Clarksdale who just haven't picked up the language.

This formulation has much in common with the source of the spoken-word piece Mathus layers over the last track on *Play Songs For Rosetta*, "Some Of These Days." Mathus credits that piece to Roebuck "Pops" Staples, at that time a resident of Chicago and patriarch of the Staples Singers, but does not mention the place that source saw print: Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues*.⁴⁷ Palmer provides no source himself for Staples's words, which occur in Palmer's chapter on Charley Patton. *Deep Blues* has no endnotes, though Palmer does note that he conducted extensive interviews that "furnished the basic materials for *Deep Blues*."⁴⁸ Presumably Staples's words come from one such interview. Without notes, however, it is difficult to make that determination. The lack of notes also paradoxically reinforces Palmer's aura of authority: without notes, the reader's eye encounters Palmer's text uninterrupted by citation of other researchers and voices. If the provenance of Roebuck Staples's words is unclear, a reasonable assumption is that Palmer provides Staples's voice for the reader as Palmer's own fresh research. Given the lack of notes in the rest of the book, the effect expands such that the information from Palmer's authorial voice becomes *the* paradigm through which to understand Delta blues – a contributing factor to making the *Deep Blues* history into mythology.⁴⁹

Another interview – this one with Muddy Waters in Chicago – plays a big role in Palmer's introduction, where Palmer sets up the lens through which he wants his readers to consider the importance of Delta blues. Like Mathus, Palmer starts out by establishing a

⁴⁷ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 61-62.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁴⁹ It's not that Palmer doesn't use and acknowledge the work of other scholars, because he does; it's that the visual representation and typography of *Deep Blues* makes Palmer look less dependent on other scholars' work. If readers trust what Palmer says, that reinforces Palmer as an authority and as the source from which blues history emerges.

reputable and white Clarksdale, where sixth-graders celebrate National Poetry Week by learning about Appalachian ballads rather than the music in their own back yards (or, one might imagine, their own cotton fields). He follows this story with a story about Alan Lomax and John Work searching for traces of Robert Johnson and instead finding and recording Muddy Waters – an intervention that Palmer claims eventually spurs Waters’s migration from Mississippi to Chicago during that same week that the sixth-graders in Clarksdale are learning about Appalachian ballads.⁵⁰ Outsiders – those who speak the language – find jewels of the Delta, the narrative goes. These same outsiders must therefore be responsible for bringing the jewels of the Delta to the attention of the outside world. Jimbo Mathus, who was an outsider (or at the very least a non-Delta resident) at the point he describes in the liner notes to *Play Songs For Rosetta*, did not have to record a tribute to Charley Patton in order to benefit Rosetta – but he did, and he did it immediately following the Squirrel Nut Zippers’ highest-selling album, *Hot*, at the height of the Zippers’ popularity, on the Zippers’ record label. Because of Mathus’s audience popularity and recent economic success with the Zippers, he had the latitude to record and distribute a project that would bring a jewel of the Delta to broader audience attention. *Play Songs For Rosetta* is as much for Charley Patton’s memory, in line with Palmer’s portrayal of Patton and Patton’s milieu in *Deep Blues*, as it is for his daughter.

Mathus’s Knock-Down Society did not only play compositions by Patton on *Play Songs For Rosetta*; songs on the album are also credited to Muddy Waters, Leadbelly, Bill Broonzy, Mathus himself, and Traditional. Rosetta herself, despite her name in the album’s title and her picture in the liner notes, tends to disappear into the background. This is the case everywhere but in the press done for the album. An interview with Mathus in the *Memphis Flyer* provides a look at Rosetta and her connection to Mathus. First, Rosetta’s name is Rosetta Brown. She was a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 1-3.

domestic worker employed by Mathus's aunt and uncle in Clarksdale. According to Mathus, Brown "worked for my aunt and uncle doing whatever. She did everything around the house – cooking, cleaning, taking care of babies, including me and my cousins. ...Every time I go back home, I go visit my aunts and uncles and Rosetta. She's just one of the people I consider part of my family."⁵¹ Yet Mathus apparently did not find out about the identity of Brown's father until 1991. The reason the album is a benefit for Brown also surfaces in the *Flyer* piece – Brown suffered a stroke at age eighty, and Mathus wanted to help with the ensuing medical bills. The *Flyer* piece also suggests, however, that this was not Mathus's only motivation in putting together *Play Songs For Rosetta*. According to the piece's author, Mark Jordan, the project "has also been about making that connection with one of his heroes, a bluesman whose records he hunched over as a youth."⁵² But Brown's stories about her father contrasted sharply with the narrative Mathus heard about Charley Patton.

"I learned a lot through this whole thing, about music and Rose[tta] and her father," Mathus says. "Rose told me a lot about him. She said he deserted the family when she was 13, I think. He would come back and visit, though, pretty regularly. He would come back down into the Delta after all the cotton was picked and everybody had money. That's where all the musicians would go. So, he'd go by and see them. She said he'd bring his guitar and he'd sing songs. She said he mostly sang gospel songs when he was around her. ... And you know how weird his voice is when he sings, she said when he talked he just talked like a normal guy.

"It was kind of cool to hear all that, to hear about a different side of him, because you always read how he was a drunkard, got his throat cut, cheated, and beat women with his guitar. Rose just had this other picture of him I've just never seen written about."⁵³

This other picture, however, does not surface on *Play Songs For Rosetta*. Instead it is all Delta blues as otherworldly secret language. Robert Palmer's work, which casts Patton as the

⁵¹ Mark Jordan, "Mississippi Moan," *Memphis Flyer*, Jan. 29, 1998, <http://www.memphisflyer.com/backissues/issue467/mus467.htm>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

domestically violent hellraiser, gets air time on the album; Rosetta, who reveals to Mathus a domesticated, gospel-singing Patton, doesn't even get her own last name.

It is into this environment shaped by dominant print narratives about the blues that Mathus brought Andrew Bird south, recording at Stackhouse Studio and Panny Mayfield's house in Clarksdale, and at Glennsway in New Orleans.⁵⁴ The *Play Songs For Rosetta* sessions also included Cody and Luther Dickinson, best known for their work in the North Mississippi Allstars, and Pat Sansone, best known for his work in Chicago-based Wilco – all of whom are Mississippi natives.⁵⁵ Bird and Mathus are the musicians backing John Sinclair's reading of Roebuck Staples's words over "Some Of These Days," a composition that Mathus credits to Charley Patton. Bird has been playing "Some Of These Days" since his recording work for *Play Songs For Rosetta*; the song also shows up on the Bowl of Fire's *Thrills*, recorded the next year. Bird's intonation sounds like that of a violinist trying to learn to play the fiddle; toward the end of phrases, Bird often slips and adds smooth vibrato on held notes. In contrast, the version of "Some Of These Days" on *Thrills* sounds much more deliberately unpolished, with emphasis on harmonious double stops – much more like a fiddler, in other words. Besides following Mathus's lead in song selection, Bird also followed Mathus's lead in composer credit; both albums credit the composition of "Some Of These Days" to Charley Patton.⁵⁶ "Some Of These Days" also shows up in the 2011 documentary film *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*, once more credited to

⁵⁴ Jas. Mathus and His Knock-Down Society, *Play Songs For Rosetta*.

⁵⁵ Sansone would later play on the Bowl of Fire's *The Swimming Hour*, and Bird's 2009 album *Noble Beast* (Fat Possum) was recorded in part at Wilco's loft – a combination clubhouse, warehouse, and recording studio – in Chicago.

⁵⁶ There is a strong case to be made for Patton's rendition of "Some Of These Days" being derived from Sophie Tucker's "Some Of These Days;" nevertheless, Mathus and Bird both credit Patton with the song. See Charley Patton, *Charley Patton: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order, Volume 2*, Document Records, 1990, compact disc; Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), 229.

Patton.⁵⁷ The staying power of Patton as part of Bird's repertoire is an indicator of the importance of Bird's time in Clarksdale and New Orleans, and Bird's work with Jimbo Mathus in general, to Bird's later career.

2.3 *A popular musician*

A crash course in "Some Of These Days" was not the only thing Andrew Bird received as a result of his time working with Jimbo Mathus. Bird got out of Chicago, met future collaborators, and generally immersed himself in environments that did not resemble Lake Forest, Evanston, or Chicago, yet also produced immense (and immensely valuable) bodies of popular music to which Bird previously had not been formally introduced. Put another way, the conservatory kid started hanging out with blues musicians. Bird became an audience member, becoming exposed to another repertoire. Even as his technique began to develop and smooth out, it changed – his violin work for Jimbo Mathus sounds little like his violin work for Kevin O'Donnell, and his violin work on the Bowl of Fire records sounds like neither. The intonation and phrasing are all different. This is a direct result of the sonic Jacuzzi approach to learning a new repertoire. Bird's time with Jimbo Mathus did not mean serving as a passive listener, but acquiring experiential knowledge of a blues repertoire and techniques, influenced by Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* – what could also be called the Palmer method.⁵⁸

Bird's experiences recording in the South gave him a great deal to think about; an opening set for folk group Waterson:Carthy that he did in Chicago in October 1997 suggests that he was indeed thinking about it. At a then-rare solo performance at the Old Town School of Folk

⁵⁷ Aranda, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*.

⁵⁸ Not that Palmer method.

Music, as part of a between-song monologue, Bird says, “Had a chance to play with a lot of Southern musicians of late and it’s influenced me quite a bit.”⁵⁹ This performance occurred after recording for *Play Songs For Rosetta*, but before the recording of the later Bowl of Fire albums, as well as his work for Kevin O’Donnell’s *Quality Six*. The Southern musicians in question: Mathus, Sansone, the Dickinson brothers, and the rest of the Knock-Down Society’s personnel.

Yet some tension is inherent between the Palmer-Mathus method and Bird’s own approach to music. Bird’s music as leader of the Bowl of Fire was less organized than the approaches of Kevin O’Donnell and the Squirrel Nut Zippers – and the cover letter he sent to Andrea Troolin at Rykodisc with his demo record some time around the end of 1996, handwritten on paper from a yellow legal pad, suggests something of why:

Over the past few years and many club dates, especially in my residency with the SNZippers, I have been learning the subtle art of making an audience loose [sic] their minds (that is without setting yourself on fire.) I guess you could say we put the fun back in to what is now considered “traditional” music. Swing, latin, Gypsy, celtic – these have all been “popular musics” at one time or place; why not here and now?⁶⁰

Playing that music for an audience, and focusing on that subtle art, suggests that the technique necessary for strict, faithful covers and renditions of forms of older music may not have been Bird’s main interest. Bird also appears to be less devoted to the propagation and preservation of genre than to “popular.” Rather, Bird appears to be more interested in audiences: music *for* people takes priority over music *by* people.

Bird also taught at the Old Town School of Folk Music at the time he opened for English folk group Waterson:Carthy – an experience that made a great impression upon him in terms of the importance of accessibility to music. Of this experience, he says:

⁵⁹ Andrew Bird, performance on October 17, 1997, at Old Town School of Folk Music, Chicago, IL, Windows Media Video file, Resource Center, Old Town School of Folk Music.

⁶⁰ Aranda, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*.

This was my first legitimate job. I just took anyone who came through the door who wanted to learn any type of fiddle playing, whether it be classical or Irish or old-time bluegrass, jazz, anything. ...the coolest thing about that time was just the total variety of students I had. One half hour I would have a 45-year-old attorney, and the next I'd have a retired machine worker. The attorney wants to learn classical, the machine worker wants to learn to play bluegrass. Actually, my favorite students were two sons of a Mexican immigrant. ...Their father spoke very little English. He just wanted them to have more than what the Chicago Public Schools had to offer. ...Old Town never pretended to be a totally accredited institution, and I respect that, because that's what folk music is about. It wouldn't be right to have too much structure on something that's meant to be a living tradition.⁶¹

To be able to teach such a wide variety of students – not to mention the wide variety of styles – requires a broad knowledge base, and the ability to switch between both students and styles with speed. It requires versatility. To get a sound “right” by playing mimetically in strict imitation of Charley Patton – this puts structure on what, as Bird says, is meant to be a living tradition. The comparative looseness of the Bowl of Fire speaks to Bird's belief that folk music is a living, not a fixed, tradition. Bird's work with others during the Bowl of Fire period was both time spent as an audience member – learning different approaches to music, learning about different people who want to play music for different reasons, learning how to build on his Western art base – as well as time spent as an apprentice, learning how to support himself as a musician as well as what kind of musician he wanted to be.

Delta blues musicians, as well as Mississippi prewar string bands, reappear in Bird's work over the longer temporal arc of Bird's career – but they reappear in ways that are different from the more strict, cover-style work he did in his early career. Nevertheless, it is this kind of cover-style work that first allowed Bird to blur these roles of audience member, apprentice, and professional musician. Bird, of course, does not stop here.

⁶¹ Antonia Simigis, “Oral Traditions,” *Time Out Chicago*, November 29, 2007, 28.

CHAPTER 3

At this point, post-Bowl of Fire and post-Mathus, Andrew Bird is a working musician struggling to break through to greater recognition. He is on the verge of developing his own style and sound of music, in contrast to the sonic Jacuzzi approach of his long apprenticeship. He is based in Chicago, but has recorded in Mississippi and Louisiana. He has worked with musicians from the South – foremost among them Jimbo Mathus – but his own approach to, and reasons for, making music conflict to some degree with Mathus’s approach to his own music in the late 1990s.

What I’m going to do next is explore the ramifications of this conflict. This requires stepping back from Andrew Bird and returning to the importance of narrative.

3.1 A note about narratives

Narratives have future power. Narratives have past power, as well, but our concern with the past, as Steve Guthrie suggested in 2008, means we look at the past “in order to understand, and even change, something in the present.”⁶² Kodwo Eshun, writing about science fiction, says that in retrospect, “it becomes apparent that science fiction was never concerned with the future,

⁶² Steve Guthrie, “Presentism and Pastism” (paper, 43rd International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, May 11, 2008).

but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.”⁶³ We can use narratives of the past to clarify or change our present, and we can use narratives that project into the future in order to work toward a desired future in the present, but we can never originate narratives from the physical position of the past. Guthrie describes his undergraduate Chaucer professor in 1966, “an emeritus don of Oxford who introduced the Wife of Bath to us as ‘a five letter word meaning lady dog’,” as “a presentist in the way that he was an Orientalist: his purpose was to colonize and civilize the Middle Ages in the name of the queen.”⁶⁴ This describes the nature of our relationship to the past. We draw the abstract resources we need from the past and make use of those resources in ways that help to affirm our present identities, and sometimes to reject the identities of others.

Narratives are resources: they are not lumber or coal or diamonds, but we fight over the elements and natures of past narratives in order to justify our manner of living in the present. When we create identities based on narratives, our colonization of the past affects the present as well as the future. Narratives influence paradigms; paradigms influence our use of the landscape and our treatment of others. The nature of narrative power depends on the individuals who interpret and wield those narratives, and the agendas those individuals may have. An example: in the hands of Guthrie’s Chaucer professor, a woman who raises the question of what women want is a bitch. Teaching students that women who have desires are bitches becomes part of a larger project to “civilize” by normalizing that notion, controlling paradigms about women and desire, and thereby influencing our treatment of others.

Narratives are at work in any given repertoire. A repertoire serves a function: it is a set of pieces that an artist is prepared to perform. In artistic fields such as theater, music, and literature,

⁶³ Kodwo Eshun, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (2003): 287-302. <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

⁶⁴ Guthrie, “Presentism and Pastism.”

repertoires exist in a dynamic relationship to the given field's canon. Because artistic endeavors have their own canonical traditions, the pieces that make up a given artist's repertoire become invested with cultural meaning that the pieces by themselves may not necessarily carry. The artist's work, therefore, takes on cultural meaning. By definition, canonical works display positive cultural values, or model right behavior; a canon validates cultural meaning by excluding works that do not perpetuate cultural value. In its original theological sense, the canon means the books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament; all other books composed around the same time are heretical. Official church institutions do not teach from them or draw from their narratives to instruct audiences – in this case, congregations – in the correct way to live, think, and otherwise conduct themselves. For these institutions, the stakes are high: the redemption of the world, a pleasant afterlife.

In this way, the politics of the repertoire become important: if questions of what is canonical can influence the location, duration, and existence of an immortal soul, repertoire then becomes a test. What the artist can (and is willing to) perform reveals that artist's stance amid the murky politics of canon formation. If the pieces of the repertoire are commonly regarded as part of a canon, then the artist is devoted to the perpetuation of that canon, and all the baggage that comes with it then comes to bear on that artist. The same is true even if the artist's repertoire is *not* part of a canon: why isn't it part of a canon? What is the artist's worth, and what is the artist trying to accomplish? What commentary and argument does the artist make? What values does the artist stand for? Audiences develop answers to these questions based on the knowledge and importance that they and their communities place on different canons.

Canon and narrative also have a relationship. The works that make up the canon – the pieces that make up the repertoire – are themselves repositories of behavior. Consider Guthrie's

undergraduate Chaucer professor again: in the mid-twentieth century, the professor's paradigm on the Western canon, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, worked hand in hand with his paradigm on the way the contemporary political world should be organized. The values with which the professor described the Wife of Bath, a woman who spoke frankly of sexuality and whose tale places female desire as the central concern, are the same values with which the professor approached his narrative of, and use of, the past: colonize it and civilize it for the perpetuation of the nation.

Narratives that exist within canons inflect and inflict meaning upon artists' repertoires. This meaning assists audiences in assigning value to artists' work. This meaning also influences artists' work whether artists intend for that to be the case or not. Marketing depends on it: conventional wisdom and what is canonical go hand in hand.

A narrative is one of the best tools available for people who want to control the future.

3.2 The Deep Blues narratives

At this point, I have described three discrete stages of Andrew Bird's apprenticeship, all of which are designed to build a repertoire on which Bird draws for his own compositions and his more current performances. The first is the Suzuki stage. The second is the conservatory at Northwestern. Bird was not a good fit at Northwestern, because the Western art canon did not mesh well with the music Bird wanted to play. The third is Bird's experience in the sonic Jacuzzi, with special attention paid to his further Southern migration working with Jimbo Mathus. This third stage was a better fit – but the repertoire and canon that Bird learned during this third stage still reflects cultural narratives and value judgments.

As my second chapter made clear, Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues* played a role in Bird's education during this third stage through Bird's participation in *Play Songs For Rosetta*. Marybeth Hamilton calls *Deep Blues* a canonical text; Samuel Floyd and James Cobb both cite it in their general studies of black music and the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, respectively.⁶⁵ Scholars and audiences have bought what *Deep Blues* is selling, and record labels and music promoters ensure that what *Deep Blues* sells survives. While I am willing to ascribe good intentions to Robert Palmer and other scholars like him, what *Deep Blues* is selling serves to bolster structural white supremacy by verbally erasing the structures and hierarchies of racism, while at the same time it uses racism and misogyny to make its arguments.

The construction that Palmer uses to set up *Deep Blues* is the one he returns to at the end, and it is this construction that reveals the narratives underlying Palmer's canonical text. He starts with a newspaper article from the Clarksdale *Register* in 1943 – a report about the musical doings of women and children. “Many of the students’ fathers were off fighting the war; their mothers soldiered on that warm, bright May with a combined celebration of National Poetry Week and National Music Week,” Palmer says.⁶⁶ He then quotes the *Register* article at length; like similar reports in rural newspapers of the era, the article describes the contents of the program, as well as who provided what – who discussed the Appalachian ballads the schoolchildren were learning, who loaned the phonograph and records for the presentation, who did the flower arranging, who made which snacks. Palmer assumes – likely accurately – that the gathered women and children were white, though he provides no reasoning for this assumption.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), 17; Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place On Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992).

⁶⁶ Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Viking, 1981), 1.

⁶⁷ The unnamed author of the article Palmer uses grants most of the ladies the title of *Mrs.*; this is the only evidence in favor of Palmer's assumption that I can see based solely on the information that Palmer provides.

He immediately follows this discussion by jumping back two years to 1941, when Alan Lomax and John Work first appeared in the area searching for Robert Johnson, and writes that instead of finding Robert Johnson, Lomax and Work found Muddy Waters. Palmer insinuates that this meeting led to Waters departing Mississippi the very month that the white women and children were learning about folk music, because Waters had had about all he could handle from the white overseer, who displayed “a certain patronizing aloofness” toward the sharecroppers under his supervision.⁶⁸

The meaning is plain: clubby, cliquy Clarksdale elites – white elites, dominated by women – were too racist, stupid, provincial, or all of the above to realize the talent around them that they willfully ignored and kept down. Palmer argues that the blues as poetry is “something truer and more genuinely of the spirit than the verse Miss Waddell’s Clarksdale English class was studying.”⁶⁹ Instead of studying Appalachian balladry, Palmer suggests by juxtaposition, the white women and children should have spent their time learning the poetry and music of deep blues. The absence of the fathers, too, is at fault; mothers have to “soldier on,” in Palmer’s martial formulation, in inculcating the white children of Clarksdale in music not their own. Meanwhile, the greatest cultural producers in Mississippi escape north, which Palmer does not miss, as immediately after he once more juxtaposes Waters and the women, he discusses the Great Migration.⁷⁰ Women have little place in *Deep Blues* – though to be fair, Palmer’s focus on blues musicians with connections to the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta prevents much discussion of the so-called blues queens.⁷¹ Still, when women appear in Palmer’s work, it is usually as

⁶⁸ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁷¹ Though this does in itself suggest that the music the blues queens did wasn’t deep – and one might assume that if it wasn’t deep, it was probably without depth.

supporters, as providers of domesticity, as providers of sexual gratification, and as the causes of the blues.⁷²

As for Palmer's racial narratives, they aren't much better. He describes the Muddy Waters encountered by Lomax and Work as possessing "features that lent him a certain Oriental inscrutability."⁷³ Local blacks willing to discuss Robert Johnson's death with Lomax and Work knew Johnson "as another no-good rambler who never stayed in one place too long, never put in an honest day's work, and made too many passes at married women."⁷⁴ Palmer claims that "it's difficult to imagine" those same Delta blacks "appreciating crisply enunciated blues verses set to melodies from Mozart or Tin Pan Alley."⁷⁵ He also casts Johnson as "the ultimate Other," five paragraphs before he claims that "we need to understand the people who made and listened to blues, not just as blacks or oppressed Americans or romantic archetypes or clever technicians or successful entertainers but as particular people who made particular personal and artistic choices in a particular place at a particular time."⁷⁶

On that point – not the point about Johnson as ultimate Other, the other point – I am in full agreement. I also agree with Palmer's claim that "[w]e need to understand what blues came from, where it grew, how it changed."⁷⁷ I do not, however, think it is necessary to explore these questions at the cost of other groups of people – not Palmer's women, not Palmer's inscrutable Orientals, not Palmer's dullard black laborers in the Delta whose musical taste isn't capable of

⁷² While other examples are plentiful in *Deep Blues*, here are two: there's Waters's girlfriend on page 12, who provides "subtle signs of a woman's touch all around [Waters's] house;" there's also Palmer's foregrounding of what is presumably a long interview with Joe Dockery, in which Dockery suggests on page 56 that "the blues means when a man has lost his woman. Which was all he had. He didn't have anything else." Dockery does not suggest, and Palmer does not speculate about, what women who sang the blues might have – possibly because in Palmer's formulations, there aren't any women who sing the blues.

