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That's Right, You're Not from Texas: Exploring Some Outside Influences on Texas Music

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Abstract

Before he began his successful recording career in 1927, Jimmie Rodgers held down gigs at resorts near Lauderdale Springs, Mississippi, and Asheville, North Carolina. His groups performed a wide variety of tunes at the resorts, including many of the songs emanating from New York's Tin Pan Alley. They played "I'll See You in My Dreams," "Doo Wacka Doo," "Who's Sorry Now?," and other hits of the day. Group member Claude Grant recalled, "We would play just about everything, square dancing music and other dance numbers. When we played for dinner it would be popular music, some country music also." One of the tunes Rodgers played was "How Come You Do Me Like You Do?," written in 1924 by the popular vaudeville team of Gene Austin and Roy Bergere.

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Courtesy of: *Talking Machine World*, July, 1928, p.46.

Before he began his successful recording career in 1927, Jimmie Rodgers held down gigs at resorts near Lauderdale Springs, Mississippi, and Asheville, North Carolina. His groups performed a wide variety of tunes at the resorts, including many of the songs emanating from New York's Tin Pan Alley. They played "I'll See You in My Dreams," "Doo Wacka Doo," "Who's Sorry Now?," and other hits of the day. Group member Claude Grant recalled, "We would play just about everything, square dancing music and other dance numbers. When we played for dinner it would be popular music, some country music also." One of the tunes Rodgers played was "How Come You Do Me Like You Do?," written in 1924 by the popular vaudeville team of Gene Austin and Roy Bergere.[1]

Gene Austin had traveled a long way before he scored on the New York vaudeville scene. Born in 1900 in Gainesville, Texas, the white singer had much of his early musical training listening to local black performers around Yellow Pine, Louisiana. He left his working-class home at the age of fifteen, when he ran away with a traveling circus troupe. After serving in World War I, Austin put together a vaudeville act and toured through the Midwest and Northeast, before settling in New York City. There he met recording executive Nat Shilkret and waxed several wildly popular songs for Victor during the 1920s and early 1930s. His smooth, understated tenor expressed a casual sophistication on hits such as "How Come You Do Me Like You Do" and his 1927 breakout recording, "My Blue Heaven." Austin eventually sold more than 86 million records for Victor and paved the way for later soft-spoken crooners.[2]

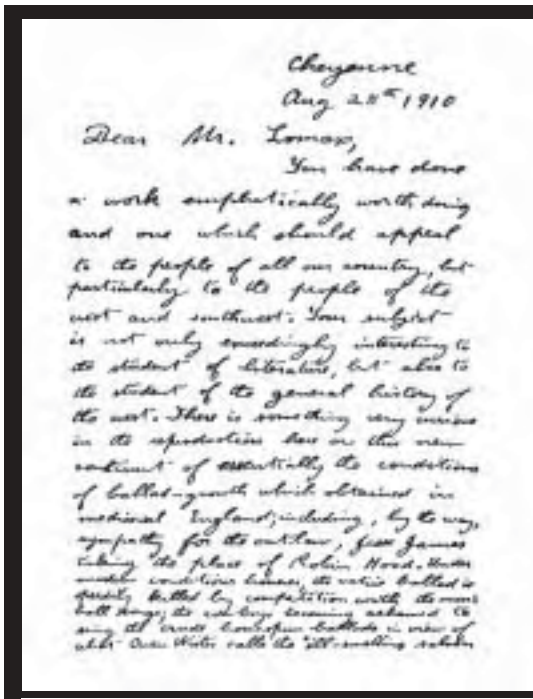
Yet Austin never lost sight of his roots in Texas and Louisiana. Even after he became the hit of society parties in the city, he still pulled on his rural southern identity. The same year he penned "How Come You Do Me," Austin displayed his southern chops, ghost singing on the debut recordings of hillbilly artist George Reneau from Knoxville, Tennessee.[3] Later, Austin dubbed himself "the Voice of the Southland," touted how he had absorbed the blues styles of his southern home, and organized tent-show tours of the South during the Depression. His New York recording success

made him a known commodity throughout the nation, including his Texas home.

The experiences of Rodgers and Austin suggest some intriguing questions. Where does "Texas Music" begin and what are the outer limits of its scope? Is the term useful if it is stretched to take in Austin's hits from the New York vaudeville stage or Rodgers's North Carolina supper club music? Can we fully understand the intricate story of music in Texas without pulling these sounds and styles into the mix? This issue of *The Journal of Texas Music History* features three essays examining music or musicians that rooted themselves in Texas by design rather than by birth. To paraphrase Lyle Lovett: "That's right! They're not from Texas." Jimmie Rodgers was a native of Mississippi but in his later years adopted Texas as his home. As Joe W. Specht's research indicates, Texas adopted Rodgers as well. Fans anticipated his appearances throughout the state and flocked to catch a glimpse of the famous "blue yodeler." John Dempsey celebrates Marvin "Smokey" Montgomery's long career with Texas swing kings, the Light Crust Doughboys. Montgomery came to Texas almost as an accident, carried by a Jacksonville tent show from his Iowa home. In later years, Montgomery would find Texas to be a launching pad for travels far and wide. Finally, Roger Wood expertly chronicles the development of zydeco music by border-hopping migrants from Louisiana in the oil and industrial towns of East Texas.

Together, these essays remind us that Texas and Texas music both exist in constant, sometimes contested, relationship to the world outside their borders. That's right: many of the influences shaping the sound, the symbolism, and the economy of Texas music are not from Texas. This essay briefly examines a few of these influences and attempts to integrate them into the story of Texas music. It is not conclusive or complete. Rather, it offers glimpses of a series of cultural encounters that shaped the sound of music in Texas. It is hoped that they might point to other similar ways in which Texas culture is defined by and against the wider world. For the sake of brevity, this essay focuses on three types of influences: people, media, and ideas about modernity and the market. First, people migrated to Texas, moved away, or simply passed through en route to somewhere else. The music that they carried with them combined with that of other sojourners to create the ever-changing sound of music in Texas. Second, national mass media such as sheet music, phonograph records, and radio have long brought national and international sounds and styles to the people of Texas. From their dawn, these industries targeted Texas as an important market for their wares, injecting the state with the vital sounds of commercial popular music, Broadway tunes, minstrel ditties, and modern orchestras. Finally, many of those who have been interested in defining Texas music have done so with one eye fixed outside the state. Folklorists, commercial record companies, and traveling musicians seized on the myths and music of Texas in the early twentieth century. Some found in the Lone Star State a culture that stood in bold relief from the music of the rest of the nation, particularly the songs and styles of the urban northeast. This perceived difference between Texas culture and the popular culture of the nation was essential to how music in Texas was promoted, categorized, and talked about by people both inside and outside the state.