⁷³ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 3.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

transcending ethnic and spatial categories. Palmer's constructions lack nuance and context – and in many cases, especially and most importantly in the case of how traces of African culture showed up in the Delta, those constructions do harm to Palmer's lofty claims about what “we” need to do.⁷⁸

Here is Robert Palmer's discussion of the Atlantic slave trade:

As the slave trade gathered momentum, it tended to shift further south [from Senegambia, or what are now the countries of Senegal and The Gambia], to the immense stretch of coastline Europeans loosely referred to as the slave coast – present day Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, Dahomey, Nigeria, and Cameroon. A third area south of the Congo River's mouth, along the coast of what is now Angola, also became an important slaving center. By 1807, when Great Britain and the United States officially outlawed the trade, slaving in Senegambia had dropped off dramatically and most of the activity was centered along the slave coast and the Angolan coastline.⁷⁹

Palmer's textual treatment of the Atlantic slave trade erases all European agency and responsibility. The slave trade “tended to shift” farther south; the traders did not shift the trade south. The trade shifted to the place “Europeans loosely referred to as the slave coast.” Presumably these loose references were part of daily, abstract conversation among residents of Lisbon, Madrid, London, Marseilles, and Brussels, given the broad brush with which Palmer paints these references. Part of Angola “also became an important slaving center.” Nobody developed the Angola coast into such a slaving center. And overall, most activity “was centered” along the slave and Angola coastlines. Nobody centered that trade there.

If my writing that you are reading right now seems angry, it is because I am angry. I am angry with Robert Palmer. It is very easy to slip into passive voice while writing, especially when writing about atrocities from which a writer may want to distance himself.⁸⁰ And it is very

⁷⁸ Also worth considering: who, exactly, is Palmer's *we*? What does that demographic look like?

⁷⁹ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 26.

⁸⁰ This is the most charitable interpretation of that passage I can make: that Palmer used passive constructions in order to distance himself from the myriad atrocities he writes about, and that this was his way of showing he did not

hard to write about music. When Palmer is not writing things that are misogynistic and racist and classist, he is a good writer and I enjoy his prose. But in *Deep Blues*, Palmer writes things that are misogynistic and racist and classist – and sometimes all at the same time. I admire and commend the apparent impulses that drove Palmer to write *Deep Blues*, and I am glad that Palmer tries to humanize musicians like Muddy Waters and Charley Patton for audiences who might not know much about those musicians. But in his description of the Atlantic slave trade, Robert Palmer writes as though real, actual people did not enslave real, actual other people, and he writes as though people did not put effort into cultivating an industry around treating other human beings as property – and I'm not okay with that. I'm not okay with white people who write about the blues and pretend that this isn't how the blues started in the United States and that this doesn't influence the way people talk about the blues, and music in general, to this day.

I'm not okay with it because *Deep Blues* is a canonical text that many people read and reference and use in their own work about the blues and its contexts. Palmer could not and cannot control how people respond to his work, and I don't fault him for that.⁸¹ But Palmer is the author of a work that is a part of a particular canon, a work that helps define repertoires, a work that contains narratives that help to preserve structural white supremacy by writing about the blues as though whites didn't have anything to do with enslaving Africans. Other people use Palmer's work to sell records, because Palmer's work is as much a work of mythology as it is a scholarly work. Palmer is not alone by any means in selling blues mythology as blues scholarship – Alan Lomax did it in *The Land Where The Blues Began*, and Ted Gioia does it in

endorse those atrocities. This is also why I am taking it a step further by using first person to make these statements, because Palmer did not.

⁸¹ For one thing, Palmer died in 1997. But even when he was alive, there were limits to his ability to influence how people used *Deep Blues*.

Delta Blues.⁸² When scholars such as James Cobb and Samuel Floyd draw on *Deep Blues*, blues mythology becomes blues scholarship. What people understand to be conventional wisdom, popular understanding, and truth therefore comes from deeply flawed works – works that suggest that only a certain kind of people make good music, and only a certain kind of people can appreciate that music.

If this sounds like the stance that Andrew Bird appears to have found off-putting about his time at Northwestern, it should. This is the same stance. The only thing that has changed about this stance is the style of music in question.

3.3 *The Knock-Down Society Plays Songs for Charley*

To see the blues canon at work in Bird's apprenticeship period, we can return to Jimbo Mathus and *Play Songs For Rosetta*. What the album became, and how people wrote about the album, is far from the way Mathus envisioned it when the idea first came to him. Mathus wrote about Rosetta Brown for the *Oxford American* while the album was still in development, and the way he frames the situation early on is very different from both the album's liner notes and the interview in the *Memphis Flyer*.⁸³ First, Rosetta Brown gets her own last name in the first sentence. Before Mathus writes about Brown's life, he provides disclosures: "I took the following notes at her residence on Christmas Eve, 1996, with her permission and in the presence of her granddaughter, Kechia Brown, aged sixteen. Due to a stroke, Rose was not in the best of health, and I was careful not to press her too hard with questions." The results of the questions that Mathus provides include the full name of Brown's mother, Martha Christian

⁸² Alan Lomax, *The Land Where The Blues Began* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); Ted Gioia, *Delta Blues* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

⁸³ Jimbo Mathus, "Rosetta and Me," *Oxford American* No. 16, 1996, 46.

Brown, the reasons that Brown's mother separated from Charley Patton, that Patton's signature is on Brown's birth certificate, and that because Patton "had not followed proper copyright procedure," Brown is ineligible for any royalties from Patton's recordings – a fact ascertained by a lawyer hired by Mathus's family for that purpose. Mathus closes the article by soliciting donations to be sent directly to Brown, for the purpose of a nurse and general household support after her stroke, and that all proceeds from the album in development will go to Brown. He also says that by Brown's request, the album that he is putting together will include at least one of Patton's gospel songs – which it did.⁸⁴

Mathus's *Oxford American* article is about Rosetta Brown. It is about the good care and friendship she provided Mathus, about where she grew up and her relationship to her father, about her own musical inclinations and her faith, about the hard work she did well for Mathus's family. In contrast, the album notes do not mention Brown by her own name, or in any other context except that of her being Mathus's friend. The album notes are about the secret Clarksdale of music and whiskey; the album is about Charley Patton. The *Memphis Flyer* article is little different, the only innovation being that it intimates that Brown knew a different Patton than the scholarship indicates – a Patton that Brown spoke about to Mathus.

The resulting album, however, does not show this Patton. Instead, the album features Robert Palmer's work, and is structured in a way that traces the same musical genealogy of Patton and Waters that Palmer traces in *Deep Blues*. *Play Songs For Rosetta* depends on the blues canon. It does not provide a different look at Charley Patton. It is not in the tradition of Patton so much as it is in the tradition of Delta blues mythology. Even knowing about Brown's Patton, Mathus – and perhaps Mammoth Records – chose to showcase Palmer's Patton, in

⁸⁴ Ibid.

keeping with the narratives of blues canon.⁸⁵ And at root, at heart, the narratives of blues canon are, like all canonical narratives, narratives of exclusion. Marybeth Hamilton, who calls Palmer's *Deep Blues* canonical, shows one result of these narratives of exclusion, based on Greil Marcus's treatment of Robert Johnson in *Mystery Train*:

Whatever unvarnished truth I was hearing in punk, it seemed Robert Johnson had got there first, and in his shadow everything else became play-acting, flimsy, trifling, inconsequential and fake. Reading about him left me feeling challenged and, in some obscure way, affronted. Marcus's rhapsodic praise of the tormented drifter seemed somehow to exclude me, as a woman if nothing else. Perhaps that was why it took me fifteen years to get around to listening to Johnson's recordings, and why, when I did, I heard very little, just a guitar, a keening vocal and a lot of surface noise. I certainly did not hear the tale of existential anguish that Marcus and others discerned within them. I wondered if this revealed some defect in me, or if there might be another blues story to tell.⁸⁶

If the goal is to get people listening to blues, so that artists – and their families, in the case of Rosetta Brown – make a living from their work, making blues an unfriendly space for at least half the human population doesn't work very well. In his treatment of Johnson, Greil Marcus claims that “[t]he original context of Johnson's story is important, and it is where his story is usually placed; but a critic's job is not only to define the context of an artist's work but to expand that context, and it seems more important to me that Johnson's music is vital enough to enter other contexts and create all over again.”⁸⁷ Marcus expands that context by arguing for Johnson as a contemporary, and inescapably American; Hamilton indicates, though, what Johnson's music is creating in these more contemporary contexts is an anti-democratic space, where tormented drifters find no succor. The context gets in the way of the music.

Hamilton responds to Marcus – and to Palmer – by writing a book arguing that early blues aficionados, professional and amateur, had specific racial tropes that they were inclined to

⁸⁵ Which, to be fair, is also John Fahey's Patton, given that Palmer's Patton chapter in *Deep Blues* draws heavily from Fahey's work. See John Fahey, *Charley Patton* (London: Studio Vista, 1970).

⁸⁶ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 5.

⁸⁷ Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (New York: Plume, 1997), 33-34.

follow. When Andrew Bird responds to these similar narratives surrounding the blues, he responds in his own music, by using that music as a launching point for critique.

3.4 She's got blood in her eyes for you

There are two songs on two albums that make the shift in Bird's use of prewar Mississippi music evident. Both use the work of the Mississippi Sheiks – a string band with rotating membership and the Chatmon family at the center, a family with whom Charley Patton was close and to whom he may have been related – but the two songs use the work in very different ways.⁸⁸ The first, more traditional song is “Too Long” from the final Bowl of Fire album, *The Swimming Hour* (2001). Bird credits this song to the Sheiks in the liner notes, saying that “‘Too Long’ is derived from a Mississippi Sheiks Recording (1931), though it was not written by them, author unknown, pub. unknown.” The vocals are in two-part harmony, sung by Bird (who sings lead) and Nora O'Connor. Tuba provides bass. Colin Bunn and Kevin O'Donnell – Bird's Northwestern collaborators – provide guitar and drums. Bird takes a few lengthy, affectedly messy fiddle breaks. It sounds like exactly what it is: a polished version of a Sheiks song.

Between 2001 and 2005, however, Bird's use of the Sheiks became something different – something more thoughtful, more critical, and less in step with conventional wisdom, popular understanding, or the truth about prewar music in Mississippi. This second song is “Fake Palindromes” from Bird's 2005 solo album *The Mysterious Production of Eggs*.

⁸⁸ Palmer, *Deep Blues*, 51; the same information is also in Ted Gioia's *Delta Blues*, though sourced to Stephen Calt and Gayle Wardlow.

Bird's violin is the first sound in the song, and it provides the first fake palindrome: something that appears to be the same backwards as it is forwards, but which upon closer examination is not precisely the same, and thus not a palindrome at all. In the first recurring violin run, which slopes ornamentally up and down like a turn, the first note is a third.⁸⁹ That third is a major third as the run goes up, but on the way down, Bird flattens that note. The pattern repeats throughout the song. A flattened third like this is a characteristic blue note. Bird's use of a blue note in that repeating phrase is an illustration of the song's title; if the phrase suggests the palindrome, the presence of the blue note renders the phrase's palindrome fake.

The other place a fake palindrome appears in the song is related to the work of the Mississippi Sheiks. As their name suggests, they were a band from Mississippi. The Sheiks were “from the hilly area around Jackson, actually a bit outside the area commonly referred to as the Delta.”⁹⁰ The Chatmon family – sometimes rendered as the Chatman family, depending on the source – made the core of the Sheiks: Henderson, the father, sons Lonnie and Sam, grandson Peter Chatmon, better known as Memphis Slim.⁹¹ Other periodic members included Charlie McCoy, Bo Carter, and Walter Vinson, among others.⁹² The Mississippi Sheiks were notable for playing for both black and white audiences. Sam Chatmon put this down to profits: “Mighty seldom I played for colored. They didn't have nothing to hire you with.”⁹³

Sam Chatman [sic] explained that musicians would usually receive about two dollars for playing at a black house party. Out of this income they would have to buy their own food and drink. White parties, on the other hand, could bring in an average of five dollars per musician as well as a plate of food. In addition, the white parties Chatman remembered usually wound down before midnight, while the black functions could go well into the

⁸⁹ Turn here is a technical term – a kind of ornamentation in Western art music, distinct from other kinds of ornamentation including trills, mordents, and acciaccaturas.

⁹⁰ The Mississippi Sheiks, *Honey Babe Let The Deal Go Down: The Best of Mississippi Sheiks*, Sony Legacy, 2004, compact disc.

⁹¹ Lomax, *The Land Where The Blues Began*, 383-84.

⁹² Lomax, *The Land Where The Blues Began*, 384; Francis Davis, *The History of the Blues: The Roots, The Music, The People: From Charley Patton to Robert Cray* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 113.

⁹³ Davis, *The History of the Blues*, 28.

morning hours. For struggling musicians like Chatman and his brothers, the early end to a party could mean a precious few extra hours of sleep before having to wake for their day jobs the next morning.⁹⁴

Working for white audiences was thus not only lucrative, but also had side benefits. Recording worked the same way in general for the Sheiks; various group members, including Sam and Lonnie Chatmon, Bo Carter, and Walter Vinson, would reorganize themselves into different smaller groups in order to maximize their profits by recording more music in different permutations for the white-owned record label Okeh.⁹⁵ It's one such Okeh session, featuring only Walter Vinson and Lonnie Chatmon recording as the Mississippi Sheiks, that produced "I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You." Personnel for the song were Lonnie Chatmon on fiddle and Walter Vinson and guitar and vocals. They recorded the song in Atlanta on October 25, 1931.⁹⁶ The writer credit for "I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You" is variously Chatmon's, Vinson's, or neither.⁹⁷ There is general agreement that the band that recorded "I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You" in Atlanta in October 1931 billed themselves as the Mississippi Sheiks.

Andrew Bird's interest in the Mississippi Sheiks goes beyond a simple cover version or lyric reference. A documentary project by a French photographer includes a Polaroid photograph of Bird; the project consists of musicians holding a small chalkboard where they have written the names of their own favorite musicians. In the Polaroid of Bird, uploaded to Flickr on August 23, 2009, he stands facing the camera with three words written in capital letters: THE MISSISSIPPI

⁹⁴ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), 65.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁹⁶ The Mississippi Sheiks, *Mississippi Sheiks: Complete Recorded Works In Chronological Order: 25 October 1931 to 26 March 1934*, Document, 1991, compact disc.

⁹⁷ The Sony Legacy collection (2004) assigns the credit to Carter, the Document recording (1991) provides no credit, and Michael Taft (*Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1983)) assigns the credit to Vinson.

SHEIKS.⁹⁸ That Bird would cite the Mississippi Sheiks as his favorite band in 2009 suggests that he does not merely recognize the Sheiks as an influence on his own work, or see the Sheiks merely as artists whose work he can cover as he likes, but also that the Mississippi Sheiks are a band to whom Bird feels some sort of connection or attachment.⁹⁹

This connection becomes clear in “Fake Palindromes,” though not in ways that are wholly positive. To understand the connection in “Fake Palindromes,” it is important to first know the story that “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You” tells. Despite the lack of gendered pronouns that would identify the gender of the speaker, it’s reasonable to read the speaker in the Sheiks song as a man, given that the speaker dons a tie before embarking on his journey. The journey in question is simple: the man, “feeling blue” one morning, sees an attractive woman – a prostitute – and decides that he wants to have sex with her. He “put[s] on [his] tie,” and sets out for what he terms his “date.” The woman looks him over, “[begins] to smile,” and asks, “[C]an’t you wait a little while?” The man responds that he cannot wait, accuses the woman of not fulfilling her portion of the transaction, and proceeds to lecture her about her unfair behavior, telling her that he is “going to tell [her] the facts,” and that there’s no “need of getting rocks in [her] jaws” – no need of a stiff jaw, or of stubbornness. The song concludes after one last rendition of the chorus: “Hey hey baby I’ve got blood in my eye for you / Hey hey baby I’ve got blood in my eye for you / I’ve got blood in my eyes for you baby, I don’t care what in the world you do.” The man asserts after every couplet that there’s nothing that the woman can do about his lust – his blood – for her. “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You” is a story about gendered power dynamics in six verses: the first three verses feature the man’s decision to assuage his blue

⁹⁸ “Andrew Bird,” *Flickr.com*, photographed by amnotham, accessed March 16, 2013, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/amnotham/3853435598>.

⁹⁹ Robert Palmer does discuss the Chatmons in relation to Charley Patton in *Deep Blues*; however, there is no documentation to show that Bird’s knowledge of the Sheiks came from his time working with Jimbo Mathus on *Play Songs For Rosetta*.

feelings by acting on his lust, and when the woman won't immediately give him what he wants, he spends the last three verses berating her. In effect, the narrative action of the lyrics only happens in the first half of the song. More, the implication is that the woman gives up her right to consent to sex because of the financial transaction taking place – that once the woman has taken the man's money, the right to dictate the terms of the sexual encounter is universally his. Sex is a commodity in "I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You," and once money has changed hands, any opposition on the part of the woman should be met with half a song's worth of the man's haranguing. If the man has the money to indulge his lust, "I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You" implies, then his lust must be indulged. The woman should not be allowed to change the terms of the deal, withdraw her consent, or take time before the transaction takes place. The man doesn't entertain any potential reasons the woman might want to wait – perhaps she has some blue feelings herself – and displays no desire to do so.

A fake palindrome is something that appears to be the same both backwards and forwards, but that isn't the same thing upon closer examination. The fake palindrome in this particular scenario is the man's assumption that because women are available for sex – and specifically, sex as a transaction – women have the desire to have that kind of sex and that women should not negotiate for mutually agreeable terms. The man assumes that the woman feels the same way that he feels about sex. That assumption, Andrew Bird suggests in "Fake Palindromes," is false.

"I've Got Blood In My Eyes For You" tells a fairly linear narrative from a man's perspective. The speaker's perspective in "Fake Palindromes" has no clear gender.¹⁰⁰ The speaker spends most of his time not interacting with the unnamed woman in "Fake Palindromes," the "dewey-eyed Disney bride," but instead observing her actions and periodically offering

¹⁰⁰ Given that a man composed and performs the song, I'm using male pronouns for the purposes of clarity.

commentary – a sympathetic peanut gallery that’s aware of gender dynamics. The speaker suggests that the woman has been subject to efforts to embalm her, asking her “what has tried / swapping your blood for formaldehyde? / Monsters?” The suggestion is that the woman is in danger, in one way or another, of losing her life and becoming preserved, whether literally or figuratively. The speaker then invokes other voices, “whiskey-plied” voices that first call attention to the murder of a brother, and then tell the woman, “Jesus don’t you know that you coulda died, you should have died / with the monsters what talk / monsters what walk the earth.” What is clear is that the woman has been attacked by monsters whose nature is veiled – and that at least a few of the drunken voices are inclined to place blame for the attack on the woman, who in their estimation “should have died,” and should have known something about the attack.

The speaker then switches away in his observations, and places his attention firmly on her, giving descriptions of what tools she uses to enhance her appearance and appeal: “red lipstick and a bright pair of shoes,” tall socks that hide physical imperfections, “certain fads, stripes and plaids[, and] singles ads.” The impression is that this is a woman who respects fads and feels obliged to follow them even if they seem painful – “they run you hot and cold,” the speaker says. “So you bite on a towel / hope it won’t hurt too bad.” This is a woman, in other words, who does not necessarily want to follow all of these trends in order to project an attractive appearance worthy of that “dewey-eyed Disney bride,” but who keeps her mouth shut and follows the pack. It’s evident, however, that the strain wears on her:

she’s got an old death kit
she’s been meaning to use
she’s got blood in her eyes, in her eyes for you
she’s got blood in her eyes for you

Whom the “old death kit” is meant for, and what it consists of, is unclear at this point, but taken with the echo of the Mississippi Sheiks’ line, the meaning of the death kit becomes sinister: it’s a toolbox of death that can presumably bring death or cause it, and given the strain that the woman is under, the blood in her eyes may not be sexual lust. It may be bloodlust. This interpretation is reinforced by the last verse, in which the woman gets to speak for herself. She echoes common language used in singles ads in a discussion of what she likes and what she’s looking for in a partner, and then finally snaps: “some lonely night we can get together / and I’m gonna tie your wrists with leather / and drill a tiny hole into your head.” The respondent to her ad doesn’t get a choice. He will be the victim of her violent act. She will restrain him while she puts a hole in his head – maybe trepanning-style to relieve some pressure on his brain, maybe for a lobotomy, maybe just to see the pain on display.¹⁰¹ Either way, or some other way, the death kit she’s been meaning to use is now a toolkit that will help her put on a display of violence. The blood in her eyes is not like the blood in the eyes of the man in “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You.” The blood in her eyes is what makes this palindrome fake: if she has lust for a man, it’s tied up in anger and in reactionary violence against the pressures that rendering herself sexually attractive put on her.

It takes an understanding of the Mississippi Sheiks’ “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You,” as well as an understanding of the Sheiks’ importance to Andrew Bird, to come to this reading of “Fake Palindromes.” If “Fake Palindromes” is a response to “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You,” it’s not a stretch to call it a feminist response: rather than focusing only on a man’s point of view, as the Sheiks do, Bird uses a similar man’s ideas about women to provide a woman’s point of view and commentary about those ideas.

¹⁰¹ An early version of this song exists in an audience tape from a concert at Schuba’s in Chicago on January 12, 2001; the phrase “she’s got blood in her eyes for you” does not appear, and neither does the ornamented violin run. The song, according to the file, is called “Trepanation.”

What would be a stretch considerably too far is to argue that “Fake Palindromes” is a response aimed at the Mississippi Sheiks and no one else. These readings of “Fake Palindromes” and “I’ve Got Blood In My Eyes For You” are products of late twentieth century critical thinking shaped by late twentieth century cultural theory. Seventy-four years have passed between the Sheiks’ recording in Atlanta and the release of *Andrew Bird & The Mysterious Production of Eggs*. In that span, Vinson and Chatmon have died, and the worlds they moved in have changed – no *de jure* segregation, among other things. In addition, the Sheiks were by no means the only blues musicians to perform and record songs propagating institutionalized misogyny. It would be a mistake to assume that “Fake Palindromes” is aimed at the Sheiks. If “Fake Palindromes” is a direct response to anything or anyone, it is a direct response that warns of the potential dangers of institutionalized misogyny, aimed at anyone who needs to hear that response. The likeliest audience for that response would be an audience that can pick up on the source of “she’s got blood in her eyes for you” – an audience that knows the work of the Mississippi Sheiks.

3.5 Civilizing the blues in whose name?

In absence of extensive quantitative data spanning decades of record companies, festivals, musicians, and individual record collections, and in absence of extensive qualitative data consisting of cross-demographic oral histories, what I have is ultimately anecdotal evidence of the propensities of white audiences of varying degrees of professional inclination to shape the blues – and consumption of pre-World War II music. This evidence may not be wholly convincing. Nevertheless, the evidence consists of narratives, and narratives have power. I find Marybeth Hamilton’s arguments about the construction of blues as first a genre, then a popular

genre, by white folklorists, record collectors, and activists to be compelling and convincing.

Hamilton suggests that the people who built the blues generally did so in a quest to find black voices uncorrupted by the trappings of modernity – technology, Tin Pan Alley, urban living.

At the core of the idea of a Delta blues, of an undiluted and primal black music, is an emotional attachment to racial difference that extends back at least to the mid-nineteenth century, to abolitionists' enchantment with the peculiar power of black singers, their uncanny ability to allow their white listeners to experience an unimagined transcendence, a level of emotional intensity otherwise out of their reach.¹⁰²

There were many points in the twentieth century at which such an emotional attachment was a useful tool for racial progressives. Indeed, this was a major part of the blues revival – the ability to point at a powerful voice singing about universally understandable emotion and then argue that this is evidence of the humanity of African Americans, and that humans deserve equal treatment. Given that slavery in the United States involved treating people as property, and that slaves counted legally as three-fifths of a person, arguments to sway white public opinion in favor of the essential humanity of African Americans were necessary.

Yet Samuel Charters, who wrote an early book with such an agenda, admitted that his efforts were not wholly successful in the ways he had in mind. In his preface to the 1975 edition of his 1959 book *The Country Blues*, Charters wrote that his hope was to attract the interest of “a certain kind of younger, middle-class white American” to the blues – a phrase that reeks of code of some sort, though it’s not immediately clear what the encoded phrase might mean.¹⁰³

Fortunately, Charters sheds some light on his own code a few pages later, saying, “This effort to involve the white intellectual in the larger patterns of black life wasn't particularly successful.

Instead of accepting black culture they tended to select certain artists out of it -- artists who,

¹⁰² Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 18.

¹⁰³ Samuel Charters, *The Country Blues*, 2nd edition (New York: Da Capo, 1975), x.

generally, came closest to a white concept of what a blues artist should be.”¹⁰⁴ Charters attempted to attract, in other words, educated white audiences, who, rather than integrate an apparently monolithic “black culture” and “black life” into their own listening, instead cherry-picked artists that met their standards shaped by their own preconceptions. Charters could not wholly control the reactions of his intended audience to his arguments, and those intended audience members included record collectors who had little interest in using Delta blues for political reasons. Instead, they claimed that the music was pure art, “the soil from which jazz sprang,” and – importantly – apolitical.¹⁰⁵ Some of those record collectors went on to release some of the recordings of Charley Patton on LP under the name of the Origins Jazz Library, and these recordings influenced the later work of John Fahey, Robert Palmer, and Greil Marcus, among others.¹⁰⁶

The narrative of the life of Charley Patton that Jimbo Mathus put on *Play Songs For Rosetta* during Andrew Bird’s apprenticeship has a genealogical history, and that genealogy goes back to a fascination with racial difference. Mathus could have shown the more domesticated Charley Patton that Rosetta Brown knew, and by doing so challenged the narratives on which that genealogy depends; instead, Mathus continued Robert Palmer’s genealogy of Patton in particular and blues canon narratives in general. In the stages of Bird’s apprenticeship as defined by the Bowl of Fire era, Bird also continued this more general genealogy. In his solo work, however, Bird steps away from that pedigree by critiquing the music of the Sheiks as he imagines contemporary listeners understand the Sheiks’ music. Stepping away from this pedigree is important, vital, difficult work because of the persistence of pernicious, harmful narratives within canons.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., xv.

¹⁰⁵ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 184.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 185-86.

Returning to Robert Palmer: the good points of *Deep Blues* are the places where Palmer serves as advocate for individual musical artists. *Deep Blues* helps to legitimize (for white audiences) the then-contemporary work of Muddy Waters by both humanizing Waters and showing Waters's lengthy artistic pedigree. But Palmer makes these points by taking shots at the whites of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta, as well as women's work inside and outside the home, while at the same time erasing more individual and collective responsibility for the historical contexts that led to the environment in which Waters developed his music. As a canonical work, *Deep Blues* transmits both narratives of value and these more problematic narratives.

So to some extent, I agree with Marybeth Hamilton's assessment of the early white folklorists, collectors, and activists:

The folklorists, critics and collectors I've written about were all searching for that vicarious ecstasy [found in "the peculiar power of black singers"]. All were born in the era of segregation; in different ways, all felt imaginatively tied to the South. Throughout their lives, they made racial assumptions that were hackneyed, condescending and often offensive. Yet as I read their words, tracked their obsessions, and revisited their journeys, I came to appreciate what they have left us, the reservoir of recovered music, the chain of knowledge and expertise. In time, I learned to admire the sheer fortitude it took to engage with an art form that few whites of their generation respected. Even as they feared black modernity, they struggled to cope with it, and sometimes to transcend their racist beginnings. We are their debtors, even if we cannot avoid being their critics.¹⁰⁷

Where I part, however, is in the idea – which Hamilton does not put forth, and I want to be clear about that – that the best that Hamilton's folklorists, critics, and collectors could give us in their era remains good enough for our current circumstances. The work of Hamilton's subjects gave us the work of Robert Palmer. Hamilton acknowledges Palmer's influence in thinking about the blues and implicitly challenges his work with her own. It is past time to make that challenge explicit and reassess the earlier work from which people derive and disseminate dominant

¹⁰⁷ Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*, 18.

understandings of the blues – the blues canon – and to provide different understandings that do not pretend to raise one group of people by lowering others.¹⁰⁸

Andrew Bird does this with his solo work. It started as he developed the early material for his 2003 and 2005 albums, including “Fake Palindromes.” He commences this work in earnest with his 2007 album, *Armchair Apocrypha*.

¹⁰⁸ I say “pretend to raise;” given that common negative stereotypes of African American men and women undergird portrayals of bluesmen, Delta and otherwise, I am not convinced that the work of Palmer and others to raise awareness of the music balances the stereotypes they deploy to raise that awareness.

CHAPTER 4

4.1 *The armchair room (the first layer)*

Start at the beginning. The title of the album is *Armchair Apocrypha*.¹⁰⁹ What does this mean?

The first chord of the first song makes an imagined space for work to be done – a laboratory, a classroom, a cloister, a room of one’s own. Andrew Bird manipulates sound in such a way that the reverberation of the first chord – played on the guitar, struck rhythmically over and over, held for ten seconds before the first progression – stacks sound waves upon sound waves, until those waves begin to echo back. To make an echo, the waves must hit and bounce off of something; the waves have hit a barrier. The echo is evidence that the listener is not in some boundless, timeless space, but in a place with walls. Because this chord is held for ten seconds – it is not minutes’ worth of drone – and the echo stacks on itself after three seconds, this is not a large room.

Andrew Bird uses the first chord to conjure a room. What occurs in this room?

This room is an imagined space. Imagine an armchair. It is probably comfortable; after all, the album is not titled *Metal Folding Chair Apocrypha*, or *Three-Legged Wooden Stool Apocrypha*. An armchair belongs in a living room, a study, a library, a bedroom – all rooms whose designed purpose is deep thinking and intimate living, all rooms that can be found in the

¹⁰⁹ Andrew Bird, *Armchair Apocrypha*, Fat Possum, 2007, compact disc.

home, depending on how fancy that home might be. In this imagined room conjured with the first chord of the album, Andrew Bird has placed an armchair.

Turn now to *apocrypha*. The OED traces the etymology first from the Greek, then from the Latin: hidden, or “those hidden away.” In English the word has two common uses as an adjective and as a noun. The adjective form means “of unknown authorship; not authentic; spurious; uncanonical; false.” The noun form means “a writing or statement of doubtful authorship or authenticity,” with special attention paid to those books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament deemed by Jews and Protestants “as having no well-grounded claim to inspired authorship.” The room, the armchair, and the apocrypha. The imagined space, the armchair for deep thinking in a domestic environment, the narratives that, while perhaps relevant to an experience of a relatively common system of belief, are nonetheless excluded from orthodox theory and praxis. *Armchair Apocrypha*: *armchair* is the modifier, and *apocrypha* is the noun. The OED has this to say about *armchair* as a modifier: “in the home; hence domesticated, comfortable; often applied to persons who confine themselves or are addicted to homemade views or criticism of matters in which they take no active part, or of which they have no first-hand knowledge, as *armchair critic*, *armchair politician*, *armchair travel*, *armchair traveller*.”¹¹⁰ What, then, is *armchair apocrypha*?

Armchair Apocrypha is contemplation of unorthodox and heterodox narratives, from the position of one’s own armchair, in that room of one’s own that Andrew Bird conjures with the first chord of “Fiery Crash.” *Armchair Apocrypha* involves those unorthodox and heterodox narratives in which the person in the armchair takes no *active* part. Yet the presence of *apocrypha* suggests that the person in the armchair is nonetheless involved: apocrypha cannot exist without its counterpart, the canon. In the case of religious apocrypha, the canon is what

¹¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.vv. “apocrypha,” “armchair,” accessed November 29, 2012.

constitutes a system of belief. Apocrypha consists of narratives in the margins. If the religion and the canon form the straight and narrow path of right belief and right behavior, apocrypha suggests divergence, diversity, and, ultimately, a better rounded, more nuanced understanding of the circumstances under which that system of belief came to exist.

What, then, of the room of one's own? *Apocrypha* is heterodox, and, as the Greek etymology suggests, must be hidden. *Armchair*, says the OED, connotes domesticity and comfort; it is a place where an individual can construct opinions about matters in which they take no active part. This is the purpose of Andrew Bird's imagined room created with the first chord of *Armchair Apocrypha*: a safe and comfortable place to encounter and come to terms with narratives previously hidden.

4.2 (*The canon and*) *Southern music*

The presence of apocrypha implies the presence of a canon. There are two sets of canon at work, and two sets of apocrypha. The first set involves Andrew Bird's artistic processes, and the circumstances and contexts surrounding the album. The second set involves the content of the album – the subject material of the lyrics, and the methods by which Bird produces the music. These sets of canon and apocrypha can roughly be considered as external and internal, and yet neither is wholly self-contained. External processes – the circumstances and contexts surrounding the creation of the album – influence internal processes, and external canon-apocrypha sets influence internal canon-apocrypha sets. (Later in Bird's career, the internal as displayed in *Armchair Apocrypha* comes to influence the external of his next three albums, *Noble Beast*, *Break It Yourself*, and *Hands of Glory*, but that will not be addressed in this

chapter.¹¹¹) To understand the internal canon and apocrypha, it is necessary to begin with the external canon-apocrypha set, which goes back to the earliest days of Bird's education.

Andrew Bird, the classically trained violinist, is a graduate both of Northwestern's conservatory and an informal period of apprenticeship learning styles and techniques of American popular music. His work with Jimbo Mathus indicates exposure to canonical work in country blues. While his work at the conservatory was the canon, the more popular music was the apocrypha; after he left Northwestern, the more popular music became the canon. Andrew Bird's early music was thus founded on performing orthodoxy, which for armchair scholars of folk music often depended on how well an artist could replicate music originally recorded with shoddy, cheap technology under poor recording conditions, as well as how thoroughly an artist knew a recording catalogue.¹¹² Bird played this version of a canon well enough, whether at live performances or on studio albums, that he could make a living.

The 2001 release of *The Swimming Hour*, however, marked the last point at which Bird in the studio would fully embrace that orthodoxy. Beginning with *Weather Systems* in 2003, Bird referenced forms and styles commonly associated with Southern music less and less frequently – and when he did, they were transformed nearly beyond recognition, including a cover of a country-style song by the Handsome Family (“Don't Be Scared”) arranged into something far more orchestral with no twang at all, and including “Fake Palindromes” on 2005's *The Mysterious Production of Eggs*.¹¹³ This also marks the start of the period in which the press outlets concerned with what most called indie rock, Pitchfork foremost among them, began to

¹¹¹ Andrew Bird, *Noble Beast*, Fat Possum, 2009, compact disc; Andrew Bird, *Break It Yourself*, Mom + Pop, 2012, compact disc; Andrew Bird, *Hands of Glory*, Mom + Pop, 2012, compact disc.

¹¹² Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues: Black Voices, White Visions* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007). Hamilton discusses these themes throughout the book.

¹¹³ Andrew Bird, *Weather Systems*, Righteous Babe, 2003, compact disc; Andrew Bird, *Andrew Bird & The Mysterious Production of Eggs*, Righteous Babe, 2005, compact disc.

pay attention to Bird's work. This period converged with Bird changing his focus on stage from leading a band to building a solo act – a vital transformation, to be addressed further later on.

Before that, though, remember that Bird's early success came with his participation in a particular musical culture founded upon styles that, at the point he played them, were seventy years old at their most recent. While it seems likely that Bird was drawn to this music at least in part because of its technical interest – he did, after all, play experimental music on multiple occasions at Northwestern – it helped that for a period in the 1990s, this music was also in fashion. Fashion, Arjun Appadurai argues, has something to do with nostalgia. Appadurai makes this argument about the fashion of material objects, but these arguments are nonetheless applicable to music, despite music's nature as something other than a concrete, material object: people can and do recognize sound cues as evocative of time, space, culture, genre, race, class, and gender (the playing of "Dixie," for example, covers most of these criteria), which people can also do with material objects.¹¹⁴ Appadurai focuses first in his discussion on the nature of patina (defined as "that property of goods by which their age becomes a key index of their high status") and its relationship to nostalgia, arguing that the presence of patina on an object always indicates "the fact that a way of living is now gone forever," which he aptly describes as a "nostalgic posture." Appadurai's primary example for these phenomena is gift-order catalogues and mass advertising, which he suggests generates several different kinds of nostalgia that "create experiences of duration, passage, and loss that rewrite the lived histories of individuals, families, ethnic groups, and classes," ultimately "creating experiences of losses that never took place." The result, Appadurai says, is that advertisers create nostalgia for the present in order to convince consumers to purchase goods to commemorate the present as a period about to be lost,

¹¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996).

which periodizes the present by associating it with nostalgia. Mass advertising – a way to get images or cues in front of consumers, and music is certainly something that can be consumed – has trained consumers to create nostalgia for the present by recognizing the present as a period of time related to a vanished past that results in no actual loss to the consumer. Appadurai calls this relationship between people and their trained mental faculties in this regard “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory” – or, as he terms it, *armchair nostalgia*.¹¹⁵

In the case of popular music, especially those forms of it as are understood to be native to the U.S. South, one might as well think of *armchair nostalgia* as *armchair canon*. The devotion of certain music fans to pre-war jazz and blues (the war here being World War II) can certainly be understood in this way. Take, for example, Chris King, collector of pre-war 78 records:

“That voice is so separated from anything that you could ever hear nowadays,” he says. “It’s like from a lost colony: There’s no way that anybody could affect that voice, let alone have it nowadays. It’s a voice from somebody from some obscure town who probably never went to school beyond the fifth or sixth grade, and probably talked like his parents, who talked like his grandparents. It’s a purely historical, regional voice that can never be duplicated. It’s totally unique.”

For King, this lost voice is a clue to how pre-war blues and country have cast their spell on him. It carries the weight of centuries in its sound, and bears the traditions of countless pockets of isolated, homegrown cultures wiped out by the spread of radio and, ironically enough, records. As performers throughout the South began to emulate the quality and affect of records, they sacrificed their own idiosyncratic styles, making way for the amplified, homogenized music he despises, which, besides bluegrass, includes pretty much everything recorded after World War II.

...“True vine is music that’s not shaped or molded by crass commercialism,” he says. “It’s the stuff that would have been in the American vernacular before there were phonographs or music marketeers. They didn’t have someone telling them what to do, they were playing the way they’d always played.”

There are a few dozen records that have this elusive quality, and King is always on the lookout for more. “The most captivating performances, the ones I absolutely have to own, are the most backwoods, informal recordings that you can possibly imagine.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 76-78.

¹¹⁶ Eddie Dean, “The Collector,” *Oxford American*, No. 45, 2003, 24-28.

King, according to this article, is thirty-one years old as of 2003 – Bird, born in 1973, would have been thirty at the time – and his obsession over the music of the 1920s and 1930s has nothing to do with either historical accuracy or a lived experience of loss pertaining to this music. What is important to King is the assumption that this music “bears the weight of centuries” and is representative of not only idiosyncrasies, but individualism that apparently no longer exists. King’s dislike of music after World War II – and note that the jazz and blues styles Bird played at the start of his career are also pre-war – assumes that music did not evolve, that the people who played it were both ignorant and immobile, and that what value there is in music is dependent on how old the style is, and how strange the voice sounds to modern ears. While this is an extreme example, it is nonetheless an example of the way in which listeners can experience armchair nostalgia with music. More than that, however, it is an example of the way in which people with an interest in culture as expressed through music reinforce the value of both the culture and the music by suggesting that some music is intrinsically more valuable because of the cultural traits it represents and perpetuates. In the case of Chris King, the valuable music represents a vision of the U.S. South that suggests the region is simultaneously “a lost colony,” ahistorical, divorced from “crass commercialism” and carpetbagging middlemen, and never experienced racial strife. While Karl Hagstrom Miller argues convincingly that musical genre was largely constructed by the recording industry in ways that reinforced white supremacy, Marybeth Hamilton also argues that the blues as most people know them, thanks largely to that same recording industry, was constructed by both white folklorists and white record collectors at least ten years, and often more, before the births of Chris King and Andrew Bird.¹¹⁷ This is the armchair canon that Andrew Bird spends his childhood, conservatory training, and early

¹¹⁷ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010); Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues*.

recording career learning, while at the same perpetuating that canon as a vibrant and exciting set of cues or musical language that must be combined and played, lest it be lost.

Yet if fashion is dependent to some degree on the periodicity generated by armchair nostalgia, the great truism is that fashion changes – which means the commercial value of this armchair canon for a young musician will inevitably drop. “The distinction between an heirloom and junk is not patina as such,” Arjun Appadurai says, “but also the successful semiotic management of the social context.”¹¹⁸ This is one reason why it was necessary for Bird to change his approach to live performance from bandleader to solo act. Leading a band playing music that requires an additional layer of performance – liner notes, imagery on the record cover, old-fashioned suits and dresses on the stage – to put a patina of legitimacy on the work became less profitable in the early 2000s.¹¹⁹ Bird was not able to manage the semiotic context of this kind of music, and in order to keep his musical career economically viable, he shifted his on-stage and sonic performance once more. Rather than the canon-and-apocrypha of his tenure at Northwestern, however, this time Andrew Bird shifted from the armchair canon of the U.S. South to the armchair apocrypha.

4.3 (The apocrypha and) Southern music, revisited

To understand the armchair apocrypha as it pertains to the music of the U.S. South, it is necessary to look at the armchair canon, its relationship to armchair nostalgia, and the relationship of both to the settlement of the New World. Recall Chris King’s conviction that early recorded music from the South is part of “a lost colony” that is “purely historical and

¹¹⁸ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 76.

¹¹⁹ There were also the inherent tensions between the approaches of Bird’s early Suzuki training and musical canons that validate by exclusion.

purely regional” and that experienced no cultural shifts over generations, considering that the voice singing “probably talked like his parents, who talked like his grandparents.”¹²⁰ This conviction reinforces the perception of this music as proof of a reified, purified culture that no longer exists, and when it did exist, it was separate and exempt from the gross political concerns of a larger world that was just itching to assimilate the talents of these simple folk into a homogenized music industry with predominantly capitalist interests. To love this music, and to try to put it back in front of audiences (whether recorded, or performed live), is to be able to show ‘proof’ that this music, this culture, this *canon* existed. In this way, as Joseph Roach suggests, “canon formation serves the function that ‘ancestor worship’ once did.”¹²¹

Yet consider the time period of these recordings. They span perhaps forty years, if one is generous – the first forty years of the twentieth century. The grandparents of the musicians that Chris King speaks of would have been children at the time of the Civil War. If canon formation is about ancestor worship, the musical canon of the U.S. South as determined from early recordings means that the ancestors that these audiences are supposed to worship don’t go back any further than the beginning of the war. The ancestors that audiences should be worshipping just played the music. They were not complicit in the music’s arrival in the New World. These ancestors had no responsibility for slavery or genocide, and it certainly was not their fault that they were on the losing end of the Civil War. In other words, the ancestors here are not the ones that people in the present day are likely to think of as being on the wrong side of history; the role of armchair nostalgia in periodizing the present and engendering a sense of loss that individuals in the present never actually experienced means that by associating themselves with this musical canon, people who buy into this vision of musical ancestors are attempting to distance

¹²⁰ Eddie Dean, “The Collector,” 24-25.

¹²¹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 77.

themselves from those same gross concerns of capitalism, politics, and history that mark the world they live in. They focus with laser intensity on the last hundred years of recording lest the specter of what happened a hundred and fifty years ago – the Civil War – and its implications intrude on their vision of an American vernacular that came into being free from the consequences of the dual cataclysms of indigenous genocide and the Middle Passage that occurred with the establishment and settlement of the New World.