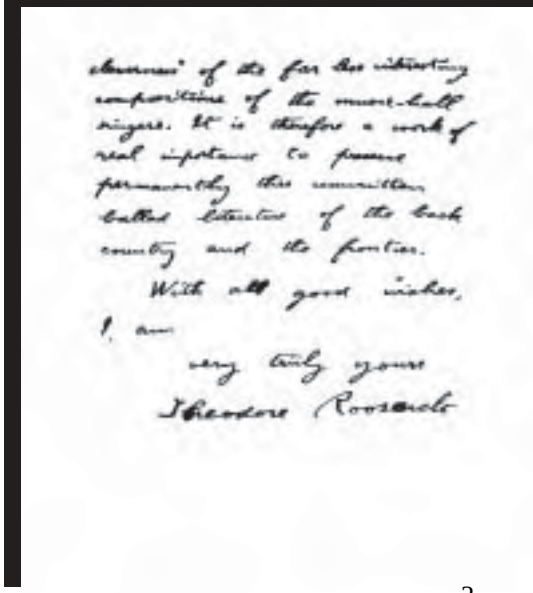
Take, for example, one of the early defining documents of Texas music, John Lomax's *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. The value of the collection, some commentators suggested, rested in its contents' difference from the music emanating from the urban northeast. When the Harvard-trained Texas folklorist published *Cowboy Songs* in 1910, Theodore Roosevelt heartily endorsed the project. The book opened with an enthusiastic letter from the ex-President to the ballad hunter. "You have done a work emphatically worth doing and one which should appeal to the people of all our country," Roosevelt wrote. Justifying the value of the project, the former Rough Rider immediately turned to visions of a European past. "There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this new continent of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in mediaeval England," he enthused. Roosevelt found that the "crude home-spun ballads" that cropped up in "the back country and the frontier" offered spiritual nourishment that the "ill-smelling," clever



Cheyenne
Aug 25th 1910

Dear Mr. Lomax,

You have done a work emphatically worth doing and one which should appeal to the people of all our country, but particularly to the people of the west and southwest. Your subject is not only exceedingly interesting to the student of literature, but also to the student of the general history of the west. There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this new continent of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in mediaeval England; including, by the way, sympathy for the outlaw, from James taking the place of Robin Hood. Under such conditions humble, the native ballad is quickly killed by competition with the music hall songs; the cowboy becoming ashamed to sing all crude home-spun ballads in view of the ill-smelling, clever



cleverness of the far less interesting compositions of the music-hall singers. It is therefore a work of real importance to preserve permanently this unwritten ballad literature of the back country and the frontier.

With all good wishes,
I am
very truly yours
Theodore Roosevelt

Letter Courtesy of: John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, (New York: Macmillan, 1948)

"music hall songs" heard in most of the nation could not provide. Lomax, he believed, had uncovered evidence of the past living in the present. Cowboys on the shrinking frontier, isolated from the ubiquitous, self-conscious music of the modern market place, had preserved the ancient art of ballad making.[4]

Lomax shared Roosevelt's interpretation. Lomax identified the cowboy by his isolation and the authenticity of his culture by the absence of modern, commercial music. "Frankly," he told an academic audience in 1913, "my own interest in American ballads is largely because they are human documents that reveal the mode of thinking, the character of life, and the point of view, of the vigorous, red-blooded, restless AmericansÖ These folk-songs originate and are yet current, as I have said, wherever people live isolated lives, — isolated lives under conditions more or less primitive[.]"[5]

Cowboy Songs tapped into a number of private and public longings shared by many northeastern white intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Many were interested in identifying an authentic national culture that existed outside of the morally compromised world of the market. The market had almost done its job too well, some argued, by creating a society of affluent citizens, comfortable creatures who were nonetheless increasingly succumbing to moral and physical weakness. As journalist Henry Childs Merwin complained in 1897, many Americans had become "civilized too much." He suggested those sick with civilization turn to those who had not yet caught the disease: "Consult the teamster, the farmer, the wood-chopper, the shepherd, or the drover," Merwin counseled. "From his loins, and not from those of the dilettante, will spring the man of the future."[6] *Cowboy Songs* answered the call, offering many readers evidence of lives lived outside of twentieth-century modernity.

Cowboy Songs was not designed to be an accurate depiction of the complex lives of contemporary cattle drivers. Lomax often struggled with his informants to separate folk songs from the parts of their repertoire that betrayed the image of an isolated frontier culture. "But are you really in earnest in claiming that the songs you send me are real range songs, untouched by any emendation of yours?" Lomax wrote to an informant in 1911: "I am after the untutored and unedited expressions of the original plainsmen. I am frank to confess that what you send me savors of the conventional popular song. Won't you tell me just what you have written yourself and what you have picked up on the plains?"[7] Lomax found his cowboy informants useful to the extent that they could represent, not their own experiences and expressions, but the folklorists' vision of an authentic isolated culture.