The musical styles that serve as the foundation for this armchair canon exist *because of* these cataclysms, not *in spite of* them. Without early genocide and later removal of American Indians, European settlement and expansion of the New World would not have occurred, just as it would not have occurred without enslavement and transportation of Africans to the New World in service of profit, which in the Caribbean and in the U.S. South tended to take the form of plantation agriculture. This emphasis on plantation agriculture was necessary for the development of blues and jazz: while scholars, armchair or otherwise, may disagree about the precise location and time these styles came into existence, they came into existence because of the presence of African slaves in the U.S. South. If jazz is from New Orleans, it is because of the presence of people of African descent, slave and free, and because of the function of New Orleans as a port city with close cultural ties to the Caribbean that was home to the largest slave market in North America.¹²² If the blues originated in the Mississippi Delta, it is because of the large population of African American agricultural laborers working for owners of Delta plantations.¹²³ Both styles developed and disseminated because of individual and cultural mobility; it had nothing to do with three generations of poorly educated yokels isolated from the rest of the world using a cultural vernacular that never evolves. The armchair canon does not

¹²² Walter Johnson, *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 2.

¹²³ James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place On Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 277.

explain how those yokels got to their unnamed, obscure locations. The armchair canon does not even ask that question because it is engaged in a project of not just forgetting, but erasing.

Acknowledging the origins of the early recorded music of the U.S. South means acknowledging and accepting that this music exists because of atrocity committed and perpetuated that establishes and preserves structures of capitalism and white supremacy.

This project of forgetting and erasing is not limited to music – scholarship related to selective memory in the U.S. South more often focuses on fields such as literature and public history, though the work that scholarship does is also applicable to music. George Handley, who advocates for what he calls a New World poetics of oblivion in literature, argues that even if an intact historical record existed of these two cataclysms that made the New World, finding a way to adequately represent these cataclysms and their legacies is a daunting task because of the nature of oblivion. The “lived realities” of genocide and enslavement, he says, are often beyond representation because they “were either initially understated or erased in historical documentation in an attempt to conceal accountability.”¹²⁴ The armchair canon, which does not represent these realities at all, presents a version of the past that suggests the legacies of these lived realities have no relevance to the present – and, to the extent that canons are interested in forming, preserving, and perpetuating culture, this armchair canon’s project with oblivion is to release those who venerate this version of the music of the U.S. South from similar accountability in the present. “Oblivion has played an integral role in the formation of the national cultures of the Americas,” Handley says, and in the case of the armchair canon at hand, oblivion functions in such a way that gives these venerated – including Andrew Bird, in his

¹²⁴ George Handley, “A New World Poetics of Oblivion,” in *Look Away! The U.S. South in New World Studies*, eds. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 27.

early days – a way to claim that their music is divorced from political intent, use, and meaning.¹²⁵ In addition to the unasked question of the provenance of Chris King’s three generations of isolated yokel musicians, this version of the past presumes that people do not produce music that reflects their present circumstances. The three generations between the Civil War and World War II experienced vast changes – even, and perhaps especially, in the rural areas of the U.S. South. Recorded songs reflected these changes with songs about railroads, artifacts of material culture, and then-current events. For venerators of the armchair canon in the United States in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Bird and the Squirrel Nut Zippers made their living off the canon, the present reality included popular adoption and use of the internet, the rise of peer-to-peer file sharing networks such as Napster, multiple high profile federal court decisions about affirmative action, and increases in global terrorism, including terrorism aimed at the United States. As audience access to music increased via the internet (both legally and illegally), the concerns of minority groups in the United States and terrorist groups sourced in places considered by the U.S. to be Third World countries (Afghanistan, Iraq) were more visible in the media than ever before. One way to respond to this is to cling to the armchair canon, to use nostalgia to displace accountability and to deny the importance of global politics, to harden one’s system of belief. The other way – Andrew Bird’s way – is to examine the apocrypha by broadening the geographic and historical context by which one considers the U.S. South.

4.4 Andrew Bird’s Armchair Apocrypha

Andrew Bird’s room with the armchair, built by the reverberation of that first chord, is designed for the purpose of putting the U.S. South in a broader context and considering the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 28.

ramifications of that action. A strategic move toward a musical apocrypha would necessitate moving even further away from the sounds on which Bird established his career and which depended largely on musical style and its associations (think again of “Dixie”; blues and jazz have similar musical footprints). No longer a bandleader, Bird had to figure out how to make an act, both live and in the studio, that would be interesting to audiences. This would necessitate a shift in methodology – both in lyrical subject matter and in the sounds produced to accompany those lyrics.

First, the subject matter: if the relationship between canon and apocrypha is described by individual “books,” as in the books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, then it is useful to consider *Armchair Apocrypha* along similar organizational lines, with each book – or song, in the case of the album – representing a specific purpose, narrative, or agenda. The subject matter of *Armchair Apocrypha* addresses both the innovations of and anxieties produced by modernity, and the ways in which individuals can respond to and cope with the feelings of fragmentation that result from the lived experience of what David Harvey calls time-space compression. Harvey suggests that, thanks to advances in telecommunications and transportation, we increasingly experience “time horizons shorten[ed] to the point where the present is all there is” as well as space that “appears to shrink to a ‘global village’.”¹²⁶ Time-space compression forces us to alter, he says, “sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves. . . . we have to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of *compression* of our spatial and temporal worlds.”¹²⁷ Bird’s model for coping with the ramifications of time-space compression is most evident in the first component of *Armchair Apocrypha* – the one about the innovations of modernity.

¹²⁶ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 240.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

“Fiery Crash” is the song that establishes the room in which Bird lays out his armchair apocrypha, but it has other functions as well. The primary innovation of modernity in the song is the airplane, but the speaker (or lyricist) is not on a plane – rather, the lyricist is in an airport waiting to board, and the lyricist is beseeching an unidentified person on the other end of a phone to engage in magical thinking. If the lyricist and the lyricist’s unidentified audience can “envision / the fiery crash” of the airplane, the plane will not crash. The magical thinking takes on ritual aspects, the lyricist identifying it as “just a formality / why must I explain? / just a nod to mortality / before you get on a plane.” The lyricist credits the origin of the ritual to the unnatural feeling of “hurling through space / g-forces twisting your face” that result in “breeding superstition.” The crash can be averted if the person on the other end of the phone (which is itself a trapping of modernity, emphasizing the present through conversation with someone absent from visible space) will not only acknowledge the possibility of that crash, but also envision it happening. Yet like the other songs about the effects of time-space compression on *Armchair Apocrypha*, the most obvious culprit for the lyricist’s anxiety is not actually the subject of this song. “Fiery Crash” takes place not in the plane, but in the airport. “Lou Dobbs and the CNN team” is “on every monitor screen,” where the lyricist is “caught in the crossfire / where every human face / has you reaching for your mace.” The unnatural speed of the plane ride may cause the lyricist anxiety, but so too does the ubiquity of Atlanta-based CNN. The global reach of CNN may originate from the U.S. South, but the news, when available twenty-four hours, necessitates commentary from Lou Dobbs (as well as from CNN’s *Crossfire*) on the state of global affairs, and cable news ratings depend on how dire and scary audiences find what is reported. It’s enough to make the lyricist reach for a self-defense aid – and given that in the United States after September 11, 2001, one cannot bring mace past the security checkpoint, the lyricist’s self-

defense aid is a phone call to someone absent, requesting aid in the form of collective visions of annihilation.

“Imitosis,” like “Fiery Crash,” starts with innovations that contribute to time-space compression but is also about the anxieties generated by the lived effects of those innovations. The lyricist’s anxieties are not of interest; rather, this song is in the third person and refers to a scientist named Professor Pynchon (as in the novelist Thomas Pynchon, often associated with postmodernity) whose work is “a playground in a Petri dish / where single cells would swing their fists / at anything that looks like easy prey.” This brand of empirical science is only possible with tools dependent on scientific advances, such as laboratories with powerful microscopes. Yet it is not the science itself that is the problem for Professor Pynchon, it is the tiny voice of his intuition asking questions that his science cannot answer – a voice that answers all of those questions with the assertion “that we’re all basically alone,” and that “despite what all his studies had shown / that what’s mistaken for closeness / was just a case of mitosis.” The questions all have to do with human behavior – “how can kids be so mean,” “why do some show no mercy / while others are painfully shy” – and the song ends with the lyricist querying Pynchon, asking, “tell me doctor, can you quantify?” The concern that “Imitosis” displays is not about the science itself, but the limits of empirical science in explaining human behavior in interpersonal relationships.

“Plasticities” and “Heretics” are about wars for space, physical and imagined. “Plasticities” addresses the physical city, and “Heretics” addresses the effects on free speech of hardened systems of belief represented by the rhetoric of the religious right. “Plasticities” and “Heretics” feature a *we* and a *they* which serve the same function in both songs: *we* will “fight for your music halls / and dying cities” in “Plasticities,” *we* hold “our breath for too long / ‘til

we're half sick about it" in "Heretics," and *they* will fight "for your neural walls / and plasticities" in "Plasticities," *they* "turn a clamp on our thumbs" and "tell us all about it" in "Heretics." *They* mandate the music *we* are to listen to in "Plasticities," where "by committee they choose it all." In "Heretics," *they* are represented by someone "making mountains of handkerchiefs / where the mascara always runs," an oblique allusion to Tammy Faye Bakker. Both "Plasticities" and "Heretics" are concerned, like "Fiery Crash," with envisioning the future – but unlike "Fiery Crash," these two songs suggest that *they* have an interest in enforcing rules about the use of physical and rhetorical space in the present while either denying the future's importance in "Plasticities," or putting consideration for the future on the afterlife in "Heretics." *We*, in contrast, know what *we* should be concerned about, and *we* resent *their* attempted sleight-of-hand and regulation of space. The last line of "Heretics" asks with scorn, "Don't you think we might have heard that before?" *We* know about history, and this is the kind of thing Bird's *we* wants in our music halls and dying cities, regardless of *their* attempt to control *our* neural walls and plasticities – a model of our cities made from a material that can be shaped into anything, and that does not look like the original fossil fuel from which it is made.

"Darkmatter" and "Simple X" shift focus away from setting up an us-and-them dichotomy by depicting a search for a self that can then become unified on a grander, broader human scale. In "Darkmatter," the lyricist asks, "do you wonder where the self resides / is it in your head or between your sides / and who will be the one who will decide / its true location?" In "Simple X," the lyricist, seeking a vision of unity, beseeches an unidentified *they* to "hold your fire / take your place around the open fire." "Cataracts," concerned with images of violence from unnamed human sources as well as natural decay ("they shall enter from the back / with spears and scepters and squirming sacks"; "the thickets thick with mold / the bracken and the briar /

catchweed into the fold”), provides no resolution but simply portrays anxiety and unsettlement. “Spare-ohs” picks up on this theme of natural decay, but approaches it from an angle of the interdependence invoked in “Simple X,” describing in detail the ways in which the feathers of birds who build nests in chimneys pollute the surrounding landscape, “crop-dusting gardens all over this town / but nobody cares when it gets in their hair / it gets in their lungs as it floats through the air / it gets in the food that they buy and prepare.” Rather than invoking a welcome table like “Simple X,” however, “Spare-ohs” suggests that people do not acknowledge their interdependence, which has negative ecological implications.

“Scythian Empires” is a special case, dealing with what appears to be factual history from centuries ago that seems as though it has nothing to do with the cultures of the United States that Bird discusses. Yet in *The History of White People*, Nell Irvin Painter traces the origin of these Scythian empires to histories written by Greeks before the Common Era, and shows how these historians portrayed the Scythians, from the Caucasus region, as “far distant barbarians,” whose very name meant “little known, northeastern, illiterate, Stone Age peoples.”¹²⁸ Greek historians portrayed Scythians as “preeminent warriors” with a “savage and drug-riddled life,” and this did not change when Scythians became a source for Greek slaves in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, including an all-slave Scythian police force in Athens known for its skill in archery.¹²⁹ Painter is interested in the history of the construction of whiteness, and designates the Scythians as the origin point for constructed whiteness, which then moves into white slavery as a beauty ideal. The Scythians, in other words, are the proto-reason that a common word to designate whiteness is *Caucasian*. As for Andrew Bird’s “Scythian Empires,” Bird’s lyricist is interested in *they* again – but this time *they* are identified: “handpicked handlers” who wear kid gloves, with

¹²⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 4.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-15.

“Halliburton attaché cases” and “Scotch-Guard Macintoshes,” who are “offering views of exiting empires / such breathtaking views of Scythian empires.” Bird’s Scythians, the “archers of an afterthought,” are only important because of their defeat; they are “routed by Sarmatians / thwarted by the Thracians.” Empires disappear, Bird says, and the government workers, who may or may not be Halliburton contractors, will follow the Scythians as a vanished empire. While the racial implications of this song may be oblique, they exist: slavery and whiteness, both matters that have interested and continue to interest the federal government.¹³⁰ In the United States, those racial implications largely have to do with white supremacy.

The final song with subject material to discuss is “Armchairs.” This is effectively the album’s title track, which bears some consideration: this is the armchair that Bird has placed in the room he builds with “Fiery Crash.” The two strands of anxiety around the lived experience of time-space compression in “Armchairs” have to do with exploration and time, and their organizing principle is the armchair. “I dreamed you were a cosmonaut / of the space between our chairs / and I was a cartographer / of the tangles in your hair,” the lyricist says; cosmonauts explore the universe, cartographers map it. They are two sides of the same function – yet there is a gulf between them despite the intimacy suggested by the lyricist mapping the individual tangles, and it is a gulf created by time and their inability to understand how the other’s sense of time functions. “An awkward pause / a fatal flaw / time it’s a crooked bow,” the lyricist says, and in that the awkward pause is the fatal flaw in the relationship between the lyricist and the person in the other armchair, the nature of the time as a crooked bow means that the timing is not right. Firing an arrow from a crooked bow means that the archer will never hit the target (since a

¹³⁰ In addition to the Civil War, there is also the U.S. Census. Something else that Arjun Appadurai discusses in *Modernity at Large* is that the way in which governments enumerate their populations through censuses and other surveys helps enforce policy: “[S]tatistics are to bodies and social types what maps are to territories: they flatten and enclose” (133).

crooked bow does not fire with any degree of accuracy), and the lyricist and his friend in the chair will never hit the target that permits the degree of understanding that forgives awkward pauses. The timing thus may never be right – and this is what troubles the lyricist, above and beyond encroaching decay of the natural world, above and beyond fiery crashes and CNN, above and beyond the fulminations of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and the religious right. “These looms that weave apocryphal / are hanging from a strand,” the lyricist says; the weaving of history and modernity means little in the face of the difficulties of interpersonal relationships. Yet the lyricist has some hope: despite the breakdown in common definitions of time, the lyricist declares with great precision:

fifty-five and three-eighths years later
at the bottom of this gigantic crater
an armchair calls to you
yeah this armchair calls to you
and it says that
some day
we'll get back at them all

Time and space have fixed points in this vision of the lyricist. The armchair is the point to which the lyricist's cosmonaut will return, and the armchair, as with the rest of the album, is the safe place to contemplate the patterns that stretch beyond the canonical and beyond the orthodox. The *we* who will get back at *them* will have a chance for vengeance, and a chance to shake *them* from their position at the top of various hierarchies. But it takes coming to the armchair, in this vision, for this revolution to take place at all.

Keeping in mind the principle of considering the songs of *Armchair Apocrypha* along the same organizational lines of the canon and apocrypha of the New Testament, these are the conclusions drawn from the subject matter: be concerned about science, be concerned about the propensity of planes to crash, be concerned about the anxiety caused by CNN's style of news, be concerned about global ecology and interdependence, be concerned about the religious right, be

concerned about whether we can recognize our common humanity and come to the welcome table – but be concerned, most of all, about interpersonal relationships, and whether the timing can be right, and whether the person with whom you want to be intimate can be known. These are the patterns that underlie every song with lyrics on *Armchair Apocrypha*.

4.5 Closing the loop

There is another set of patterns to consider, however, when considering Andrew Bird's shift in methodology surrounding *Armchair Apocrypha*. The subject matter of the lyrics addresses the content of Bird's move into apocrypha, but Bird's shifts in musical style and performance serve to expand and reinforce those shifts in subject matter. Bird's tactical use of reverberation to make a room falls under this category. Bird's use of looping pedals on the album, a new development both on *Armchair Apocrypha* and in his live shows at the time, also falls under this category. The pedals, activated by foot, allow Bird to record a line of violin, guitar, vocals, whistling – whatever instrument he plays – and then put that line on loop so that he can add a second line, and a third, and so on. The effect, when performed correctly, creates harmony, which by definition requires multiple voices. Looping also trains audiences to spot patterns – more so live than in the studio, as Bird must construct every layer on stage, but these layers are also evident in the studio versions of “Fiery Crash” (around 2:00) and “Simple X,” as well as in the two instrumental tracks on the album, “The Supine” and “Yawny At The Apocalypse.” With the instrumental tracks in particular, it is easy to hear Bird build patterns, and what all four of the looping tracks have in common is their relative minimalism. Compared to Bird's prior output, *Armchair Apocrypha* is economical and Spartan – Bird's prior output is a

legacy of both orchestral conservatory training and an attachment to older styles of jazz where every instrument in the ensemble plays its own melody at the same time – and those four looping tracks in particular are founded on simple scales and warm-up exercises. These foundations make for easy harmony, and easy pattern recognition. Creating an environment in which it is easy for audiences to recognize patterns in the music helps reinforce an environment in which audiences can recognize patterns in the lyrical subject matter.

There is one other methodological shift that Andrew Bird makes around the time of *Armchair Apocrypha*, and it is one he uses in his live shows that is certainly a way to maintain audience interest. Bird's Janus horn is custom-built by Specimen Products in Chicago, and functionally, it is a speaker. Sound comes out of it – most often, the sound is Bird's violin, but he can and does send looped sound through the Janus horn. As the term suggests, the horn has two Victrola-style bells, placed back to back, with the wider parts of the bells at the farthest points. Sound comes through the place where the two bells conjoin, and diverges as the horns themselves diverge; this is where Janus comes in, as the two-faced Roman god who looks backwards and forwards. This is not the only innovation of the Janus horn, however; in addition to looping sound through it, Bird can also make the Janus horn spin with a foot pedal, and can control the horn's speed as it revolves. The spinning horn creates a Doppler effect, bending pitch depending on the acoustics of the room in which Bird uses the Janus horn – so the patterns literally change depending on where one is located upon hearing the sound. The patterns change, depending on context.

In the same way as some people read Biblical canon as though it has literal relevance, reading Andrew Bird's *Apocrypha* shows how Bird added context to his music, making space for a new South – not only on CNN, but also in thematic and performance elements that show up in

his later albums – and evolving his live and studio performance practices in ways that make a space for audiences to learn to spot patterns. Once Bird leaves the room he builds in *Armchair Apocrypha*, once Bird gets up from the armchair and turns back to musical forms, themes, and history that reference canonical perspectives on the U.S. South, he is accompanied, figuratively and literally, by the Janus horn – the sound that looks backward as well as forward, blending sound and producing sound dependent on individual perspective, bringing the lessons learned in the room he built to audiences wherever he goes.

CHAPTER 5

5.1 In the beginning, a word

I have devoted the last two chapters to explaining how Andrew Bird interacts with prewar music associated with the U.S. South in general and with Mississippi in particular. To return to the metaphor with which I began this project, when Bird comes south as an apprentice, he studies older styles of music. As he builds his musical career, Bird incorporates those styles in his own compositions. As Bird becomes an established artist in a genre one could classify as indie pop, he begins to critically engage with the dominant discourses surrounding those styles.

But putting it that way seems too dry for what is effectively, in Bird's hands, an argument for a living tradition that stretches back much further than the aforementioned dominant discourses, or canons, say it does. Yes, Bird critically engages with dominant discourses surrounding Southern musical styles. When he does this, however, it is not theory, but praxis. He does this in recording studios and on stages, not in writing. For Bird, this engagement occurs in the physical act of performance.

Bird titled the album I discussed in the last chapter *Armchair Apocrypha*, which presents a formulation of music with theoretical or dogmatic implications: the canon versus the apocrypha, the top-down, hierarchal, traditional structure versus the ways people go about day-to-day life, the *them* versus *us*. In this chapter I address more theoretical and dogmatic implications, but with an eye to Bird's praxis. Bird's economic success as a musician can be

credited to good fortune, and that success is also certainly due to intense effort, but as with any musician, his economic success comes down to his ability to summon and maintain a level of performance that audiences find compelling. The role of performance in Bird's career cannot be overstated: the foundation of his performance during his period of apprenticeship was how well Bird could reconstruct and embody older musical styles and forms. The foundation of Bird's more recent performance style is the impressively difficult task of building harmonized, coherent loops on stage that are often based on these older musical styles and forms.

Yet these older styles and forms do not consist only of prewar blues and string band music. Another way by which Bird comes south is his developing use of gospel music. Gospel is commonly associated with the evangelical Protestant Christianity of the U.S. South – but for Bird, it serves another purpose. In performance, it is a way for him to interact with a world that is unseen, unknown, intangible, using a vocabulary with which his audience likely has some familiarity.

While the focus of much scholarship on religious matters tends to look at the ways in which religious culture adapts to the world around it, I'm interested in that interaction from another angle: that of the secular using the language and forms of the sacred. Andrew Bird's music is mostly secular, and mostly founded upon secular forms (jazz, blues, Western art). Still, songs featuring Jesus and the images of John's Revelation are creeping with increasing frequency into Bird's work. Bird does not appear to have a testimony – if he does, he is very quiet about it – and his career does not depend on the good will of an overtly religious audience. In short, it is not necessary for Bird to work in religious terms, which means he must find

something about these themes and subjects compelling enough to put them in front of an audience that buys secular albums and goes to secular concerts.¹³¹

5.2 Language and functional performance

The lens through which to consider the ways in which Andrew Bird uses themes, subjects, and structures connected with gospel music starts with some simple ideas. Both worship and music are communal, communicative experiences. Both worship and music involve people gathering together for the purpose of trying to connect with something intangible. Both have ritual aspects and learned behaviors. Both are governed by performance.