The informants whose handwritten transcripts Lomax used to forge parts of *Cowboy Songs* often had a more complicated story to tell about their musical lives. They heartily fought social isolation, attempting to remain connected to the larger cultural currents of the nation while riding the desolate plains. One Texan wrote to Lomax in 1910, "[A]bout the first thing I recolect [sic] at about 5 years of age was sitting in the saddle and riding around the cows (and sorts of other livestock)[.] And our music outside of a Jews harp or a violin for an old time dance was all vocal[,] and we picked up all the comic and sentimental songs we could hear and learn and would some times attempt to rhyme songs ourselves."[8] The comic and sentimental songs popularly available through sheet music and touring shows constituted a hearty portion of the music sung by cattle drivers. *Cowboys*, it appears, thirsted for such material and got it any way they could. In fact, after the publication of *Cowboy Songs*, Lomax received numerous requests from drivers asking for copies of the book.[9] When they received copies of Lomax's collection in the mail, cattle drivers may have been surprised to read that their experiences resembled "mediaeval England" more than the time and place in which they lived.

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Many residents of Texas and other frontier states had imbibed the nation's "conventional popular song" for some time. Like some of Lomax's informants, they integrated the sounds and styles heard into their musical lives. These national influences on music in Texas were aided by concerted efforts by national theater and phonograph industries to build networks of performance spaces, product distribution, and retail stores.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Texas had become an important market for national vaudeville and minstrel companies. Blackface minstrel troupes had been one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the country since the mid-nineteenth century. The largest companies combined derogatory caricatures of black culture by white performers with increasingly elaborate stage design and dramatic spectacle. The wild popularity of the major troupes attracted songwriters and publishers, who fought to get their latest products featured in the show. Minstrel troupes thus became one of the predominant circulators of commercial song throughout the nation. They brought the latest sentimental ballads, novelty numbers, and Tin Pan Alley compositions even to many relatively remote sections of the country. Texas was an important part of their territory, especially in the winter months when northern travel was difficult. Dan Quinlan, the manager of the successful A. G. Field's Minstrels wrote to *Billboard* in 1900 from Palestine, Texas:

"The prospects in Texas look very encouraging to me, if the weather keeps good. I have been coming down here for seventeen years, and have never seen so much money in circulation in this state. Every nigger has his fist full of twenty-dollar bills, so if the weather keeps up at all good, we ought to play to an immense business the next four weeks."[10] Field's Minstrels were not alone in their exploitation of rural Texas markets. The Harrison Brothers, a nationally touring minstrel company comprised of African-American singers and dancers, traveled through Texas in late 1900. The Harrison Brothers performed sixteen one-night engagements between November 28 and December 15. Their itinerary, typical of many contemporary touring companies, included both significant cities and smaller towns in east Texas: West, Waco, Calvert, Bryan, Navasota, Houston, Beaumont and La Grange.[11] Companies such as Field's and the Harrison Brothers brought the sounds of the urban stage to small town Texas. They shaped the sounds of Texas music and brought residents of West and Waco into cultural conversation with the rest of the nation.

In the first years of the century, Texas also found its place on the map of an expanding phonograph industry eager to rope in new consumers of the talking machine. Initial images of Texas in the industry press associated the state with the rural isolation featured by Lomax and his peers. However, instead of identifying isolation as an antidote to civilization, the talking machine world found rural isolation evidence of a hungry, untapped market for their wares. In 1906, writer Howard Taylor Middleton published "The Country in Autumn" in *Talking Machine World*, the premiere journal of the industry. The article played upon the cultural isolation identified with rural Americans. "The rural districts are fraught with promise to the talking machine dealer, and the more isolated the district the greater the promise," Middleton argued.

> Wherever the enjoyments of the great metropolis are heard only through the medium of the newspaper, where not even an echo of city life penetrates, there will be found a happy hunting ground for the talking machine salesman.

The talking machine could make the "country village...throb with the quick pulse of the city" by bringing the "pleasure of the theatre, the concert and the minstrel show" to isolated consumers, the author insisted.[12]

The previous year, Middleton vividly illustrated how the introduction of the talking machine to the cattle range might create excitement among isolated consumers. His short story, "The Prima Donna and the Cowboy," served as an object lesson in selling the talking machine to western working-class consumers skeptical of the industry's intentions. The story begins as Ike, a white cowhand prone to cursing and hurling racial slurs, settles down with his friend, the Kid, to listen to a new talking machine sent from his boss, who has traveled to a roping contest in New York City. The first record they hear depicts a Wild West show. It culminates in a cavalry bugle cry and the wails of Indian warriors in retreat. After a moment of silence, the Kid comments,

> I've heard a lot about them talkin' machines, but reckoned they was a fake put up to sell like that blamed patent medicine that slick critter from the East pawned off on us down to Denver last winter, but (here he took a huge chew of tobacco to recuperate his sense of speech) when they kin git a whole tribe of Injuns, a full brass band, a regiment of cowboys an' the Lord knows what else in one of them black dinner plates, an' shoot it out at you through a funnel, an' make your hair stand up an' bring the sweat out on you in a minute more'n a whole blamed round up of mad steers would in a month, it's a tolerably hot article, ain't it, Ike?

"'Them's my sentiments, Kid,'" Ike responds. The mood of the story changes quickly when the pair listens to the next record. The initial awe of hearing the talking machine is replaced by a strong cultural connection to the industry's home in the Northeast. "Home Sweet Home" echoes from the horn, and Ike is transported back to an eastern middle-class life. "His cowboy life fell away, and once more he was home from college on his first vacation home in the little New Hampshire village, and strolling up to the rustic cottage where dwelt Grace Brandon, the little New England maid who had promised to become Mrs. James in the far-distant, rosy future when his college days were o'er and he had made a fortune." Ike travels back east, marries Grace, and brings her back to live with him on the range.[13]

The story thus begins by asserting the common image of cowboys' cultural distance from the urban Northeast. Yet it concludes by drawing the cattle range into an intimate relationship with northern capital and culture, easing the cultural difference associated with the two regions and suggesting that the frontier West offered a fruitful market for the talking machine. It thus helped to draw consumers on the Texas range into a cognitive map charting the phonograph industry's expansion.

This map of the talking machine's reach increasingly included Texas as industry executives and scouts surveyed the prospects for sales in the state. Talking Machine World featured discussions of the railroad and trade routes through the state for the benefit of outside jobbers, warning that the great distances between cities would require extra travel time. By 1905, the industry had invested considerable capital in Texas, integrated the state within national distribution networks, and established regional

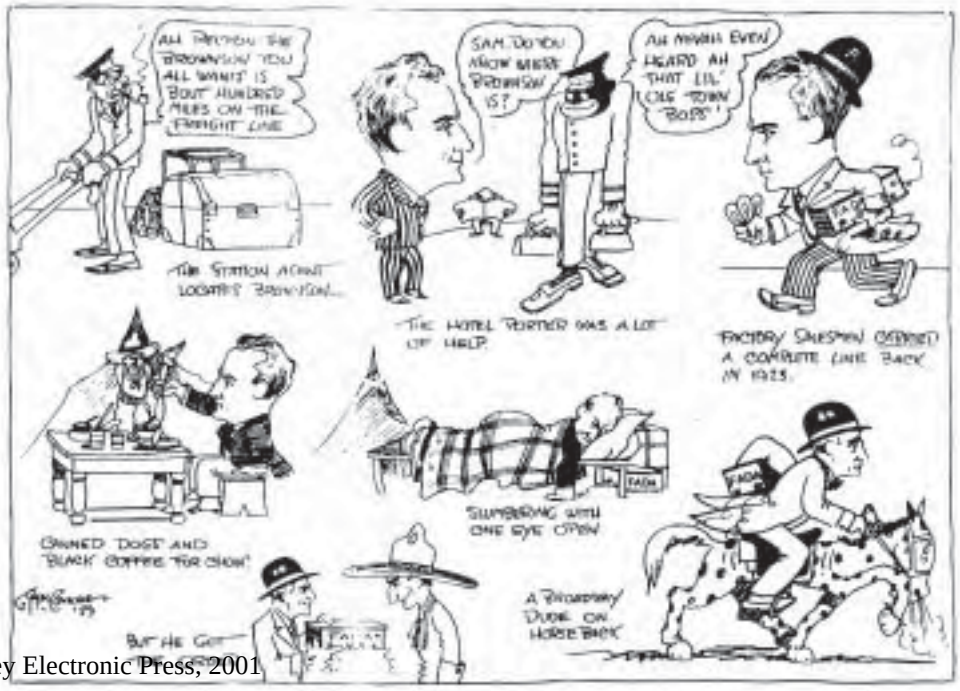
sales territories. Talking machine companies covered the state so thoroughly that industry pundits expressed fear of imminent market saturation—this many years before the recording of Texas music.[14] In the following decade, postwar prosperity and the oil boom again sent phonograph companies scurrying to build their customer base in Texas. The state's place in the national economy, its burgeoning fuel and agricultural base, thus affected the ways in which the phonograph industry imagined its role in the state.[15] In 1923, Lester Burchfield, a Victor wholesaler from Dallas, explained:

> The rural districts are the heaviest buyers of Victrolas, and the easier money conditions, the good crop outlook and good prices for the products of the farm have given the farmers and stock raisers confidence so that they are not backward in making purchases. Wool is now selling in Texas at nearly double the price received last year. This is being reflected in heavy sales of talking machines in southwest Texas, where wool is grown chiefly.[16]

As the talking machine and radio industries attempted to bring these rural Texans into the media consumer fold, they often portrayed their efforts as a clash of separate cultures. Traveling salesmen reverted to standard stereotypes to describe the Texans they encountered. The recollections of Fada radio salesman Lou Stutz are illustrative. Stutz wrote of a 1923 sales trip to Texas, "where men are men and used to the wide and wild open spaces." While visiting Beaumont, Stutz received a wire from his headquarters claiming that there was a potential customer in Brownson. This began a search that the eastern salesman described as a series of encounters with stereotypical Texans: slow-drawled railroad workers, an ingratiating, minstrel-inspired black porter, and a series of rough-hewn white cow pokes (see accompanying illustration). Stutz highlighted the difference between the characters he encountered and his own modern, urban life. "Picture me, a Broadway dude, never aboard a horse in all my life," he wrote. "At that time derby hats were the vogue. My apparel included a Chesterfield overcoat, tight fitting with a velvet collar—and I straddling this raw-boned Napoleon!" After his long quest, however, the cultural difference between Texas and the east coast melted away as his client "went into hysterics over the set—which created a sensation in that section of the country."[17]

These stories give several important clues to the relationship between the development of the mass media in Texas and the images of the state in the eyes of these industries and the nation. The expansion of the talking machine world into Texas was accompanied by images of Texas and its people as somehow isolated and different from the people of the Northeast. The industry pulled on the same visions of Texas isolation and difference that characterized scholarly works such as *Cowboy Songs*. Industry pundits such as Middleton and Stutz may not have invested Texas isolation with the same moral primitivism Lomax found on the open range. Yet they did contribute to the idea of rural Texans as dramatically, if unwillingly, outside modern American culture. Such images would have long-lasting effects on the sounds and styles the nation's music industry sought from Texas musicians and promoted as characteristic of the state.

The talking machine changed the ways Texans heard music. Texans discovered music to which they had not previously had access. These new sounds fundamentally changed the way in which Texans made music and imagined their own connections to the world outside the state. In 1924, a Dallas phonograph salesman noted,



Courtesy of: *Talking Machine World*, September, 1929, p. 9

> People with radio-receiving sets now listen in and perhaps hear a few strains of a song or an instrumental number a thousand miles away. It may be a catchy song or music number and the listener gets just enough of it to whet his appetite, as it were. Next day he goes down to his music store and buys a record of that number because he wants to hear the rest of it.[18]

Even before record companies began recording Texas vernacular music in the 1920s, many Texans listened to and enjoyed a variety of music on the phonograph. Mexican-American singing star Lydia Mendoza, for example, had some of her earliest musical experiences listening to her father's collections of opera recordings. Mendoza recalled, "My father liked the theater and music very much, and during those times when he owned a phonograph, our home was always full of music from records as well as what we would play ourselves. For instance, when I was young I listened a lot to Caruso, Enrico Caruso. My father was a fanatical aficionado of his. At one time, he had the entire collection of Caruso's recordings."[19] Texas blues legend "Leadbelly" born Huddie Ledbetter, also may have learned some of his vast repertoire of songs from phonograph records. While performing with Blind Lemon Jefferson in Dallas around 1915, the black guitarist drew on the songs and styles available through records, including Tin Pan Alley, Broadway show tunes, and the like.[20] The singer did recall learning several songs from mass-produced sheet music.[21] By the 1920s, early country records and radio were also at his disposal. John Lomax noted Ledbetter's love of this material. "Prime examples," he wrote, "are the yodeling blues and ballads of Jimmy Rogers [sic] of recent fame, whose ardent admirer Lead Belly still remains. His favorite song, we hate to say, is 'Silver Haired Daddy,' a favorite with yodelers and only too familiar to everyone who has a radio."[22] Lomax also noted the singer's love of several jazz tunes. Ledbetter pulled on all these sources as he convinced audiences at cafÈs and house parties to push back the carpet.