In terms of gospel music, there are three roles to consider in terms of community and communication: the performer, the audience, and God. The relationship structure is triangular. The performer wants to use music to influence the audience and bring the audience closer to God by sharing his or her experience; the audience wants to experience God through a good musical performance; and the performer and audience of and for gospel music presumably believe God wants the performer and audience to become closer to the divine through this experience. Performance is a communicative act, and, in this context, music is also communicative, regardless of the environment in which it occurs. Whether the music occurs live or is recorded and then played back, that relationship still exists. In the case of live music, the performer, the audience, and God are in the same room (often a church setting, but not always). If the music is recorded, the physical space of performance is gone, but the relationship still remains: the

¹³¹ It is not safe to assume that Andrew Bird's life contains no regular religious practice. Still, given that the marketing for his music – his interviews, his publicity campaigns, the majority of his concerts – occurs in a secular context and makes no mention of any kind of faith, Andrew Bird makes his living as a musician in the secular part of the music industry, and always has.

performer plays for the audience, the audience hears the performer, and both, if the settings and circumstances of performance and witnessing that performance are right, have achieved some interaction with each other and the divine.

While it may not matter whether the gospel music is live or canned, it is important to realize that gospel music started live, was a way for people who would not or could not take on the role of clergy to use their talents in the service of their faith, and thereby gained some degree of religious authority. Glenn Hinson describes gospel music as “a performer’s art:”

Unlike the traditions of congregational song that preceded it, gospel encouraged self-conscious artistry and creative performance. As such, it welcomed the contributions of individual voice and practiced ensemble, thus broadening the musical scope of worship while changing its performative contours. ... These artists sang *to* and *with*, rather than *from* and *amongst*, their congregational peers; they offered praises not as undifferentiated co-equals, whose voices were lost in the swelling sounds of the full assembly, but rather as singular performers, whose songs commanded attention by virtue of their very foregrounding.¹³²

This is something true of both the evolution of African American and white gospel music: the act of moving performers from structured congregational singing and into a featured element of services meant normalizing this kind of performance in broader church cultures. What congregations liked and supported, whether it was the music of Thomas Dorsey or the traveling white gospel quartets used to sell songbooks on behalf of publishing companies, became accepted – which includes the professionalization of gospel music.

Widespread congregational legitimation of gospel music is reflective of a larger principle, which is that gospel, whether music or the four gospels in the New Testament, gains its authority from mutual recognition of its divine inspiration. Building a religious culture in a local environment depends on being able to recognize the other practitioners around you – which is something that Christine Heyrman suggests was important to the establishment of evangelical

¹³² Glenn Douglas Hinson, “When the words roll and the fire flows: Spirit, style and experience in African American gospel performance” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989), Ann Arbor: UMI, 102-103.

religion in the South. Heyrman refers to “the language of Canaan” as “a metaphor evoking the new awareness into which believers were initiated by undergoing repentance and rebirth” which united denominations otherwise separated by methods of church organization as well as interpretation of the Bible.¹³³ Even though Heyrman refers to it as a metaphor, her discussion of it shows that this language of Canaan is more than a figure of speech – and does not even depend on speech. She cites various experiences that show that the language was not dependent on understanding English, or even being able to speak at all, including recent immigrants and the recently enslaved and transported, who did not speak English well or at all, finding faith “after listening to sermons preached in English.”¹³⁴ Heyrman also cites the account of a minister of a man, “always deaf and dumb, [who]... by signs, will give a good experience of grace, both of his conviction, conversion, and his progress in his service of the Lord.” Her conclusion here is that the language of Canaan was so powerful “that even those who had literally no tongue to speak nor ears to hear could somehow convey its accents.”¹³⁵ An entire range of experience, ritual, and communication dwells in Heyrman’s use of the word *somehow*. Salvation is not dependent on the ability to hear and to speak, yet the man conveyed through the minister not only his understanding, but his conviction. The minister recognized this man’s faith through a communication register beyond words. This communication and recognition is the language of Canaan.

Early evangelicals in the South were not the only ones to acknowledge the importance of mutual recognition of genuine religious conviction using nonverbal communication. Writing about Pentecostal practices approximately eighty years after the evangelicals in which Christine Heyrman is interested, Grant Wacker observes that what he terms “environmental cues”

¹³³ Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1997), 4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

contributed to whether or not Pentecostals accepted individual instances of speaking in tongues within congregations as authentic experiences with the Holy Spirit:

Indeed, if the setting was not right, the whole performance could be discounted as false or even demonic. So in one instance the saints interpreted a message in tongues as curses against God uttered in Chinese. The record left no hint why that particular ejaculation seemed blasphemous, but clearly the community's lack of ratification played a crucial role. San Francisco's *Glad Tidings* told a similar story. In 1927 one Seattle woman landed on the mission floor "under the demon power," where she began to speak in devil tongues, "each one distinct and cruelly hideous." In most instances anyone so smitten would have been regarded as slain in the Holy Spirit and praising God in tongues. Why not in this case? It is impossible to know for sure, of course, but a revealing clue can be found in a stray comment that the woman was a "backslider." The details varied from case to case but, taken together, they make clear that subtle communal cues helped to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate ecstasy.¹³⁶

Name for the phenomenon aside, the cultural meaning of "tongues" is not relevant for anyone besides the one who experiences it until the community agrees that the nonverbal display – and keep in mind that Wacker uses the word "performance" – is legitimate. Performance implies an audience, even if that audience is only God, and a single performance can have multiple meanings for the audience. Verbal meanings and meanings derived from kinesthetic cues must be in harmony in order for an audience to acknowledge a performance as legitimate.

This secondary register of communication occurring alongside the verbal is not limited to practices within the church. One example of particular relevance is the development of musical styles by slaves and their descendents (including what would eventually become African American gospel music). In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy describes the development of this particular register of communication as the "topos of unsayability," or many kinds of nonverbal language contained within these styles of music, and credits that development to the denial of slaves' access to literacy:

¹³⁶ Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001), 56.

[The topos of unsayability] can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness. The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slaves' access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantations and in the barracoons.¹³⁷

Where reading, writing, and the verbal propagation of language and ideas was not possible, people came up with many alternatives. *Topos* does not suggest one alternative, but an entire landscape in which it is possible to map many alternate methods of communication besides the verbal – in other words, what is unsayable.¹³⁸ Gilroy is accurate when he suggests that language and writing have been privileged in thinking about human expression, given that human experience consists of a much broader range than what can be encapsulated into words. This is one reason why Grant Wacker considers and then dismisses the arguments linguists make about the irrelevance of glossolalia, given that it is free of predictable grammar or syntax. Glossolalia's meaning, Wacker says, is both in its cultural importance and in its individual experience of interaction with the divine – both of which are part of Gilroy's topos of unsayability. Wacker cites the ability of those baptized in the Spirit by speaking in tongues to enter and exit their disassociative, ecstatic states based on knowledge of the culture in which Spirit baptism took place. They were, he says, able to control their performance.¹³⁹ They are performers who know the language of their audience.

Performance is a slippery word, and by using it I don't mean to suggest that performers, whether gospel musicians, secular musicians, or people baptized in the Spirit, knowingly manipulate their audience in any way. For one thing, it's difficult to fake convincing nonverbal

¹³⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 74.

¹³⁸ It might be useful to think of this idea in terms of Bird's Suzuki education: Shinichi Suzuki's methods are founded upon his personal observations of language acquisition in children. The way Bird learned music was itself a way to communicate without words.

¹³⁹ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 56.

communication. Even assuming that in the examples Wacker cites of Spirit baptisms not accepted by congregations, the tongues-speakers were having genuine transcendent experiences, the earthly validation of these experiences matters, if for no other reason (and there may well be many) than for the legitimation of the religious culture in which Spirit baptisms and other, similar phenomena take place. There must be a level of mutual trust, or if not trust, at least the willingness to suspend cynicism; otherwise there would be no community surrounding a perceived transcendent experience. In other words, I'm not interested in legitimating religious phenomena myself, nor do I think anyone within a religious community is particularly interested in my opinions on whether their contact with the divine is "real." I'm interested in the functions these performances serve in allowing communication between performers and audiences, and between humans and the divine. As such, I'm inclined toward a function-centered definition of performance. Joseph Roach provides a good one in *Cities of the Dead*, saying that performance "stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace."¹⁴⁰ In the case of the three-sided relationship among gospel performers (whether musical or those baptized in the Spirit), audiences, and God, the meaning of performance is to embody and replace the nature of an experience with God. This is not to say that performers want to *be* God, but that performers strive toward an experience with the divine. By watching performers striving toward that divine experience, and by accepting that performance as legitimate, audiences can affirm both that this replacement is possible, and that they can put themselves in the performer's place with this divine experience.

There is biblical precedent for this model; the New Testament epistles often frame the experience of living religiously as dwelling within God or Christ. This also connects with Roach's definition of performance through his discussion of effigies. An effigy, Roach says,

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1996), 3.

“fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original. ...performed effigies – those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke – provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates.” Roach goes on to list some kinds of possible surrogates, including priests, celebrities, children, and “especially, by virtue of an intense but unsurprising paradox, corpses.”¹⁴¹ By serving as the intermediary between God and humanity, and by redeeming the world from sin through sacrifice of his physical body, Christ is an effigy. By attempting to live in Christ and access the divine through the moment of their performance, religious performers both affirm Christ as an effigy and become effigies themselves.

As mentioned, however, worship is a communal experience. Audience recognition and legitimation of the performer as effigy is vital both to the performance and to the perpetuation of the community. This is where the world – the secular – enters into the sacred. Performers attempting to become effigies are attempting surrogation, which Roach defines as the process by which “culture reproduces and re-creates itself,” and which “does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. ...Because collective memory works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely, surrogation rarely if ever succeeds. The process requires many trials and at least as many errors. The fit cannot be exact.”¹⁴² In the case of religious performance, that means that performers will never become the divine, nor will audiences ever see this happen. This also allows for audiences with that selective collective memory to legitimate some performances and performers, and not others: if an audience does not respond to a particular performance, they do not recognize the Spirit baptism as legitimate. They do not acknowledge a performance of gospel music in church

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁴² Ibid., 2.

as inspired or worthy. And, in the case of professional musicians, audiences will not support their work with money.

The audience response to religious performance is the place where the secular enters into the sacred, where the world enters the otherworld, where – in Grant Wacker’s terminology – pragmatic and primitivist impulses intersect. Wacker’s discussion of early Pentecostal religion is framed by this distinction between the primitive, or the desire to dwell within the divine, and the pragmatic, or the necessity of adapting to the context in the world surrounding that divine experience. Wacker argues that the Pentecostal movement was able to hold these two impulses in “productive tension.”¹⁴³ He also acknowledges that this is a model that reaches back to the gospel of Luke, with the dichotomous approaches of Mary and Martha to receiving the teachings of Christ, and suggests that it has in some ways defined specific approaches to Christian living since the earliest days of Christianity.¹⁴⁴ Certainly it did not stop with the early Pentecostals, as one way to think about the rise of professionalized gospel music is as a result of this productive tension between the worldly and the sacred, that depends on the language of Canaan, whose legitimation depends on mutual recognition of the registers of communication that dwell in the topos of unsayability. Music might just be entertainment – wholesome or otherwise – but it also serves other purposes, both primitive and pragmatic.

5.3 Surveying Bird’s gospel music

With this understanding of separate registers of communication and the importance of mutual recognition for legitimation, it is time to return to Andrew Bird. To understand the

¹⁴³ Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

connections between Andrew Bird and the intangible exchanges between the music of evangelical Protestant culture and the secular world, it is helpful to think about the musicians from whose work Bird draws. The most notable one, already mentioned, is Charley Patton. Starting with *Play Songs For Rosetta* in 1997, Bird's music often references Patton's work – all the way through to his most recent album, *Hands of Glory*, released in October 2012. Like Bird, Patton is primarily regarded as a secular performer. Patton's music is often lewd, contains at least one reference to cocaine, and critiques white law enforcement – none of which suggests a special interest in cultivating a relationship with the divine.¹⁴⁵ Yet Patton, also like Bird, recorded religious music – two “sanctified pieces,” and two spirituals, and all four songs show up in Andrew Bird's performance at one time or another.¹⁴⁶

Bird and Patton are the musicians at hand, but it is true of other musicians as well: secular does not equal disinterested in religious performances. For a musical polymath like Bird, with such a long tradition of gospel music founded on forms in which he has an interest such as jazz and blues to draw upon, it would be far stranger if he did not incorporate recognizable elements of gospel music in his work. For the sake of ease in spotting patterns, however, it makes more sense to survey and discuss Bird's use of religious elements in chronological order.

First comes “Dear Old Greenland,” from *The Swimming Hour*.¹⁴⁷ It is an outlier in several ways, in terms of Bird's use of religious material: it is the only one that takes a recognizable song form and turns it to a wholly secular purpose, and it is the only one that may treat gospel music and religious material in a way that can be construed as tongue in cheek. This may well not have been Bird's intention, but it is easy to read that way; it is also worth noting that of these

¹⁴⁵ Ted Gioia, *Delta Blues: The Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters Who Revolutionized American Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 70.

¹⁴⁶ Patton, *Charley Patton, Document Records*, vol. 2.

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Bird's Bowl of Fire, *The Swimming Hour*, 2001.

examples, it is the only one occurring during the Bowl of Fire period.¹⁴⁸ The song itself is based on the chorus-spoken sermon-chorus model common to the music of Hank Williams as Luke the Drifter, as well as the Louvin Brothers' "Satan Is Real." Rather than use the spoken sermon portion to explore issues of morality, provide a warning, or evangelize, however, Bird instead casts Greenland as a place he will journey to experience the cleansing properties of its existential nothingness:

Friends, Greenland is a place where souls go to dry out
It is a vast and terrifying place of ice fields and tundra
Bereft of fire and in the horror of its imposing irrelevance
There is a peace
The peace of pain
The peace of nothing
Well, friends, I tell you what, I'm going there

Skipping over the part where Greenland is relevant to human culture and human history, having been inhabited for thousands of years by several cultures (it also possesses a thriving indigenous rap and hip-hop scene), a sermon illustrating not the joys of the world to come – or the horrors, if one is not saved – but a rather nihilistic display of the pleasures in giving up seems antithetical to the chorus-sermon-chorus form in general and the culture that created the form in particular. While I would stop short of calling Bird's use of the form here disrespectful, it certainly does not match the comparative thoughtfulness of his later uses of gospel music.

Bird's second recorded foray into gospel music is part of the *Fingerlings* series, which to date consists of four EP-length self-releases, mostly recorded in live settings. On *Fingerlings 2*, Bird recorded a cover of Charley Patton's version "Some Happy Day," in which Bird plays his

¹⁴⁸ Bird does invoke Patton's Elder Greene, a religious figure, in *The Swimming Hour's* "Way Out West," but the first line of the song is "Elder Greene is dead and gone." Greene does not appear again.

violin pizzicato-style, strumming and attempting to emulate Patton's tempo, guitar style, and vocal intonation.¹⁴⁹ Bird does not mention Christ, as Patton's version does.

A recording made by an audience member of Bird's show at Seattle's Woodland Park Zoo on July 23, 2008 features a mashed-up arrangement in a minor key of two gospel songs: Patton's rendition of "Jesus Is A Dying-Bed Maker," and the Reverend Gary Davis's "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed And Burning."¹⁵⁰ Unlike Bird's earlier recording of "Some Happy Day," Bird mentions the divine as he plays – no elision of verses pertaining to Jesus or the Lord – and Bird's vocals owe much to Patton's intonation, if not Patton's rasp.¹⁵¹

Bird later revisits this arrangement in *Fingerlings 4: Gezelligheid Chicago*, which was released in 2010 but recorded in 2009 at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church – the first year of an ongoing concert series that takes place in the few weeks before Christmas.¹⁵² The Dutch word *gezelligheid* does not have a precise English translation, but roughly means 'coziness,' especially in winter; the concert series always takes place in churches or synagogues, and consists of Bird performing solo and acoustic music that is quieter and more experimental in nature than what he usually plays in concert.¹⁵³ The Patton-Davis song is melded with a (usually instrumental) composition of Bird's called "You Woke Me Up," and is accompanied by lyrics portraying what appears to be someone feeling detached and alienated from his or her surroundings; this narrative line of the song is followed with the Patton-Davis element as an admonition. This is different from Bird's "Dear Old Greenland": rather than use the form without the intent, the form has

¹⁴⁹ Andrew Bird, *Fingerlings 2*, self-released, 2004, compact disc.

¹⁵⁰ While Blind Willie Johnson's recording of this song dates earlier than Reverend Davis's recording, Bird's arrangement derives from Davis's arrangement.

¹⁵¹ Andrew Bird, audience concert recording on July 23, 2008, Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, WA, audiovisual file in the author's possession.

¹⁵² Andrew Bird, *Fingerlings 4: Gezelligheid Chicago*, self-released, 2010, compact disc.

¹⁵³ Sarah Cobarrubias, "Get Intimate With Andrew Bird," *Chicagoist* (blog), December 8, 2009, http://chicagoist.com/2009/12/08/get_intimate_with_andrew_bird.php.

changed, but the intent has not. The effect of the three strands of song is to suggest that faith can be a sustaining force when the exterior world is not kind.

A pair of songs from an audience recording of a show at the Rio Theater in Santa Cruz, California on January 28, 2011 demonstrates Bird's growing comfort with performing gospel music on stage.¹⁵⁴ Again Bird covers a Patton song – "Goin' Home" – but Bird also covers a gospel song called "Tribulations." The latter song was composed by E.C. Ball, and Alan Lomax recorded Ball playing his song in August 1959. Lomax's session notes call Ball a "songwriter, flatpicker, and schoolbus driver," and Ball's introduction to the song is simple: "This is E.C. Ball in Rugby, Virginia, recording a song that I composed from the last book in the Bible, Revelations. The title of this song is 'Tribulations.'"¹⁵⁵ The song itself is simple, and does precisely what Ball says; it describes the apocalypse depicted in the book of Revelation. As one might imagine, the lyrics are not cheerful (though the song itself is in a major key):

The beast with horns will come upon you
One with seven, one with ten
Men will cry unto the mountain
Will pray to die but cannot win
When the fire comes down from heaven
And the blood shall fill the sea
I'll be carried home by Jesus
And forever with him be

Bird's cover of this song is faithful to the lyrics. He opens with bowed fiddle riffs that perhaps owe more to Patton's disregard for tempo than Ball's strict adherence to it, but the sung portion is in a standard 4/4 in a pizzicato strum. His vocals also match Ball's depiction of the end of the world.

¹⁵⁴ Andrew Bird, audience concert recording on January 28, 2011, Rio Theater, Santa Cruz, CA, audiovisual file in the author's possession.

¹⁵⁵ E.C. Ball, "Tribulations," recorded August 30, 1959 by Alan Lomax, <http://research.culturalequity.org/get-audio-detailed-recording.do?recordingId=3714>.

The other song from the Santa Cruz show, Patton's "Goin' Home," is considerably sped up from Patton's original recording of it. Nevertheless, this is the clearest evidence available of Bird attempting to embody Patton's voice; Bird sings from his chest, much as Patton did, creating a noticeably rounder and more resonant sound than his usual vocals provide. As for subject matter, the song is about someone ready to go to heaven (and who is assured that that is where they're going):

I'm going home, going home, going home
You will never ever fear any more
I'm going home, going home, going home
I will meet you on that fatal shore

This turn toward faithful renditions of gospel songs is relatively new for Bird – while the evidence suggests it started in 2001, it did not pick up in earnest until 2008 – and no faithful rendition exists on any of the releases that he has put out through a record label (the *Fingerlings* recordings are self-released and have no distribution through record stores). Bird's performance of others' gospel songs exists almost entirely on the stage, in front of an audience.

2012 marked the first time that Bird has taken elements from gospel songs and put them on a formal studio record. His March release, *Break It Yourself*, features a song called "Fatal Shore" that draws from Patton's "Goin' Home." Instead of the assurance of the saved, however, Bird displays doubt:

Would it be easier so much easier
If you never knew us
Would you ever fear any more
If you never knew us
Would we meet on a fatal shore
On a fatal shore
When are you coming to shore
To never fear any more
You never know any doubt
Like we who breathe in and out

While Patton speaks for the saved in “Goin’ Home,” Bird speaks for the secular in “Fatal Shore.” The theme continues on his October 2012 release, *Hands of Glory*, where a line from the first song, “Three White Horses,” consists of a slightly reconfigured title of another one of Patton’s religious songs: “You’re going to need somebody when you come to die.” The other, more notable gospel influence from *Hands of Glory* is the song “Something Biblical,” which draws from imagery of blue laws and a drought – “the county remains dry” – and Biblical disasters that call back to Ball’s treatment of Revelation in “Tribulations”: “But still we keep on dreaming / Of that fifty year flood / Of oceans of plasma / And rivers of blood.” Droughts, floods, and blood – all of them have been Biblical plagues at one time or another, and unlike Ball’s song, Bird’s does not suggest right behavior or Jesus as a method for stopping them.

The themes of Bird’s gospel-influenced output express four concepts: death, dislocation, a yearning for a better world, and concern about the current world. When Bird models his performance after any particular influence, it is Charley Patton.¹⁵⁶ Other than the round, resonant voice and the general disregard for keeping a straight tempo, Patton was notable for other aspects of his performance – despite being a small man with a limp, his voice was loud, “nasty,” and used to critique nearly anyone, and his musical performance involved “strutting and flaunting,” and “an endless stream of lively banter.”¹⁵⁷ In modeling his performance as much as possible after Patton’s (and it is worth noting that Bird is also small, with a wide vocal range that seems the most comfortable in the vicinity of a high baritone or low tenor), Bird performs to embody someone to whom people had to listen. Patton is not present and must be replaced – but Bird is not a good surrogate for Patton, despite any physical and vocal similarities. For one thing, Bird is

¹⁵⁶ When speaking of Bird’s performance models, I can only address the aural performance, as none of these concert or studio recordings have video with them. While there are written descriptions of Patton’s performance style, a close comparison of Bird’s movements to Patton’s is simply not possible.

¹⁵⁷ Gioia, *Delta Blues*, 49-51.

a much more successful musician than Patton ever was; for another, brash manner aside, Patton was still a black man living in the Mississippi Delta during the 1920s. To the extent that Patton's music is notable for its authority, Bird cannot match that authority because the racial environment has shifted (for that matter, Bird is white). What Bird gets from Patton's vocal intonation and Patton's disregard for strict meter is a method in which he can claim that gospel music for his own uses. Bird approaches Biblical imagery and gospel music with some caution; it is only very recently that he seems to be willing to incorporate it in his own composition and performance. After his first foray into gospel forms with "Dear Old Greenland," Bird's efforts turned to replicating the sounds and timbres of other performers. Only after a few years of this, and after a few years of concert residencies in church environments, did Bird's songwriting begin to incorporate gospel music.

Bird's concerns with gospel music may indicate why he has taken this trajectory. Dislocation, death, yearning for a better world, concerns about this world – secular artist though he might be, these themes indicate a search for understanding that in a more traditional gospel music environment could be assuaged by a profession of faith. The tenor of "Fatal Shore" is suggestive. Bird speaks as someone in a secular environment, and his riff on Patton's song – the song that Bird himself has performed on stage – addresses someone with faith. The song addresses the gulf between the secular and the sacred worlds. If Bird embodies Patton, a man whom it was hard to ignore, Bird attempts to replace Patton's commanding presence. Bird attempts to be heard in a register that goes beyond the words themselves and into that second register drawn from the topos of unsayability.

5.4 *The invisible third; or, a (w)hol(l)y ghost religion*

In Chapter Two, I suggested that in comparison to people concerned with maintaining some sense of structural integrity within the fields of Western art music and blues, Andrew Bird is more interested in the ways he can use those genres to reach audiences. For Bird, music *for* people takes priority over music *by* people. Bird's earliest education – the Suzuki part – underscores the importance of the environment in which learning and performing take place, as well as the idea that everyone has the potential to learn and appreciate music. His later phases of education – the conservatory, and his period of apprenticeship – address only aspects of a holistic environment, where Bird learns repertoire and technique. Yet social and political contexts come to bear on music, creating discourses of respectability, authenticity, and what precisely constitutes or preserves that structural integrity of musical genre. Bird's student and apprentice phases meant encountering those discourses, which were and are at odds with Bird's earliest musical education. The way Bird tangled with these discourses as his apprenticeship period came to a close was to present different points of view, as he did with “Fake Palindromes” and the Mississippi Sheiks. Bird took it a step further one album later by presenting the discourses as canon, and reaching instead for the apocrypha – a religious formulation.

The Charley Patton that Bird invokes in his explorations and uses of gospel music has more in common with the apocryphal Patton suggested by his daughter Rosetta Brown than the canonical Patton presented by Jimbo Mathus on *Play Songs For Rosetta*, presented in books by Robert Palmer, John Fahey, and Ted Gioia, or presented in the comprehensive Revenant Records box set with extensive liner notes (including Fahey's book) by such critics as Dick Spottswood,

David Evans, Edward Komara, and John Fahey again.¹⁵⁸ Bird's Patton is the Patton who sings gospel music to his family when he visits.¹⁵⁹ When Bird invokes Patton, he does so to muse on death, dislocation, and concern for the present world. Bird also does not merely cover Patton's work, but he *invokes* Patton – he slips Patton's lines in his own compositions, yes, but he also strives to embody Patton. Bird performs with Patton's rounded vowels, and with something of the showmanship described by the Patton canon, but on occasions that frequently only overlap with Bird's performance of Patton's songs, Bird also summons the vocal power behind Patton's sound on stage. Bird's posture changes. Bird's vocal dynamics change. Bird becomes closer to an imagined Patton by channeling Patton. If Patton is an authoritative voice – and that is something on which Brown's accounts and the canonical accounts agree – when Bird invokes Patton, he invokes that authority.

Gospel music then becomes a useful paradigm through which to think about what Bird is up to when he comes south after his apprenticeship. The structure and purpose of gospel music invite a third into the relationship between performer and audience.¹⁶⁰ With secular music, that structure is a linear relationship, with a line drawn between performer and audience. With gospel music, that structure becomes triangular – both performer and audience are interested in drawing closer to an invisible third in the room, whose presence is evident to everyone (if the performance is mutually legitimated) but who remains unseen. In a religious context, this invisible third is usually God or the Holy Spirit. In a secular context, the identity or identities of

¹⁵⁸ Charley Patton, *Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues: The Worlds of Charley Patton*, Revenant, 2003, compact disc. It is worth noting that Revenant's package design calls Patton the Masked Marvel, superimposes a domino mask over Patton's eyes, and places embossed question marks all over the box. The box set is a gorgeous object, well designed, and pleasing to look at and handle – but since it uses the iconography of the Riddler, it also presents Patton as a Batman villain.

¹⁵⁹ Mathus, "Rosetta and Me."

¹⁶⁰ The third, in this case, is not the music industry: recall the discussion in Chapter Two about the relationship between performer and audience being of paramount importance.

the invisible third become more slippery. Bird himself does not put an identity on this invisible third, though he does acknowledge its existence in his musical process:

I don't write anything down generally, no chord charts, no even – rough outlines. I just hope if it's really good, it catches and it'll come back out of me. A melody pops into my head, and then the next day, I try to piece it together. I could do everything as I did it the day before and it wouldn't exist any more. So there's like a ghost that has left those notes, and it's gone on to something else. And you just keep chasing that thing. And that's what is so attractive about performing – having to chase that ghost on stage.¹⁶¹

In a different context – a Pentecostal context – this ghost becomes the Holy Ghost, whose presence becomes manifest in a room through a performed, mutually legitimated experience of spirit baptism. In Bird's work, this ghost is often, but not always, the ghost of Charley Patton. Bird summons these ghosts with the importance of environment in mind: he makes a safe space for audiences to think heretically and consider the apocrypha, he uses technology – looping and distortion pedals, spinning horns – to train audiences to spy patterns, and then he seeks the invisible third, or the ghost.

The process of seeking that ghost reveals these preoccupations in Bird's more recent work – death, dislocation, anxiety for and caused by the present world. It is through the ghost, the invisible third, the *thing* whose presence we feel or suspect rather than see or hear, that Bird comes south one more time, in a different register of communication, to begin to navigate the *topos* of what is fundamentally unsayable – Bird's own, more secular, wholly ghost religion.

5.5 And about those ghosts

Time to put my cards on the table: I'm telling you a ghost story.

¹⁶¹ Aranda, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*.

Way back at the beginning, I said that Bird's got the right to tell his story the way he wants to tell it. A little further on, I said that narratives have future power. And I've told you some of Bird's story the way I see it (and why I see it that way), and I've shown you some of the other narratives that have shaped Bird and the contexts he works in, around, and with. I've suggested that a better way to think about what Bird is up to is to think of Bird as invoking, performing, inviting, *welcoming* an invisible third into the room with him -- and because his job as a musician involves audiences, he brings that invisible third, that ghost, into the room with the rest of us. Bird gets himself haunted on that stage, in that studio. Bird asks us to go there and get haunted with him.

A ghost story usually involves the haunted party or parties having to figure out whatever the original trauma was that created the ghost. Then, if they're lucky, they pacify the ghost and make it out alive. The problem with that story is that it assumes that the ghost story is contained, with an ending. And when I think about the canonical narratives I've spent the last few chapters discussing, I think of them as the kinds of ghost stories that have easy endings -- that once we know the traditions we're supposed to respect, the work is done.

The ghost story I'm telling you about Andrew Bird ends a different way. He is haunted -- his audience is haunted -- and in this story I am telling you, this narrative I am laying down, he's learned to live with the dozens, hundreds, thousands of ghosts that haunt the landscapes where he dwells. And he asks his audience to do the same.

We've talked about the canon. We've talked about gospel. Let's talk about ghosts.

CHAPTER 6

6.1 Twenty-eight seconds

The ghosts come in with the performance, so here is the performance. This is a typical version of a song that Bird plays frequently, called “Why?” – a holdover from the Bowl of Fire era, reinvented for the looping era.¹⁶² This is how Bird moves. This is how Bird performs.

A spotlight makes a circle in an otherwise darkened room. Andrew Bird is in the center, violin held to his chest, bow dangling from his fingers. He commences with one emphatic strum down as his foot presses a pedal. Just as quickly he turns away, pacing toward the Janus horn behind him, back to the audience – and then back around again, as he keeps playing pizzicato like a fingerstyle guitarist. His head shakes – first no, then yes, then something in between, never quite in time with the beat. His eyes are closed, his expression a series of winces. He might be fighting something, or feeling his way into something, or both. Tempo becomes a suggestion rather than a mandate. His hand rises to strum another chord and waits, kinetic – and then finds his downbeat. He presses a pedal. This is the loop. It is twenty-eight seconds long. Tempo is a suggestion, not a mandate. Andrew Bird finds his downbeat.

¹⁶² Andrew Bird, “Andrew Bird – Why? – Live at the Guthrie Theater,” YouTube video, 6:14, from a 2008 performance at the Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, MN, posted by “andrewbirdmusic,” March 25, 2009, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZBoZ0sUT3k>. This is another place where the official record – “andrewbirdmusic” is an official, Bird-affiliated account – contradicts itself; tour data provided by Ekonomisk Management says Bird’s only performances at the Guthrie Theater between January 2005 and December 2012 were on December 14 and 15, 2007.

Twenty-eight seconds: this is the foundation, these are his boundaries. He starts by waiting, by listening, by rocking back, bouncing on the balls of his feet in a manner much more like a coiled spring releasing tension than in a subdivided beat. His eyes open, gaze shifting up, toward the ceiling, as though in consideration. His head shakes, nearly, *nearly* in time with the first loop. The fingers of his left hand move on the strings, attempting vibrato on no sound at all, until as a near afterthought he pulls up the violin and whistles into an f-hole, then shakes his head violently, then whistles into the hole again – then waits, foot extended, for the last part of the foundation loop to play. Once that's done, he presses two pedals with his feet, quick, even as he plays pizzicato more quickly, something that sounds like it's based on an augmented sixth (a diminished seventh) from the minor root, something that sounds like it's designed to make the skin on the back of your neck crawl with discomfort: *why won't this resolve?* And then with the downbeat from the first loop, it resolves. And Bird keeps going, keeps playing on top of it, chromatic, ornamented, uncomfortable, head shaking *no* arrhythmically the entire time, stumbling away from the mic with the force of his (our) discomfort. Loop number two.

And with that accomplished, Bird has time for the vocals. He leans into the root C – the piece is in C minor, for whatever that might be worth – and holds it long enough to make it evident that he's juxtaposing it with the chromatics, juxtaposing it with the arrhythmia, one long, drawn out word: *Why?* As he lays out that single question, he leans in, violin cradled in his right hand, his left arm questing out, palm facing outward, arm crooked at ninety degrees at the elbow and pressing out flat to one hundred eighty degrees with the force of the question, pushing something away. *Why'd you do that?* Bird makes the question descend in tone even as his left arm comes back, recoiling, just in time to find its rightful spot on the violin's fingerboard for some more discomfited pizzicato. *You shouldn't have done that. If I've told you once, I've told*

you three times – hand waving, gesticulating, but not quite quickly enough to be on beat, as though his hand and arm must move through some substance heavier than air before coming back to the fingerboard to bounce along with his suddenly more staccato intonation, descending in unison on a chromatic scale – *You get your punishment when you show me your crimes and it's not* –

Twenty-eight seconds. Bird is on the downbeat, pizzicato line headed up, leaning up in a *relevée* to follow the line, his ankles turned outward (which is bad for them). His heels come back to earth as he sings, gestures, *A spell or a curse you put on me*. Pizzicato, as he doubles over briefly. *Or the way you make me* – Bow dangling off his finger, his hand spans the violin and brings the instrument up, as he either reaches out to grab or to fight back, in a movement unclear as to whether it's swimming or violence – *smile so tenderly*. Unison again, bouncing vocals, bouncing pizzicato: *How I wish it was, how I wish it was your temper you were throwing*. He sways, not like a reed, but as something that ripples or reverberates, shoulders rising with the movement from side to side. *Damn you for being so easygoing I swear*. Twenty-eight seconds.

At two minutes and seventeen seconds Bird's bow hits string for the first time, in a loud, crass trill. He shakes his head for emphasis and leans back into the mic again. *Oh, I thought that time would tell*. More trills. *My sins would provoke you* – tremolos galore – *to raise some hell*, as his voice rises to a high fifth, a loud G. The violin harmonizes as he wordlessly croons in unison, voice as instrument, right foot rising as he leans his bow into the note. *Not a chance*. Bird lets the loop do the job, as he crooks his violin back in his right arm, pushing and pulling with his left hand again against whatever is in the air. *I mean, whatever happened to fiery romance? How I wish it was your temper you were throwing*, he sprechgesangs, left hand spread in question or

indignation, *or those dishes you were throwing*, as he points a finger and drops his hand as his head lowers. He gives the pedal board a quick grin: up comes the violin again, and another unison descending chromatic scale. *Damn you for being so easygoing I* – A small pause. *Swear*, he says, in his normal speaking voice. Twenty-eight seconds.

Time for bow-work; Bird steps away from the microphone and begins to pace, and turn, leaning into the phrases he plays on top of the loop. First clockwise, then counterclockwise, then the force of his bow arm seems to make him stumble, then he catches himself. Periodically his feet lift off the floor in no predictable time or rhythm, one foot at a time, as though trying to shed himself of excess potential energy lest the system become overloaded. Twenty-eight seconds pass. Another set goes by; in one run Bird's violin work starts out bluesy and winds up classical. And then finally Bird, in the middle of an up-bow sequence, lets his bow carry over and down as his hands come to his sides. He leans into the mic, and confronts: *Why'd you do that*. He is having a conversation between two people as the twenty-eight second loop plays. The second speaks, finally, in Bird's voice, saying *Why'd I do what? I haven't done anything, I'm just standing here*. Hands on hips. *Everything's cool as far as I'm concerned, I don't know what the problem is*. He lifts his right hand, bow dangling off his finger, the offended party again: *No no nononono, that's just it right there*. His voice slips into a higher, sung register again. *Why'd you have to go ahead and do – nothing?* In a grand, measured movement, the violin comes up to his chin, the bow swings around, and it's another double-stopped tremolo as Bird's voice rises, and the bow slips to move in slow unison with the vocal. *I thought that time would tell*. Tremolo. *My sins would provoke you to raise* – The word is drawn out long, uncomfortable, only to resolve in another tremolo. *Raise some hell*.

Twenty-eight seconds, and the downbeat. Bird draws out uncomfortable notes again, notes that don't feel good on a C minor scale. *Don't give me that line.* He wags his finger, wags his bow. *Don't tell me that inaction's not a crime. Can't you see what kind of seeds.* Voice sloped up, he draws out the long *e.* *What kind of seeds you're sowing?*

He shakes his head.

Pizzicatos softly.

Damn you for being so easygoing, he says, and ends with a sharp, discordant downbeat.

6.2 *The call is coming from inside the house*

A ghost is an individual figure, a social figure, a sign, a noun.¹⁶³ *Haunting* is the action that ghosts take in order to inform the living of their presence. A ghost is a sign that a haunting is occurring; the feeling of being haunted indicates the presence of a ghost. The ghost is the one who does the haunting. The living feel the effects of that haunting, which Avery Gordon describes variously as “how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities,” “a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted,” and “a constituent element of modern social life.”¹⁶⁴ Assuming that the living can first detect and then are willing to acknowledge the fact of their haunting, the acknowledgment of the ghost behind that haunting transforms the living individual’s knowledge:

The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent

¹⁶³ For this discussion of ghosts and haunting, I am drawing from, and deeply indebted to, the work of Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹⁶⁴ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8, 4, 4.

to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition.¹⁶⁵

Ghosts haunt the work of Andrew Bird. With the documentation publicly available, I can't tell you the precise moment when Bird first experienced that transformative recognition that shapes a different understanding of reality than the realities prescribed by canonical understandings of music – but that transformative recognition is there. In his studio work it appears in 2005's "Fake Palindromes."¹⁶⁶ In that particular song, you can't throw a rock without it passing through a ghost: the unnamed woman berated by the unnamed singer of "She's Got Blood In Her Eyes For You," the cause of the blue feelings of the unnamed singer of the song, the Mississippi Sheiks themselves. As Gordon claims, these ghosts indicate something lost, or barely visible, or only seemingly not there. In Chapter Three, I presented a reading of "Fake Palindromes" that advocates the song as a feminist response to the Mississippi Sheiks' song *while at the same time* cautioning contemporary listeners to refrain from blind veneration of the Sheiks. In "Fake Palindromes," what is lost that Bird hints at is the troubling historical, social, and political contexts that surrounded the Sheiks as they worked and that surround contemporary listeners.

This is only the beginning of what becomes a widening pattern of friendliness toward ghosts and acceptance of haunting in Bird's live and studio performances. As I argued in Chapter Four, *Armchair Apocrypha* creates a space for listeners to contemplate unorthodox and heterodox narratives previously hidden. These narratives are sites of haunting. The people

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶⁶ This transformative recognition likely occurs even sooner given that versions of what becomes "Fake Palindromes" appear on live audience recordings as early as January 2001, and that Bird does not release *The Mysterious Production of Eggs* until 2005.

involved in these narratives are ghosts. Bird, in Gordon's formulations of ghosts and haunting, follows the ghosts:

Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter-memory, for the future.¹⁶⁷

Taken in concert, "Fake Palindromes" and *Armchair Apocrypha* meet Gordon's conditions for a ghost story: they repair representational mistakes, and they raise questions about and explore the conditions under which orthodoxy renders certain narratives apocryphal. As a result, Bird's performance effectively creates a space that exists in a continuous condition of haunting – and any time that performance occurs in front of an audience, that audience has the chance, courtesy of Andrew Bird, to experience *and acknowledge* that condition of haunting.

The release of *Armchair Apocrypha* is not where this particular ghost story ends, however. In Chapter Five, I described Bird's more recent involvement with gospel music; certainly there is room for ghosts – usually holy ones – in gospel. This is not the only way in which Bird continues his work with ghosts after 2007. To understand how, it is necessary to keep in mind two things that Bird does simultaneously. First, Bird treats compassionately with individual ghosts. Second, Bird uses the knowledge from his own ghostly, haunted encounters to transmit that knowledge, that condition of haunting, to his audience. He brings the invisible third in the room to do work. Bird's role is to amplify that work, to bring the audience closer to the ghost.

¹⁶⁷ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

6.3 No, seriously, the call is coming from inside the house

The example closest to hand for the ways in which Bird treats compassionately with ghosts is the ghost of Charley Patton. Patton has been waiting for us in what I've been writing (and what you've been reading) since very nearly the beginning.

What I've been writing does not describe a war over Patton's memory, since that would require that everyone know that there is a conflict happening in the first place. And a haunting is not a conflict – it is a resonance, a dissonance, and what Gordon again describes as a “seething presence.”¹⁶⁸ The only way a ghost has to advocate its agenda is haunting; it takes the living to do anything with that ghostly agenda, which requires the living to detect that seething presence in the first place. Bird not only detects that presence, but also welcomes that presence in his performance in very particular ways.

Those ways are not purely mimetic in Bird's later work with ghosts, as they were in his earlier work with Jimbo Mathus. It is also not enough that Bird covers songs that he credits to Patton. Bird performs very particular aspects of a received understanding of Patton's essence – an understanding which derives from the existing recordings of Patton's music as well as what people have spoken or written about Patton after Patton's death.

Recordings of Bird's *gezelligheid* shows, the mostly-annual-since-2009 shows taking place in consecrated spaces in midwinter, are particularly good for evidence of performed Patton, given the quiet of the environment: the renditions of “Goin' Home” and “Some Of These Days” toward the end of individual concerts show Bird, compared to his vocals in the rest of those individual concerts, comparatively taking on more vocal power. Again, Bird's use of Patton's technique is not wholly mimetic. Bird does not reproduce every vocal tic and shape every vowel

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

in the precise manner of Patton's recordings. Rather, he provides more breath support in his own sound, singing from much further down in his chest, which allows him to reproduce Patton's dynamics, Patton's breath, and Patton's *resonance*. The Patton described by Robert Palmer, Ted Gioia, and John Fahey is a showman, known as much for being loud as for his showboating instrumentals, playing over his head, behind his back, and in other physically improbable ways. The physical improbability of Bird's stage act owes something to this Patton as well; Bird switches among violin, guitar, and glockenspiel at the same time as he sings, croons, whistles, and uses technology to loop all of these different voices on top of each other in ways that converge and harmonize. Patton's balancing act, according to the canonical narratives, was his masculine charisma versus the unwelcoming worldly reality of the Mississippi Delta in the 1920s. Patton's ghost, as received by Andrew Bird, dwells in Bird's balancing and control of multiple voices in concert.

But why invite the ghost of Patton into the room at all? The simple answer is that Patton's ghost still has an agenda to advocate through haunting in the present that is not the work Patton did as a living musician. The agenda is also not the work that Palmer and Mathus gave Patton, either – the work of being an original ancestor whose magic passed into the very soil with his death. Nor is it the agenda suggested by Rosetta Brown, of a man who only came around to sing family-friendly gospel songs. Andrew Bird's work with the ghost of Charley Patton makes it clear that multiple agendas can exist in one body of work. The agenda of the ghost of Charley Patton in his haunting of Andrew Bird is to be *a* voice, not *the* voice – and not just *a* voice, but a *complex* voice. This, too, Avery Gordon cites as a vital part of the conditions that make ghosts:

...even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents. It has always baffled me why those most interested in understanding and changing the barbaric domination that

characterizes our modernity often – not always – withhold from the very people they are most concerned with the right to complex personhood. ...At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning.¹⁶⁹

Patton exists in Bird's work as a musician who sang about Jesus, his own jilting, and his own jelly roll with equal enthusiasm and ability. The ghost of Charley Patton is neither victim nor superhuman agent, neither progenitor nor prophet. He is a complex figure who haunts Andrew Bird and his audience.¹⁷⁰ That haunting "is about reliving events in all their vividness, originality, and violence so as to overcome their pulsating and lingering effects."¹⁷¹ Bird cannot make Patton live again, but Bird can invoke the events that influenced Patton's life and caused the haunting to occur, in an effort to relive those events.