Artists such as Mendoza and Ledbetter actively broke down some of the borders between musical genres as they integrated the songs and styles they heard into their performances. Their stories demonstrate that Texas artists developed their music and their livelihoods in constant cultural contact and interaction with music from beyond the Texas border. They often showed little desire to segregate the music that they made from that which was popular in other parts of the nation or the world. In this they were not unique. Texans had been willing and enthusiastic consumers of a wide variety of music for quite some time, often belying images of their cultural isolation or antagonism to commercial popular culture. Some Texas artists even went as far as leaving their homes for the bright lights of the Northeast.

In 1910, the year folklorist John Lomax published *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, a young, white Texas singer picked up stakes and moved fifteen hundred miles to New York City. Vernon Dalhart, born Marion Try Slaughter in 1883, grew up in a rancher's family in and around Jefferson, Texas. As a young child, Dalhart had learned to ride horses and tend cattle on his uncle's 500-acre ranch. In his teens he held a summer job as a cow hand, the cowboy songs loved by Lomax echoing through the youngster's head. These were not the only tunes occupying Dalhart, however. When his family moved to nearby Dallas following the death of his father, the teen went to work as a salesman for a local piano store. His interest in music continued to blossom as he studied at the Dallas Conservatory of Music. By 1910, the husband and father of two was prepared to dive into the national music scene as a performer. He moved to New York City, the capitol of the nation's theater, phonograph, and music publishing industries. He took the name of two Texas towns near Jefferson to create his stage name.[23]

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Paying the bills by again selling pianos, Dalhart scoured the city in search of singing opportunities. He hired himself out as a soloist to local churches and funeral homes. In 1912, he landed a minor role in Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*. The following year he scored the lead in Gilbert and Sullivan's *H. M. S. Pinafore*, singing from the stage of the famed Hippodrome before joining the production on the road. He received positive press for his singing of light opera. Like many other New York stage sensations, Dalhart's talent soon was tapped by the talking machine business. In 1915, Edison announced in its catalog that Vernon Dalhart would make records for the company. Edison followed with the black dialect number "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline," several foxtrots, and light opera selections such as "On Yonder Rock Reclining" from Auber's *Fra Diavolo*. Dalhart became a strong and versatile seller for Edison. The company sent him on "tone-testing" tours to demonstrate their products and helped set up guest spots with oratorio societies

and performances in music halls. The tenor could do it all. A few years after he left his Texas home, he had found success in the popular music business.[24]

Dalhart's journey to New York suggests an important counter-narrative to a well-known tale: northern scholars descending into the South to discover traditional folk music. As John Lomax ventured from Harvard to the cattle range, some of the very musicians who sang the songs he sought were traveling in the opposite direction. They were not in search of American tradition but access to the modern American media. Back home, performing in local theaters, bars, or medicine shows did not gain the attention of the recording or publishing worlds. New York was different. If one wanted to make much money making music, it was the place to be. Southern migrants found varying degrees of success in the big city by shaping their art to fit into the genres and styles popular in New York at the time. Like Dalhart and Gene Austin, they sang light opera, and performed on vaudeville, Broadway, and cabaret stages.

Ledbetter, Mendoza, and Dalhart enjoyed the wide variety of music they encountered through national touring shows and phonograph records. Yet the music for which they eventually became known showed relatively little sign of these influences. Part of the reasons for these ellipses may be the pressures they experienced from folklorists, recording companies, or audiences from outside of their local Texas communities. Each found that these powerful audiences—and guardians of the media gates—were not interested in hearing Texas artists perform all of the music they had come to love. Rather, they encouraged Texas artists to perform songs and styles that stood in stark contrast to the nation's repertoire of commercial popular song. Exploring how these artists experienced these expectations reveals a great deal about how Texas music and Texas culture operated in relation to the rest of the country.

Vernon Dalhart attempted to build a career for himself as light opera singer, yet he received his strongest early accolades for his performance of minstrel material. The singer recorded a number of "negro dialect" numbers that were reportedly too true to their source material to be characterized as novelty or burlesque. A 1917 Edison catalog demanded, "You must realize, even when you have only heard 'Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin', Caroline?' once that this is quite different from the usual 'coon song.' It is a really artistic, old-fashioned darky love song. Vernon Dalhart sings it with tremendous effect. He gets the real darky whine. This is probably the best rendition of its kind ever recorded." Another Edison publication from 1918 found Dalhart responding to questions about how he learned to perform such convincing "negro dialect":

> 'Learn it?' he said. 'I never had to learn it. When you are born and brought up in the South your only trouble is to talk any other way. All through my childhood that was almost the only talk I ever heard because you know the sure 'nough Southerner talks almost like a Negro, even when he's white. I've broken myself of the habit, more or less, in ordinary conversation, but it still comes pretty easy.'[25]

Edison's praise of Dalhart's "negro dialect" was part of a larger trend which identified the South and southern performers with an anti-industrial ideal.

Blackface involved not a mere dismissal or attack upon blackness but an opportunity to publicly imbibe it and all it represented.