Reliving the events that made the living Patton as well as the ghost of Patton means navigating the *topos*, the landscape, of what is fundamentally unsayable, that other register of communication I began to describe in Chapter Five. The immediate world surrounding the living Charley Patton was a plantation economy that had been in place in the New World for centuries by the time of Patton's birth; this economy is how Patton came to be where, what, and who he was. And as mentioned in Chapter Four, the history that serves as the foundation of the received understandings of Patton and that plantation economy relies upon physical evidence, and privileges print evidence. Yet given that the physical evidence makes it possible for Chapter Four's Chris King to participate in the long project of forgetting and erasing that is extreme veneration of prewar music, how can Bird or anyone engage in reliving events that include what that long project of forgetting and erasing has consigned to oblivion?

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁷⁰ Put another way, Bird holds these different narratives of the ghost of Charley Patton in productive tension, Grant Wacker's formulation that I discussed in Chapter Five. But I'd rather orient the ghost as agent, given the historical tendency to do otherwise.

¹⁷¹ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 134.

6.4 Not a robot, but a ghost

This is one of the questions with which Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* is preoccupied. In describing her reasons for writing the book, Gordon suggests that the vocabularies of her everyday life were inadequate for the work she was trying to do:

The available critical vocabularies were failing (me) to communicate the depth, density, and intricacies of the dialectic of subjection and subjectivity (or what in my business we call structure and agency), of domination and freedom, of critique and utopian longing. Of course, it is not simply the vocabularies themselves that are at fault, but the constellation of effects, historical and institutional, that make a vocabulary a social practice of producing knowledge. A vocabulary and a practice were missing while demanding their due.¹⁷²

Bird's studio album (as well as his shift in performance practices) following *Armchair Apocrypha*, 2009's *Noble Beast*, addresses these problems of dominant systems providing inadequate vocabularies to describe what seems to be fundamentally unsayable. This is the logical (and arguably inevitable) followup to stepping away from any canon and asking what else is out there: how can you begin to describe what has been systematically marginalized and ignored in order to provide a different representation or a counter-memory? Avery Gordon writes *Ghostly Matters*. Andrew Bird releases *Noble Beast*.

To be sure, Gordon's book is a fuller and longer answer to that question than Bird provides on *Noble Beast*; Bird is still trying to answer this question, three albums later. The beginning of Bird's answer, however, starts with similar concerns about the inadequacy of a received vocabulary. These concerns manifest in wordplay and in the presence of numerology – both, like Bird's then-new expansion into and of his use of looping technology, being ways to

¹⁷² Ibid., 8.

train audiences to spot patterns.¹⁷³ Outside those two elements, however, two individual dictums within Bird's lyrics sum up his stance on the problem of vocabulary. The first, from "Fitz and the Dizzyspells:" *The language is broken. Cast your own.* The second, from "Not A Robot, But A Ghost:" *I crack the codes, you end the war.* The point of teaching audiences to spot patterns is to teach them to see the layered meanings that could lie under any given statement, riff, or image – not just in Bird's work, but elsewhere. The codes that Bird adjures the listener to crack are those that support Avery Gordon's constellation of effects that make those gaps and silences where hauntings occur.¹⁷⁴ And Bird's statement that the language is broken, and his imperative to listeners to cast their own language, occurs in this particular sonically and socially haunted reality that Bird has constructed that depends on Bird's ability to internalize, invoke, and then externalize a balanced and harmonic array of ghostly voices in many different registers.¹⁷⁵ This is the role of *Noble Beast*: if *Armchair Apocrypha* makes the apocrypha-friendly space for these ghostly voices, *Noble Beast* questions the ability of the vocabulary received from canonical ways of thinking and communicating to adequately represent that haunted space and those ghostly agendas.

¹⁷³ The presence of wordplay and numerology, not to mention anxiety about time, evolution, received history and vocabulary, and their collective influence on interpersonal relationships, in and on *Noble Beast* could easily get the same track-by-track treatment that I gave *Armchair Apocrypha* in Chapter Four. I don't think that spending the space on this kind of treatment best serves the arguments I'm laying down in this chapter (and *Armchair Apocrypha* is a turning point for Bird's work in ways that *Noble Beast* is not) – but that doesn't mean those elements aren't there. They're often explicit. The chief locations on the album for these elements and anxieties, other than the two songs I'm about to mention: "Tenuousness," "Effigy," "Nomenclature," "Anonanimal." Note also that with "The Privateers," Bird revisits an old Bowl of Fire song from *Oh! The Grandeur* (1999), "The Confession." And Charley Patton shows up again in "Souverian," where Bird cribs lyrics from "Goin' Home."

¹⁷⁴ Or, if you like, the same codes that surround the ability of sound cues to evoke time, space, culture, genre, race, class, and gender, as I mentioned in Chapter Four.

¹⁷⁵ It is not an accident that Bird starts performing live with a band rather than solo more regularly around the release of *Noble Beast*, since at this point Bird needs more collaborators and more voices. The *Noble Beast*-era stage band consists of musicians from Minneapolis: Martin Dosh, multi-instrumentalist and percussionist (whose solo work also relies upon looping technology), Jeremy Ylvisaker, guitarist (with a pedal board nearly as expansive as Bird's), and Mike Lewis, bassist and multi-instrumentalist (who also plays saxophone and clarinet). Lewis has since left the band to work with Bon Iver; Bird replaced him in 2012 with Brooklyn bassist Alan Hampton, who, like Lewis, has an extensive background in jazz.

Yet words are not the only registers of communication. Print evidence is not the only way to see narratives at work. Ghosts must communicate in different ways, given that haunting paradoxically indicates a ghost's presence only by a manifested absence. The ghost of Charley Patton is visible in Bird's work through Bird's decision to let Patton haunt him – and, by extension, the audience – in ways that go beyond words. The ghost of Charley Patton haunts Andrew Bird's performances by means of what Joseph Roach calls the kinesthetic imagination. Roach defines this as “a faculty of memory” which “flourishes in that mental space where imagination and memory converge,” and “is a way of thinking through movements – at once remembered and reinvented – the otherwise unthinkable, just as dance is often said to be a way of expressing the unspeakable.”¹⁷⁶ Bird's restlessness on stage in the post-*Armchair Apocrypha* era, moving from instrument to instrument, pedal board to pedal board, whistle to subvocalized moan to Patton-inspired displays of vocal power, pacing and swaying and turning, gesturing and gesticulating as though to punctuate speech or to disperse smoke (or spirits), shrugging away from or leaning into invisible forces – this is a different register of communication. This is kinesthetic imagination at work. This is performance.

Kinesthetic imagination is one of three processes that Joseph Roach suggests regulate not only performance, but genealogies of performance, which “document – and suspect – the historical transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations.”¹⁷⁷ The other two processes are what Roach calls vortices of behavior and displaced transmission. If kinesthetic imagination provides the movement, vortices of behavior provide the place: “a kind of spatially induced carnival, a center of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behavior,” “a place in which everyday practices and attitudes may be

¹⁷⁶ Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 27.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

legitimated, ‘brought out into the open,’ reinforced, celebrated, or intensified.”¹⁷⁸ Displaced transmission “constitutes the adaptation of historic practices to changing conditions, in which popular behaviors are resituated in new locales.”¹⁷⁹ To return to familiar territory for an example, the ostensible job of Robert Palmer’s *Deep Blues* is to trace a genealogy of performance for Muddy Waters. This performance genealogy positions Charley Patton as progenitor, whose remembered behavior constitutes the kinesthetic imagination from which Waters draws, whose style of music, the country blues in the Mississippi Delta, serves as a vortex of behavior, and whose practices are displaced even as they are transmitted in linear time – Waters played electrified rather than acoustic, in urban Chicago rather than rural Mississippi.

The way Palmer tells it – the way canonical blues narratives in general tell it – Waters is but the most recent of a long series of what Roach calls effigies.¹⁸⁰ Waters, as presented by Palmer, then becomes an effigy whose role is in part to serve as living memory of a particular vortex of behavior: blues culture of the Mississippi Delta between 1920 and Waters’s departure for Chicago in 1943, which Palmer then reconstructs by delving deeply into the life of Charley Patton. But this version of the Delta is a place where bad things happened, where there were a lot of atrocities perpetuated and where white audiences by and large did not appreciate the good music happening around them. The reason that circumstances couldn’t keep down Charley Patton is that Patton’s narrative, in this version of events, is about transgression. Patton’s transgressive behavior is what draws audiences’ attention to him to begin with. Palmer’s living Patton is a performed effigy that invites the community for whom Patton is the effigy to perpetuate Patton’s transgressive behavior.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 28.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 36. I first introduced Roach’s formulation of effigies in Chapter Five. An interesting resonance – I wouldn’t call it a coincidence – is the presence of “Effigy” on *Noble Beast*.

But Charley Patton is not a good effigy for this purpose, because at the time Palmer was writing about him, Charley Patton was a ghost. Patton was already dead. Some effigies are better than others; if the role of an effigy is to produce memory through surrogation, as Roach says, it pays to remember that Roach also says that surrogation, the process by which “culture reproduces and recreates itself,” “rarely if ever succeeds.”¹⁸¹ There are many reasons surrogation does not succeed, but Roach draws particular attention to certain instances, namely those in which:

...the very uncanniness of the process of surrogation, which tends to disturb the complacency of all thoughtful incumbents, may provoke many unbidden emotions, ranging from mildly incontinent sentimentalism to raging paranoia. As ambivalence deepens before the specter of inexorable antiquation, even the necessary preparations of the likely successors may alienate the affections of the officeholders – all the more powerfully when social or cultural differences exacerbate generational ones. At these times, improvised narratives of authenticity and priority may congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.¹⁸²

This is the agenda enacted by Robert Palmer in *Deep Blues* that becomes canonical. Moreover, because Palmer’s work depends on the folklorists, collectors, and sociologists that Marybeth Hamilton discusses in *In Search of the Blues* (and that I discuss at length in Chapter Three), these canonical narratives, like so many other canonical narratives, privilege physical evidence, and especially print evidence, over the repositories of knowledge and memory that dwell within physical performance. In this way, Patton-the-effigy serves the agenda of the living and the then-present, instead of the other way around, because the focus lies on Patton’s transgressive behavior rather than the structures that made Patton transgress.

For Andrew Bird, however, Patton is not an effigy, not a robot, but a ghost. Ghosts haunt. Haunting “is about reliving events in all their vividness, originality, and violence so as to overcome their pulsating and lingering effects,” which in this case involves exploring those

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸² Ibid., 2-3.

abstract and concrete structures that made the space that served as the behavioral vortex that made the ghost of Charley Patton.¹⁸³ Understanding that ghost requires granting that ghost Gordon's complex personhood – which again requires seeing a *person*, rather than a role, which is another way to think of a repository of behavior or memory – and thus thinking about those same structures. For the living Charley Patton, those structures derived from the plantation economy that dominated the Mississippi Delta during his lifetime; those structures in turn derive from what George Handley terms, more broadly, “greater Plantation America.”¹⁸⁴ The presence and legacies of Plantation America in Andrew Bird's recent work are why Joseph Roach, whose work involves communities on the circum-Atlantic rim, has something to contribute to this discussion of ghosts: Andrew Bird has come south.

But then, curiously, he begins to travel north again. To understand how, why, and to what effect, it's necessary to look at the places – and absences – that Plantation America built.

6.5 How to keep them down on the farm?

The plantations of Plantation America are economic engines and socioeconomic structures: they are large-scale agricultural operations whose purpose is to generate large amounts of cash crops such as cotton, sugar, and tobacco for as hefty a profit as possible. To accomplish maximum profit requires not just labor, but cheap labor, because high wages cut into profit margins. Before the Civil War, this labor was largely slave labor; after the Civil War, sharecroppers and tenant farmers did the bulk of this labor, though with the advent of widespread

¹⁸³ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 134.

¹⁸⁴ George Handley, “The Poetics of Oblivion,” 27.

mechanization in the 1930s this began to change. Maintained well, a machine is much more cost-efficient than paying wages, and is thus the cheapest labor of all.

While resident planters in the Mississippi Delta had incentive before the Civil War to keep their slaves healthy, absentee planters, who treated their plantations as investments and who relegated day-to-day operations of the plantation to overseers, had less opportunity to ensure that overseers cared well for slaves. James Cobb argues that general belief in the antebellum Delta was that “the lot of the slave was hardest throughout the Delta on large absentee-owned plantations supervised solely by overseers.”¹⁸⁵ Cobb puts this down to several factors:

...the self-interested Delta overseer did everything in his power to squeeze every possible bale of cotton out of the plantation and the work force he supervised. His job and his prospects for a bonus or a raise depended almost entirely on the plantation’s cotton yield. If the owner was an absentee, the overseer knew full well that his employer would be much more likely to judge him solely on the size of the cotton crop. At the same time, the owner was certain to be less aware of how the overseer had to drive the slaves to produce the maximum yield.¹⁸⁶

A planter without day-to-day knowledge of the plantation – the climate, the disease, the lives of his slaves – was not able to read between the lines of communiqués from his overseer in order to tell the manner in which the overseer ran his plantation. Physical distance meant a lack of knowledge and context; physical distance often meant a lack of investment in social status within a community. The planter was of course not the only participant in the socioeconomic structure of the plantation; he was just the chief beneficiary. When the chief beneficiary was absent, his lack of knowledge meant an increase in abuses of the labor force. The fact of a planter’s absence reduced the plantation’s purpose to a healthy profit at the end of the season.

Subjugation is thus inherent to the plantation model: in order to make the maximum profit, owners must have maximum control over labor and the environment. In order to have

¹⁸⁵ James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place On Earth*, 22.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

maximum control, it is necessary to create and enforce safeguards that prevent mobility and enforce sameness. The overt ideal final product of the plantation structure is profit; the covert final product of the plantation is control. But the beginning of the plantation is the acquisition of large amounts of cultivatable land. If the majority of slaves whose labor made plantations profitable were of African descent, the land itself belonged to American Indians. The scope of the harm caused by the establishment of plantations in the New World is not only limited to people of African descent. The present-day configuration of North America owes its existence to atrocities committed by whites against people of color. Echoes of these initial atrocities are plentiful, assuming one knows where to look.

It is not so much *where* to look, however, as it is *how* to look. The old saw that history is written by the victors has some truth to it: in order to solidify a hold on a people, a landscape, a structure, it is not in the best interest of a hierarchical elite to portray their origin stories in a negative light. The past is a place that we understand through narratives, and those narratives do not spring fully formed from the soil; they come from somewhere. As George Handley points out, historical evidence, especially when speaking of the foundational atrocities of the New World, may be hard to come by, as “the lived realities [for American Indians and African slaves] were either initially understated or erased in an attempt to conceal accountability. And, of course, dead victims cannot speak: those who did survive had little or no access to written expression, and their testimonies often held feeble legal force.”¹⁸⁷ The problem of representation has many facets. Historical evidence suffers from unreliable narrators, and when it comes to the historical record of these foundational atrocities, it is incomplete. No historical work can make it complete.

The realization that one’s present life is contingent upon the commitment of atrocities is difficult. It might result in horror. It might result in denial – that the past is past, and that it has no

¹⁸⁷ Handley, “The Poetics of Oblivion,” 26.

bearing on the present. Assuming one chooses to address that realization rather than deny it happened or deny its importance, the problem then becomes one of representation. Because the historical record of these atrocities is incomplete, work that addresses this subject often falls in the realm of literature, music, art, and other culture-informed works in the imaginary. Handley describes the process of writers and critics addressing these foundational atrocities as “awakening from a fundamental numbness” – numbness that stems from this realization that the New World in its present configuration is a result of gross human rights violations. Handley also describes a general method for those writers and critics who address this topic:

New World writers who do overcome this numbness paradoxically do so by beginning with a recognition not of the realities of the events per se but of the existence of a saturated, collective amnesia about them. In these cases, readers are typically taken through two levels in the suspension of disbelief, first on the level of historical experience (“Could this really have happened?” and then again in working through the trauma of what they have been asked to *imagine* as real (“What difference does it make that it did happen?”). This double suspension of disbelief does not create further numbness precisely because it points with greater honesty and humility to the enormity of the challenge that New World history presents.¹⁸⁸

Handley writes not of the suspension of belief, but the suspension of *disbelief*, which assumes that on some level, we know or knew that New World colonization and New World origin stories involve cataclysmic trauma, and that for whatever reason – ignorance, active choice, lack of convincing evidence – we do not believe this. What writers whose work addresses these cataclysmic traumas do, Handley suggests, is ask their audiences to believe that these things happen, and to explore what these things might mean. Handley advocates for a poetics of oblivion for writers and critics seeking to acknowledge these traumas, defining oblivion as “not what is remembered but what is forgotten and therefore unsayable” – an attempt, in other words, to reconstruct what might once have existed and address that reconstruction for the sakes of both

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

the present and the future.¹⁸⁹ It is the task of the writers and the critics who take on these subjects to develop treatments for this collective amnesia; the treatment Handley advocates involves acknowledging oblivion by taking what few things are known and building upon those things in their creative work. The theoretical result of this is to create in readers “an ethical obligation to learn to read cross-culturally throughout those regions affected by the historical patterns of Plantation America,” while always remaining aware of the risks of this practice, including “identifying traces and transformations of ancestral cultures as significations of their original form... render[ing] the historical agency behind colonialism and slavery invisible.”¹⁹⁰ To create a more inclusive and a better future, in other words, it is necessary to rely on the future power of narratives by using imagination to put people in where narratives created by historical agency render those people invisible – while still acknowledging that the imaginary is the imaginary, and oblivion is real.

To write effectively in the manner Handley advocates requires bringing this paradigm, where the plantation structure lies behind the colonization of the U.S. South and where implementing plantation structure created cataclysms from whose effects the New World has yet to escape, to a narrative that affects an individual rather than a race, or a class. It is disturbingly easy to perpetuate what Handley terms amnesia in print. Houston A. Baker, Jr. points out a place in Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* where this occurs:

However, for me, *The Black Atlantic* remains surprisingly abstract and indeterminate with respect to the very “chronotope” the book claims as its analytical “organizing symbol” – namely, “ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean” (4). After early mention, *ships* virtually disappear from Gilroy’s work. They disappear as chronotropes, material vessels “transplanting” black populations, dread transports of “conquered” people to penal colonies of the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 27-28. At the risk of beating a dead horse: remember Robert Palmer’s description in *Deep Blues* of the development of the Atlantic slave trade? Palmer does exactly what Handley warns against by using passive constructions.

Americas. *Ships* – as disciplinary and carceral “holds” on the shackled black body – receive no extensive treatment in *The Black Atlantic*.

Gilroy’s neglect of material ships and their movement is in some respects understandable. For he is in the final analysis, far less committed to careful, multilocal history leading to greater comprehension of *plantations* than to issuing a sprightly monograph in the service of black diasporic music criticism.¹⁹¹

Baker appears to have misread *chronotope* as *chronotrope* in Gilroy – but I think that mistake is intentional. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin originates the concept in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” defining it as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”¹⁹² A trope is a recurring figure in a work of literature – itself abstract. Baker referring to a chronotope as a chronotrope calls further attention to the abstraction of a very concrete object and a very traumatizing experience. The experience of the slave ship is one for which there are primary sources containing descriptions from which people can begin to understand the horror of the Middle Passage and thus one of the cataclysms of the New World. As one of the places that we can know at least something about when it comes to the foundational atrocities, Baker’s criticism of Gilroy’s choice to abstract the objects that made this cataclysm possible is understandable: turning the ships into tropes is a way to deflect the horror and pain of the Middle Passage, a way to avoid talking about the connections between plantation structure and – Baker’s concern – the prison-industrial complex (much less possible connections between plantation structures and the music industry, which would certainly be germane to music criticism), and a way to avoid discussing oblivion. Recall the prior discussion of absentee planters: slaves’ lives in the Mississippi Delta were often worse when the planter was not there to understand at least in part the factors that determined the success rates of his bottom line after the harvest. When the plantation is an

¹⁹¹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Turning South Again: Re-thinking Modernism/Re-reading Booker T.*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2001), 85.

¹⁹² Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas UP, 1981), 84.

abstraction to the planter, the people on the bottom of the plantation hierarchy suffer. When the ships become an abstraction to Gilroy, Baker suggests that Gilroy ignores the suffering of the Africans on those ships. The practical difference between Gilroy and an absentee planter is vast. The theoretical difference between Gilroy and an absentee planter may not be quite so vast.¹⁹³

Slavery in Plantation America served to deny millions of Africans complex personhood. They existed to perform labor to achieve maximum profit. The careful reconstruction of slaves' lives and relationships is a comparatively recent project, and, as with early slave narratives, other, more pernicious narratives can and do slide in and transmit out alongside what scholars and writers are able to reconstruct. The reconstruction of American Indian lives and histories is an even more recent project. These erasures, which only fairly recently have scholars, writers, and artists attempted to encompass, are the backdrop for jazz and blues in the U.S. South.¹⁹⁴ Yet the canonical narratives and received understandings of this music largely don't engage with this history and these absences, which serves to perpetuate further collective amnesia.

6.6 Andrew Bird and the New World ghost story

The perpetual collective amnesia makes sense to me, and the way George Handley talks about it makes sense to me, too. The stage where you're trying to figure out whether something so immense and ponderous as millions of people – not units of labor or property, not statistics, but individual *people* – just vanishing into oblivion, the complete and permanent absence of

¹⁹³ Gilroy's work, like the work of Robert Palmer in *Deep Blues*, is foundational for what I'm writing – the sources I draw on have drawn on it themselves. I draw on *The Black Atlantic* in Chapter Five. The point: it is appallingly easy to contribute to the collective case of amnesia about the foundational traumas of the New World.

¹⁹⁴ John Fahey, Robert Palmer, and Ted Gioia maintain that Charley Patton had Indian ancestry (but provide no tribe). Also, consider what the first white scholar who wrote anything about the blues, Charles Peabody of Harvard University, was doing in the Delta in 1901, per Marybeth Hamilton, Robert Palmer, and Ted Gioia: he was excavating Indian mounds, including human remains. Blues mythology literally starts with the graves of dead Indians.

possibility and knowledge, could have actually happened – that’s not an easy place to be. My experience of trying to mentally encompass the scope of New World oblivion contained, and contains, sheer crawling horror. It’s easy to want to just forget the whole thing. And what does anyone do with that knowledge, once they’ve tried to consider all the implications of the bad things that people did to other people a long time ago? What good does it do to put yourself through the process of dealing with the trauma of something that didn’t happen to you? That’s not a question with an easy answer. It’s not a question with only one answer, either.