Blackface minstrelsy lived its nineteenth-century infancy primarily in northern cities. White working-class performers—many of them immigrants—turned to derogatory visions of southern black culture both as a pastoral antidote to their economic oppression and as a way of asserting their own whiteness. Through the performative ritual of putting on and eventually taking off "blackness," blackface minstrels and their audiences asserted a common whiteness defined by the negation of everything the stage minstrel represented: slavery, primitivism, hedonism, and naivetÈ. At the same time, historian David Roediger contends, the black mask enabled white workers to express longing and desire for that which their whiteness left behind. Blackface involved not a mere dismissal or attack upon blackness but an opportunity to publicly imbibe it and all it represented.[26]

Central to the minstrel show were images of southern black plantation life and labor, and it was with special fascination and longing that many urban industrial workers may have viewed these depictions of a pre-industrial idyll. The notes of lament and longing for the southern plantation heard in songs such as "Dixie" and "Old Folks at Home" resonated with urban workers whose lives were often marked by the discipline of industrial labor and a palpable distance from the rhythms and beauty of nature. While historians such as Roediger convincingly associate these songs with workers' quest for their own pre-industrial past, it is also important to note the ways in which the South took on much of the weight and substance of these visions. "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny" requests a move back in time but also a transportation through space. On the minstrel stage the South

became a mythic place out of time, a geographic time capsule which contained natural abundance and fostered the folkways of people not dulled by industrial wage labor. While increasingly a myth as the New South became peppered with textile mills, lumber camps and mining towns, this vision of the South persisted well into the twentieth century and influenced both northern and southern depictions of the region.

By the time Dalhart made his recording debut singing "Can't Yo' Heah Me Callin'," southern artists had achieved a privileged place within minstrelsy. The popularity of northern white performers within the minstrel industry had waned as southern artists—both white and black—claimed the lead in performing caricatures of southern black culture. African-American blackface performers such as Bert Williams and "coon song" composers such as Bob Cole insisted that minstrelsy was better when it offered more authentic depictions of southern black life. Bob Cole typified this trend, titling his 1896 sheet music "Genuine Negro songs by Genuine Negro Minstrels."[27] In light of these changing depictions of minstrel authenticity, white southerners also claimed that their southern heritage made them more "genuine" minstrels. Dalhart's supposed intimate exposure to African-American culture in his Texas home thus enabled him to claim a certain authenticity northerners could not match.

Dalhart's early career in New York, therefore, was intimately intertwined with northern visions of its neighbors to the south. Dalhart, like fellow Texas native Gene Austin, built his public image upon a combined command of a variety of popular styles and a continued economic and cultural pressure to represent his southern home to northern ears. He was celebrated for his authentic versions of "negro dialect" numbers, a genre founded upon inauthentic, derogatory images of southern black life. He was not alone. Other Texas musicians faced similar conundrums as their music was shaped by northern expectations of the sounds of the South.

Huddie Ledbetter faced a series of influences in the shaping and presentation of his art to the nation. Many of the songs and styles that he employed in his local Texas performances were not welcome in his performances for and with John Lomax. The ballad hunter noted Ledbetter's interest in popular songs, jazz tunes, and the music of white country artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and Gene Autry. Yet under the watchful eye of Lomax, the singer's vast repertoire was kept in check. As Lomax stated in the published collection *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly*, "We held [Ledbetter] to the singing of music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana, some of which he had 'composed,' at least partly."[28] Lomax repeatedly suggested that editing Ledbetter's performance of non-folk material was a big part of his responsibility. The singer, he claimed, was unable to judge what songs were of interest to the scholar. When Lomax refused to allow him to sing songs such as "Silver Haired Daddy of Mine," "he could never understand why we did not care for them," Lomax recalled.[29] The singer willingly catered to the collector's desires. In 1940, a few years after the two had a falling out regarding the rights to the songs published in *Negro Folk Songs*, Ledbetter appealed to Lomax's son Alan to help him get back in the elder ballad hunter's good graces. He argued that he had not let his interest in popular music alter his singing of traditional material. "If your Papa come I d like for Him to Here me sing," Ledbetter wrote. "If He say I have Change any whitch I Don't think I have and never will But to be [sure] to get his ideas about it I would feel good over what ever he says about it."[30] Ledbetter may have tried to please the ballad hunter for economic reasons. "[H]e confessedly cares for me only because I am 'the money man,'" Lomax explained.[31]

Ledbetter also faced stereotypes during his 1935 trip to New York with Lomax. Press reports depicted the singer as a representation of some of white America's worst fears. A headline in the *New York Herald Tribune* declared, "Lomax Arrives with Leadbelly, Negro Minstrel: Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides." The article sensationalized Ledbetter as a dangerous, murderous black man: "a powerful, knife-toting Negro, who has killed one man and seriously wounded another, but whose husky tenor and feathery, string-plucking fingers ineluctably charm the ears of those who listen."[32] Such images pulled on dual white traditions of depicting African-American men. Minstrelsy proffered images of a lighthearted, singing black people in the South. At the same time, depictions of black people as irrational, violence-prone primitives played a large role within American culture, having shaped pro-slavery arguments, Redemption propaganda and the brutal justifications for Jim Crow and "Judge Lynch." *The Herald Tribune* used both of these traditions to explain and contain Ledbetter's performances in the city. To some extent Lomax fostered the image of Ledbetter as a black Other, retelling the story of the singer's crimes and suggesting he wear prison stripes for public appearances.[33] Yet the New York press and audiences went beyond the folklorist in its association of black folk culture with violence and volatility. Lomax and his son Alan denounced the caricatured depictions of Ledbetter in the press. "Yet without the violent past, the white audience never would have noticed him," Alan later recalled.[34] Once again, northern audiences shaped the music and image of a Texas singer to conform to their own expectations.

A final speculative example of this trend can be found in the early musical experiences of Lydia Mendoza and her family. Her early performances in Texas were intimately connected to the tourist trade. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Mendoza family sang for the coins they could coax from visitors to San Antonio's Market Square. Their modest income depended upon giving visitors the songs and styles they desired while visiting Old San Antonio. Her story thus gives an opportunity to explore

the effects of outsiders' visions of Texas culture on the life and livelihood of Texas artists.