Trying to break through that first stage, what Handley calls that fundamental numbness, to the second stage is a frightening prospect with few rewards – but that is, I think, part of the process of being haunted. The question that George Handley uses to describe the second stage asks what it means that these bad things happened here. Answering that question is what it means to tell New World ghost stories.

Assuming one is willing to entertain Handley’s second question, I think that trying to tell New World ghost stories creates two obligations: reconsidering the past, and taking a long, hard look at the present. Avery Gordon writes that “following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located. It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look.”¹⁹⁵ And I think that’s true – and it’s also remarkably abstract. As a guidebook, it leaves something to be desired, and that something is praxis.

If following the ghosts is also about putting life back into an absence, then it denies those ghosts the complex personhood they were also denied in life to only see them as “victims, or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents.”¹⁹⁶ In the last several dozen pages, I’ve seethed; I’ve also

¹⁹⁵ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 22.

¹⁹⁶ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 4.

made bad jokes which, I assure you, I took great joy in doing. I'd like to think we can acknowledge that the seething presences who instigate changes in our social relations may have shared similar impulses. And Gordon also states that the purpose of following ghosts is to make a contact that changes *you*, an individual. When we follow ghosts, it doesn't do anything for the ghost, nor for the specific events or structures that made the ghost. What following ghosts does do is remake social relations – which is a fancy way of saying that following ghosts, if factors converge in just the right way, can lead to the possibility of bad history not repeating itself.

In the case of the legacies of Plantation America, the prospect is tantalizing. Plantations didn't vanish with the end of the Civil War. People still disappear into structures, agricultural and industrial both, in the name of profits and in the name of control.¹⁹⁷ Race plays a large role in the likelihood that people will disappear – how could it not, when the *forgetting* part of the ongoing project of forgetting and erasing designates incomprehensible violence on massively systematic levels by whites against people of color? Gender and class play roles, too.¹⁹⁸

Discourses and dialogues are happening in academic and vernacular venues all over the United States about these legacies of New World cataclysms. Because of the colossal scope of these legacies, no one person can encompass the whole thing in their work. Talking about this, dealing with this, representing this – it's an individual project, an individual *praxis*, with scope often limited by individual interests and histories. And it's important work.

¹⁹⁷ A very brief and non-comprehensive list of works providing examples, arranged in chronological order of publication: Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died For Your Sins* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005); Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2008); Douglas Blackmon, *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Anchor, 2009); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

¹⁹⁸ We can take it as granted that racism and patriarchy and cyclical poverty exist, often work together, are bad, and should be dismantled, I hope.

It's work that Andrew Bird does by engaging with ghosts, and asking audiences to take on that condition of haunting with him. He doesn't directly ask this of his audience; rather, his lyrical content and his performance work hand in hand to create environments where audiences can encounter these ghost stories. Bird has a repository of memory to draw from that is not print – the circum-Atlantic repository of memory that Joseph Roach describes at length in *Cities of the Dead*. By drawing from this repository of performed, kinesthetic memory, Bird invokes ghostly presences. By using technology to stack layers of sound in recognizable patterns, Bird trains audiences to spot patterns. By juxtaposing hauntings created by received understandings of the past with personal, individual anxieties caused by the inexorable encroachment of modernity on present conditions, Bird makes spaces simultaneously familiar and new for audiences to consider the ways in which their relationships to their individual social worlds could shift if they themselves are willing to engage with ghosts.

6.7 And now, the weather

Earlier in this chapter I suggested that after coming south, Bird turns back and travels north again, and that Bird is still trying to answer the question of how to describe what has been systematically marginalized and ignored in order to provide a different representation or a counter-memory. These two ideas are related: Bird's ghost-following praxis asks audiences to consider their own individual social relations, and he also does this work himself. The social and spatial relations that Bird himself considers involve turning back to look at his own family history and his relationships with and to Chicago.

I am leery of drawing any argumentative conclusions about Bird's answer to this question of description, because any answers that Bird might show in his work are preliminary at this point. Chronologically, we have arrived in our discussion at the moment in Bird's career where he has released two albums within the last fourteen months – *Break It Yourself* and *Hands of Glory* – and while these albums do follow from, and expand upon, *Noble Beast* in the ways they deal with the themes, questions, and issues I've discussed in this chapter, it is simply too soon to make any of those argumentative conclusions.

You could stop reading here. The last paragraph of the last section is what I'm arguing that Bird's music does, courtesy of his various physical and abstract journeys south. But that doesn't mean that there aren't patterns to note and, in some cases, to investigate, in these two most recent albums. In tracing what patterns there are to trace, I need to break with the structure I've followed so far, because my argument is effectively concluded – for now – even though Bird is still working. What will follow is neither an argument nor a conclusion, but a forecast.

FORECAST

If I had to pick any single composition of Bird's that best describes what he's up to with his journeys south, it would be "Weather Systems," from the 2003 album of the same name (and his first solo record after the end of the Bowl of Fire). The lyrics tell a simple story: a woman sitting on the edge of a bed describes to a nearby man, turned away from her, the ways in which she can see systems, small and large, from the growth of his cells and the flowing of his blood to the weather systems of the world. That's literally all the song is – her telling him that she can see it all. The song starts with an imperative – *quiet / quiet down she said* – and finishes with philosophy:

Some things you say are not for sale
I would hold that we're all free agents
Of a substance or a scale
Hold still a while
Don't spill the wine
I can see it all from here
Weather systems of the world

There's some resonance in ending this project with a forecast. I'm taking my lead for this section from "Weather Systems," a song in which Bird asks for quiet, then describes the ability to see systems, micro and macro, personal and (seemingly) impersonal, and then, finally, acknowledges free agency in balance with interdependence.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ The looping shows up, too, in force – violin loops make up the back half of the six and a half-minute song.

Break It Yourself (2012) literally starts with quiet, the absence of sound: it starts with an image. The album's cover has colors reflected prismatically over what appears to be a black and white photograph. In the foreground of the photograph is a towheaded child in a white, smock-like dress over boots. The child, who appears to be no older than five, looks down at his or her dark boots. One hand tows a toy horse by its halter: the horse is black and wears a saddle, and its hooves are on a wooden, wheeled plank. Behind the child are houses, all two or three stories tall. The child is playing in the street, which is not paved; it is dirt. Debris is scattered in front of the nearest house, on the viewer's left. The trees by the house have no leaves. On the viewer's right, a team of black horses edges into frame. The way the street curves, the child – and the photographer – lie in the path of the team, and whatever it is the team might be pulling. The photograph itself is off balance, the camera tilted slightly to the left. The child pulling the horse appears to stand straight. The surroundings behind the child – the buildings, the oncoming team of horses – appear to be off kilter.

It's a strange choice for a cover, and it marks a departure from previous albums for Bird. Other covers have all been hand-drawn by various artists, with the exception of *Armchair Apocrypha* – and the cover of *Armchair Apocrypha* is a photograph of a parakeet from behind.²⁰⁰ The photograph on the cover of *Break It Yourself* has a different provenance and a different significance. Bird spoke about it in interviews that were part of promoting the album, such as this interview with *The Daily Beast*:

The survival theme echoes through *Break It Yourself*, right down to the startling cover image. It started with an old family album, Bird says. In it, he found a remarkable frayed photo that his grandmother had taken while visiting cousins in Missouri. “It was 1915,” he explains, “and she’s 11 years old. She snapped a photo of her cousin in the middle of the street pulling a [toy] horse.” In the corner of the frame, ominously, a team

²⁰⁰ The interior album art, as one might suppose, features a photograph of the back of Bird's head.

of horses rounds the next bend in the street, “on a direct path for both my grandmother and the cousin.”

It was striking for Bird, almost a century later, to see his young grandmother on this collision course. The photo, he says, was filled with heavy portent. Would they escape? It’s a question he’s happy to leave open.²⁰¹

And this interview, with online magazine *Drowned in Sound*:

My grandmother took the photo in 1915, when she was nine years old, when she was visiting her cousins in this tiny town in Missouri. And that’s her cousin, Edgar, pulling the little toy horse across the street. It was a brownie camera, so it was this little postage stamp photo in an old family photo album, and in the original you can barely see the team of horses coming around the corner behind him. I’ve always been fascinated by that photo, and I’ve since kind of studied the town, and tried to piece the story together, because Edgar does not appear in any photos after that. So it’s this mysterious, kind of ominous photograph.²⁰²

The details might be slippery – is his grandmother, whom Bird credits in the liner notes as Irma Wegman Bird, nine or eleven? – but Bird’s take on the photograph is not. The word deployed in both excerpts is *ominous*. Other words deployed: mystery, portent. And of course, there is the ghostly Edgar, who is in this image but no others, who enters briefly into focus while pulling a toy horse even as real horses come into the frame, their kinetic energies suggesting an impending crash. The photograph, according to Bird, was taken in Bonnots Mill, Missouri, which is a small town in Osage County, about seven miles east of Jefferson City.²⁰³ Bonnots Mill sits along the Missouri River.

This image – this ominous, mysterious, portentous image, according to Bird – is the visual entry point to the album. And this image is also part of the historical record of Bird’s own

²⁰¹ Andrew Bird, “Andrew Bird’s ‘Break It Yourself’ Is a Tale of Survival,” by Adam Auriemma, *The Daily Beast*, April 5, 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/05/andrew-bird-s-break-it-yourself-is-a-tale-of-survival.html>.

²⁰² Andrew Bird, “‘Autonomy is overrated’ – DiS Meets Andrew Bird,” by Sam Cleeve, *Drowned In Sound*, February 24, 2012, http://drownedinsound.com/in_depth/4144143-autonomy-is-overrated-dis-meets-andrew-bird.

²⁰³ A replicated photograph was included in the small-run deluxe boxed set, with vinyl, of *Break It Yourself*. The back of the photograph reads *Bonnots Mill 1915, Photo by Irma Wegman age 11*.

family. With *Break It Yourself*, the history is not only the history of the colonization of North America. The history and the ghosts are personal.

Family history shows up again in Bird's recent work. Bird commissioned filmmaker Xan Aranda to make a documentary about his creative processes. The resulting product, *Andrew Bird: Fever Year*, is the longest and most detailed work about Bird to date that does not derive from the music industry-induced need to promote albums and concerts by giving interviews. The 2011 documentary, limited only to festival showings as of this writing, looks at Bird on and off the stage – including segments at and about the Bird family farm in far northwestern Illinois. The farm is located near the village of Elizabeth, in Jo Daviess County, whose county seat is Galena, which was a steamboat port on the upper Mississippi River. Bird had a great deal of editorial oversight for the documentary; the presentation of the farm as the Bird *family* farm, rather than his farm, is again suggestive about the increasing role that his family history plays in Bird's recent work.²⁰⁴

The farm itself, Bird says in *Fever Year*, is important to his work as a site of composition and creativity:

I'll gather ideas as I'm traveling but I'll come here and unpack the ideas and unfold them. Being able to seek distances calibrates the brain to hear different music. In urban areas there's a density to your ideas, that it just relays to the audience that manic intensity. In the city I feel like I'm in crisis all the time, you know, and when I'm out here I make these kind of slow, low-pitched loops. Most of my efforts are about trying to bring this –

²⁰⁴ Bird required Aranda to recut the first full draft of the film before he would permit it to be released. It is unclear how much of Bird's editorial hand is present in the version of *Fever Year* that made it to festivals; that said, if the parts about the farm made it into the film, I'd suggest taking that as a sign of the importance of the farm to his processes.

what happens here – somewhere else. Just playing for the sheer joy of playing. No pressure, no, no expectations.

I wrote some of my first songs on the front porch of the farmhouse over there when I was eighteen, nineteen. It's just always been a place where I've had a lot of good ideas. I fixed up this barn in 2000 and I kind of developed a direct channel between being here and experimenting.

This interview takes place on a couch in the remodeled barn, which in *Fever Year* is filled with instruments and recording equipment. The portions of the film that take place at the farm are accompanied by long, lingering shots of wheat and corn fields, spiderwebs, clouds, streams, forest and pasture, the faded red barn and gray silos. The farm, the site of Bird's creativity, is a pastoral, idealized location in *Fever Year*. As for why Bird does not simply stay there, the film seems to suggest that it is because he feels compelled to perform – which is not something one can do in a rural environment if one wants to make a living.

Other elements present in *Fever Year* worth taking into account are the lines of transportation and association drawn between different places, and different kinds of places – the farm in western Illinois, and Chicago; Chicago, and the rest of the world. Getting out of Chicago is an ordeal, according to *Fever Year*. Locales other than the farm that get long, lingering shots are the Chicago Skyway toll plaza and bridges, the miles of electrical wires, the steel mills of Gary and Hammond. This is the I-90/94 corridor out of Illinois through Indiana.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ I'd argue that on some level, Bird as a musician has always been concerned with how you get into and out of Chicago, from the view from the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall at Northwestern forward. Bird comes from suburban Chicago and elects to live in urban spaces. Elizabeth is roughly seven miles from the Mississippi River and fifteen miles from Galena, a steamboat port for travel up and down the Mississippi. Across the river in Iowa is US Highway 61. *Fever Year* lingers on the southeastern route into Chicago – the Skyway.

On *Break It Yourself* it becomes clear that while Bird is interested in the value and interplay of autonomy and interdependence, another important theme is the persistence – and selectivity – of memory. The first line of “The Lazy Projector” asks, *If memory serves us then who owns the master?* It takes the structure of a statement used to prove something logically, philosophically, or mathematically, and turns that into a question. *If memory serves us* – meaning that perhaps it doesn’t. *Then who owns the master?* The question refers to a master recording, the kind from which other recordings can be made, whose ownership is an important question for a musician.²⁰⁶

The metaphor carries forward, however: the lazy projector for which the song is named is a subjective piece of machinery that shows a picture or tells a story. Bird describes the projector in the refrain as “that forgetting embellishing lying machine.” *Masters* show up in Bird’s work: there’s “Masterfade” on *The Mysterious Production of Eggs*, “Masterswarm,” on *Noble Beast*, “Master Sigh” and “Sigh Master” on *Useless Creatures*. Another revisitation is the line *time’s a crooked bow*, originally from “Armchairs” on *Armchair Apocrypha*. Bird prefaces the line in “The Lazy Projector” with *history repeats itself*. Given Bird’s journeys south, asking what happens when you personify those masters – plantation masters – may prove to be a useful line of inquiry in the future. Who owns the master? What happens when memory does, or doesn’t, serve us?

This same question appears in “Orpheo Looks Back,” where memory is contested ground, and ground over which *we*, in the first person plural, must journey. Bird maps out the route with imperatives: *And there are places we must go to / To bring these hollow words on*

²⁰⁶ Usually record labels, having paid for the production of a record, will own an artist’s masters. In conversation with Andrea Troolin, Bird’s manager, on January 10, 2013 in her office in Logan Square, Chicago, she told me that upon conclusion of Bird’s contract with Rykodisc (which ended with the release of the final *Bowl of Fire* album in 2001), Bird made the business decision to fund the production of his own records going forward. As a result, Bird owns his masters.

back from / You must cross a muddy river / Where love turns to love turns to fear. The presence of rivers is particularly notable because of the polyvalence of rivers in the factual and felt history of the United States, in the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (from which the title of the song comes), and in the geography of Bird's own family history. The words become hollow, in the places we must go to; the rivers we cross will change us. The rivers in the Greek underworld, which Orpheus must cross in an attempt to retrieve Eurydice, include the River Lethe – the river of forgetting, or of oblivion. *They say you don't look / There's only one way / On back from on back from here / They say you don't look / They say you don't look cause it'll disappear.* If you turn to look at Eurydice – what you love – she'll disappear. The title of the song suggests that, like in the story, Orpheus does look back, in spite of the warning.

I'd interpret the song, both this version and the slower, more minimal, less frenetic version that appears on *Hands of Glory*, the following way: on the personal journey to the metaphorical underworld of questioning received history, looking back on your relationship to the past will make your understanding of the past disappear. According to Bird's logic, this will induce madness – *They say you don't look / 'Cause it'll drive you mad* – but *If it drives you mad / It'll prob'ly pass.* The words are hollow, though; they're not enough on their own. The rest is performance – instrumentation, arrangement, dynamic, intonation. Without the performance, the movement, the praxis, the words remain hollow.

Bird's grandmother had family outside Jefferson City, Missouri; the family farm is in far-west Illinois, in Elizabeth, near Galena. One connection between those places is their proximity

to rivers – older highways, which many of the early European explorers relied upon. Galena and Elizabeth are near the Mississippi River; Bonnots Mill sits on the Missouri River. These two rivers encouraged European exploration and settlement on a north-south and east-west axis. They were also the highway by which the federal government, on behalf of the state of Minnesota, expelled the vast majority of Dakota remaining in Minnesota after the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, removing them to a reservation in Dakota Territory.²⁰⁷ Even as the United States was engaged in fighting the Civil War, the United States was also engaged in continuing a very old pattern of behavior in order to secure the Northwest Territory for white settlers – a pattern which runs through the land that became Bird’s back yard. Elizabeth, Illinois was the site of the Battle of Apple River Fort in 1832, a battle that was part of the Black Hawk War:

The Apple River Fort was the site of an important battle during the Black Hawk War. It was the only fort attacked by Black Hawk during the turbulent summer of 1832. On June 24, 1832, the settlers at the fort turned back an attack by some 200 Sauk and Fox warriors led by Black Hawk. The war, which lasted only 16 weeks, ended the threat of Indian attacks in the area and opened the region to further settlement. Many notable men participated in the Black Hawk War including a young Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and General Winfield Scott.²⁰⁸

Restoration of the Apple River Fort site by the state of Illinois started in 1996, the year after Bird graduated from Northwestern. Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, Winfield Scott: it’s worth thinking about the patterns of genocide, racial violence, and white settlement in the history of the United States as one of Joseph Roach’s genealogies of performance.

²⁰⁷ Mary Lethert Wingerd, *North Country: The Making of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). Wingerd wrote *North Country* by commission of the Minnesota Historical Society, and in it she directly questions the myths and popular understandings of Minnesota’s founding. She writes the history of how white settlers and white-dominated infrastructures seized and controlled the land that became the state of Minnesota from the Dakota, Ojibwe, and Winnebago nations – and calls on W. Fitzhugh Brundage’s work on memory and Southern identity to explain Minnesotans’ tendency to think Scandinavian immigrants simply spilled onto empty prairies.

²⁰⁸ “Apple River Fort – Welcome,” Illinois State Preservation Agency, accessed April 6, 2013. Available http://www.illinoishistory.gov/hs/apple_river.htm.

Journeys south and east, north and west, are part of Andrew Bird's personal history. His recent work struggles to put words to what, if anything, that might mean.

The journey ends, for now, back in Chicago.

On December 21, 2012 – the night the world was supposed to end – I was in the pews at Fourth Presbyterian Church, watching Andrew Bird perform. I was there to see the three nights that constituted the Chicago sequence of the year's mostly-annual gezelligheid shows. The church sits across from Water Tower Place, neo-gothic architecture outside and inside. The statues of angels atop the buttresses in the sanctuary play instruments, including the violin. It was cold, and snowy, and inside the audience was quiet as Bird worked. For the last few years the gezelligheid shows have been a place where Bird feels more comfortable than usual experimenting with new material, and 2012 was no different.

He played this song all three nights, and he prefaced it with the same story: a memory during high school of encountering an exchange student from Thailand, who'd arrived wanting to see Pulaski at night. I've transcribed what I heard on the first night, December 19, 2012, starting with Bird's introduction, continuing with the lyrics:

It takes a piece of old memory of Chicago – years ago a friend of mine had an exchange student staying with him from Thailand and for some reason the exchange student got it in their head that he wanted to see Pulaski at night. He kept saying, "I want to see Pulaski at night." And we thought that was kind of funny because, you know, sorry, Pulaski, there's not much to look at. The street, that is. But, it just stuck in my head. I don't know.

Half empty, half full
Cup runneth over
Horns of plenty, coffers full
We're starting over

I write you a story
But it loses its thread
And all of my witnesses keep turning up
Keep turning up dead
And I paint you this picture
Of Pulaski at night
Greetings from Chicago, the city of
City of light
Oh, come back to Chicago, city of

I write you this story
But it loses its thread
And all of my witnesses keep turning up
Turning up dead
I send you this postcard
From Pulaski at night
Greetings from Chicago, city of
City of light
Come back to Chicago, city of, city of
Come back to Chicago, city of²⁰⁹

Bird tends to perform new, as-yet officially unreleased material with a certain deliberate tentativeness. It isn't that he's afraid to commit to what he's playing – more that he's not sure what it is he's committing to, and as such, he elects to be cautious. “Pulaski at Night” as performed in December 2012 is more on the deliberate side than the tentative side; I think it helped that he was backed up by Alan Hampton on the string bass, and as such, Bird had to let Hampton in on the game plan. The song itself is in a minor key, with a lot of looping, a lot of ornaments, a lot of chord progression and stacking. The chords do not resolve.

But I also think that at least some of the tentativeness in “Pulaski at Night” leached into Bird's lyrics. They show ambivalence about Chicago. What is Chicago now, at this point in his career after all these physical and metaphorical journeys south? What does the place where Bird

²⁰⁹ Audience recording in the author's possession. As of this writing, two different versions of Bird performing this song are available on YouTube from shows at Riverside Church, New York City, December 11, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb5O71O5IIU> and at the Hideout in Chicago, IL, December 22, 2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPVNJcd5keA>.

received his early understandings of the systems of the world mean, once he's encountered the ghosts of the continent and taken on the condition of haunting? What does Chicago mean, now that he acknowledges his creativity springs from his connections to a particular rural space that saw its share of nation-building rooted in white supremacy, approximately three hundred and fifty years after Columbus departed Spain? What does he make of Chicago, now that he has acknowledged the interdependence of south and north, southeast and northwest? The witnesses to the events that make up this story are all dead – but not gone. Bird sends a postcard from an imagined Chicago, and cannot put a firm descriptor on what Chicago is. *Light* makes a convenient rhyme, but he spends more time leaving the question of what Chicago is, and what Chicago means, open-ended.

While I can point out themes and history that I suspect will come into play as Bird continues to work, I don't know how Bird will finish that phrase, or answer that question, or continue to work through the felt history of the continent and its relationships with the present and the future, through memory, through the wariness and ambivalence and wonder, through the haunting and the living. I look forward to finding out.

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