The Mendozas came to the United States from Monterrey in 1927. They eked out an existence by singing on street corners and at local businesses in south Texas. Unable to achieve any financial security, the family traveled to Michigan as migrant farm workers. They picked beets and worked in a nearby automobile plant before deciding to return to Texas and the street performances they had left behind. After living in Houston for a short time, the family moved to San Antonio and began performing regularly for the evening crowds at the city's Market Square.[35]

Market Square had become a major tourist attraction by the late 1920s—a cultural highlight of a city that increasingly promoted its unique mix of Mexican heritage and modern conveniences. To many United States tourists, Mexico, particularly the supposed ancient roots of its indigenous population, seemed a haven for authentic spiritualism and simplicity, an antidote to the dislocating modernity they were experiencing in their own cities. The vision of a premodern culture as close as Mexico enjoyed an "enormous vogue" among US tourists by the late 1920s, historian Helen Delpar argues. The *New York Times* described the trend in 1933: "It came into being at the height of our prosperity when people gave signs of being fed up with material comforts and turned, for a respite from the Machine Age, to primitive cultures. Mexico lay close at hand."[36] San Antonio, in fact, lay closer, and city boosters proclaimed the benefits of visiting Mexico without leaving the comfort and security of the United States. Visiting the city, the traveler could enjoy the best of both worlds—"primitive cultures" and "material comforts." The Market House, one guidebook contended, "affords one of the city's typical contrasts: a large, modern white building in a setting of age-darkened shops. The anachronism is even more evident inside, where the appointments are modern and sanitary, yet the atmosphere remains that of a Mexican mart."[37] Tourist literature, in many ways, operated in ways similar to Lomax's *Cowboy Songs*. It implied Mexican residents of Texas were outside of time. Their songs, dances, and culture were evidence of a romantic past living in the present.

Mexican and Texas-Mexican musicians were a major component of Market Square in the eyes of many visitors. Travel writer, and San Antonio resident, Mary Aubrey Keating closely related the musicians she encountered in Market Square with the site's ability to offer a relaxing respite from modernity. In 1935 she wrote,

> Go down Houston Street to the Old Market and you will be in the center of the old WorldÖ
>
> Here come "Lupe" and "Pedro." They are singing "Cuatro Milpas." All the songs of the Mexican people are full of contrast, either wildly gay or full of melancholy, with queer racial harmonies...
>
> As the music drifts in the glamorous Texas starlight, let us be a part with the scented darkness, be one with little lamps that flicker from tables, gay with flowers. Let us dream while the music plays, and our dreams shall waft upwards like the fragrant smoke from the charcoal braziers, upward to the star-filled sky of old Romantic San Antonio.[38]

Lydia Mendoza might have been one of the singers Keating encountered while visiting Market Square. Yet the singer had a very different view of the economic and cultural interactions that took place there. The severe economic conditions many working-class Mexican migrants experienced made performing in the square one of the best options for survival. The Mendoza Family made between fifteen and twenty-five cents a day singing in the market, enough to cover their daily necessities but little more. Lydia recalls many musicians in the same situation:

> There were a lot of groups in the Plaza...There were...more than ten groups there all spread out through the open area of the Plaza. And they'd just be hanging around there playing dice at the tables; waiting for someone to turn up... As soon as a car would enter, everybody, all the musicians, would run and crowd around to see.

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> "Can I sing for you? Me? Can I sing for you? Do you want to hear 'La Adelita'? Can I sing 'Rancho Grande' for you?"
>
> Well, times were hard and those musicians all made their living the same way we did: just from what people would give them. Everybody was chasing after the centavos in those days.[39]

"Americans and Mexicans—everybody—would come down there to eat and listen to music," Mendoza claims. Many white visitors to Market Square were interested in experiencing representations of a Mexican past. Mendoza's brother Manuel recalls, "The people used to ask to hear certain songs more than others. They were old songs, real old songs."[40] Within the very severe constraints of their economic situation, the singers were in little position to challenge their audiences' desire to hear only old songs. The performance of an uncomplicated vision of Mexican culture placed limits upon their repertoire and constrained their ability to communicate their lived experience through their art. While Keating pined for an "old Romantic San Antonio," the pressure to survive may have often left Mendoza little choice but to contribute to Keating's vision.

Dalhart, Ledbetter, and Mendoza found their art deeply affected by the expectations and assumptions outsiders held of Texas culture. Each discovered that their best economic prospects resided in creating music that conformed—to a lesser or greater degree—to these expectations. Like many of their peers, they experienced outside influences in two fundamental ways. First, their exposure to the culture of the wider nation changed the ways they heard and thought about the country and their relationship to it. They integrated national songs and styles into their lives and their art. At the same time, however, the national culture they encountered often carried visions of Texas as a place and a people outside of the national drama. National audiences accepted Texas artists such as Dalhart and Ledbetter partially because they embodied the stereotypes audiences had of the region as a place where modern concerns and contrivances did not apply.

Within these limitations, some artists found space in which to assert a positive, more complicated image of their culture. "As can happen with stereotyping," anthropologist JosÈ LimÛn reminds, "there is a paradoxical way in which artists and intellectuals, but also the ordinary citizens, of the sectors in question can actually partake of the stereotype in such a way as to provide distinctive and ratifying cultural affirmation and presence over against those who would wield it in wholly negating ways."[41] One can hear such a positive reclamation in the passion and conviction of singers such as Ledbetter and Mendoza. They declare their pride, humanity, and integrity through their art. Yet it must be remembered that their music did not grow from an isolated Texas soil. The images they fostered, the songs they sang, and the audiences they encouraged, were all part of a larger conversation among Texans, tourists, northern urbanites, and countless others.

When Jimmie Rodgers first auditioned for Victor's Ralph Peer in 1927, he performed some of the dance material that had gone over at his resort gigs. Peer was uninterested. "We ran into a snag almost immediately," Peer recalled, "because in order to earn a living in Asheville, he was singing mostly songs originated by the New York publishers—the current hits."[42] Peer did not want a rehash of tunes and styles that were already on record. He was looking for something different. Rodgers convinced Peer that he could come up with some old-time material by the following day. Peer worked with the singer to develop the type of material he wanted: music that sounded old yet was original enough to be copyrighted. Rodgers recorded two selections based on older compositions: "The Soldier's Sweetheart," based on a World War I era theme, and "Sleep, Baby, Sleep," a refiguring of a nineteenth-century vaudeville number. Peer copyrighted the first. The second remained in the public domain. Rodgers walked away from the sessions with a royalty deal and $100 cash—more than his band's weekly salary—as well as the satisfaction that his recording career had begun.[43]

The Mendozas came to the United States from Monterrey in 1927. They eked out an existence by singing on street corners and at local businesses in south Texas.

In 1911, John Lomax admonished a man who had answered his call for cowboy songs: "You do not tell me if you founded the song you sent me on the poetry of Walt Whitman. I am really interested on this point, and would be glad to have you tell me definitely if you are acquainted with the work of this great American poetÖIf you know of the words of any real cowboy songs, — I mean the songs they sing around the camp fire on the range — I shall be very grateful for them."[44] Like Ralph Peer in Bristol, Lomax actively shaped an image of his artists' culture that obscured important wider influences and sources. They appeared to be more isolated from the currents of American popular culture than was actually the case. As we struggle to define and describe Texas music, one of our challenges involves recapturing this history of the interaction of Lone Star artists with sounds, media, and ideas that are not from Texas. As Lyle Lovett reminds, "Texas wants them anyway." ■

NOTES

1 Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 55, 80.

2 H. Allen Smith, "A Crooner Comes Back," *Saturday Evening Post* (August 31, 1957) 25, 66-67; Jim Walsh, "Favorite Pioneer Recording Artists: Gene Austin," *Hobbies* (February, 1957), 34-35, 55, 64; and *Hobbies* (March, 1957), 30-32; John A. Agan, "The Voice of the Southland: Louisiana's Gene Austin," *North Louisiana Historical Association Journal* 28:4 (Fall, 1997), 123-137. See also Tor Magnusson, "Fats Waller with Gene Austin on Record," *Journal of Jazz Studies* 4:1 (1976), 75-83.

3 Bill C. Malone, *Country Music USA* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 58.

4 John Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910).

5 John A. Lomax, "Some Types of American Folk Song," *The Journal of American Folk-Lore* XXVIII:CVII (Jan-Mar, 1915), 3-4.

6 Henry Childs Merwin, "On Being Civilized Too Much," *Atlantic Monthly* 79 (1897), 838-846. See also Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism* and the *Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Simon J. Bronner, *American Folklore Studies: An Intellectual History* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1986), 10-11.

7 Lomax Family Papers, Box 3D169, Folder 8: John A. Lomax, Sr.: Folk poetry and folksongs: Correspondence Ballad collecting: General: October 1910-1911. Center for American History. University of Texas at Austin.

8 Anonymous letter to John Lomax, May 2, 1910. Lomax (John A.) Family Papers. Box 3D174: Folder 2: John A. Lomax Sr.: Folk poetry and folksongs: correspondence: Publishing: Books: Copyright and authorship controversy related to "Home on the Range" 1853, 1904-1911, 1930-1941. Center for American History. University of Texas at Austin.

9 See, for example, letters from J. M. Grisby, Lomax Family Papers. Box 3D169: Folder 8.

10 "Minstrels," *Billboard* (December 1, 1900), 7.

11 "Routes," *Billboard* (December 1, 1900), 9.

12 Howard Taylor Middleton, "The Country in Autumn," *Talking Machine World* (October 15, 1906), 5.

13 Howard Taylor, "The Prima-Donna and the Cowboy," *Talking Machine World* (May 15, 1905), 22-23.

14 "'Talker' Trade in Texas," *Talking Machine World* (December 15, 1905), 35. See also "Business Booming in Texas," *Talking Machine World* (October 15, 1906), 53; "Dr. O'Neill's Impressions," *Talking Machine World* (June 15, 1907), 29.

15 See "Oil Brings Boom to Texas," *Talking Machine World* (September 15, 1919), 43: Bliss Stoddard, "Bringing the Talking Machine to the Attention of the Public in Texas," *Talking Machine World* (March 15, 1920), 14.

16 "Dallas," *Talking Machine World* (June 15, 1923), 113.

17 Lou Stutz, "Remember 'way Back When," *Talking Machine World* (September 1929), 9.

18 "Dallas," *Talking Machine World* (January 15, 1924), 126.

19 Lydia Mendoza, *Lydia Mendoza: A Family Autobiography* (compiled and introduced by Chris Strachwitz with James Nicolopulos) (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 18.

20 Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 45-46.

21 Ross Russell, "Illuminating the Leadbelly Legend," *Downbeat*, August 6, 1970, 33.

22 John A. Lomax, "Notes on the Songs of Huddie Ledbetter," Library of Congress, Archive of Folk Song, 103-104.

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24 Haden, "Vernon Dalhart," 67-69.

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28 John A. and Alan Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (New York: Macmillan, 1936), 52.

29 Lomax and Lomax, *Negro Folk Songs*, 52.

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31 John Lomax to Ruby Terrill Lomax, February 11, 1935. Lomax Family Papers, Box 3D150, Folder 6. Center for American History. University of Texas at Austin.

32 "Lomax Arrives With Leadbelly, Negro Minstrel," *Herald Tribune* (January 3, 1935).

33 See, for example, John A. Lomax, "Habitual Convict Given Furlough to Help Gather Songs of Negro Race," *Dallas Morning News* (May 24, 1936).

34 Wolfe and Lornell, *Leadbelly*, 197.

35 Mendoza *Mendoza: A Family Autobiography*

36 Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico*, 1920-1935 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 57-58.

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39 Mendoza, *Lydia Mendoza*, 57-58.

40 Ibid., 63.

41 José Limón, *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, the United States, and the Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 18.

42 *Meridian Star*, May 26, 1953); quoted in Porterfield, Jimmie Rodgers, 110.

43 It is unclear why the split between the musicians occurred. Grant recalls that the group had a falling out over who would get top billing. Peer remembers that Rodgers recorded solo on his suggestion. See Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 107-111.

44 John Lomax to Francis James, August 8, 1911. Lomax Family Papers, Box 3D169, Folder 8.