

Chapter 9: Dead Presidents: “Charles Guiteau”, “White House Blues”, and the Histories of Smithville

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This is an attempt to understand what kind of history lesson we receive when we listen to two songs – Kelly Harrell’s “Charles Guiteau” (1927) and Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers’ “White House Blues” (1926) – in the context of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*. It is also an attempt to think about the ways that the *Anthology* engages with the American past. For when we listen to the second half of the first volume of this collection, we are pulled into a narrative of modern American history. Disc one has already taken the listener on a journey through time and space: from the opening Child Ballads through to “Omie Wise”, “Peg and Awl” and “My Name is John Johanna”, we have moved from Old World to New, tracing the folkways of American colonization. When we reach “Bandit Cole the Younger” on the opening of disc two, however, we find ourselves in notably different territory. The specificity of event, time and place that this song of Jesse James gives the listener makes it clear that we are in Gilded Age America. It is, with no little irony, 1876, the year of America’s centenary. What follows, then, can be understood as a roughly chronological journey through American history at a particularly pivotal moment: the period of approximately fifty years separating the James Gang from the performers and performances that make up the *Anthology*, a half-century that might also be seen as the crucible of modern America.

What also becomes immediately clear are the idiosyncrasies of the alternative history that these songs weave. Major events that are commonly read as the defining moments of the period are conspicuously absent: the Civil War, for example, conspicuously happens off-

stage, in the silence between the two halves of disc one and disc two, traceable only in the (unmentioned) Confederate careers of Cole Younger and his associates. Indeed, all other wars (Indian, Spanish-American) are excised from this narrative (except for perhaps class war) – as are, beyond their implicit effects on the narrators and subjects of these songs, the wider stories of politics and economics. Instead, the folkloric and the quotidian take the place of traditional grand narratives: outlaws, murderers, steel-driving men, train drivers, farmers and the passengers of the Titanic take the place of politicians and generals. The overarching story, if there is one, is of the manifold effects of industrialization on the lives of (mainly Southern) black and white Americans during the birth of the twentieth century – a story that was still clearly being experienced at the time that these songs were recorded, was still pertinent at the time of the *Anthology*'s release, and which still echoes now. This is, very clearly, the result of Smith's editorial practice. Whatever else their significance, the assemblage of these songs in this order provides the listener with a subaltern history of America across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; it is a song cycle that is also a meditation on who gets remembered – and forgotten – when conventional histories get written.

Whilst other commentators have certainly recognized that this is the moment when the *Anthology* engages most directly with the narrative of American history, that recognition has also come with something of a dismissal for the exercise. For Greil Marcus, "Though roughly tracing a chronology of British fable and American happenstance, and in most cases tied to historical incidents, these ballads are not historical dramas. They dissolve a known history of wars and elections into a sort of national dream."¹ Robert Cantwell reached for a similar image: "Whatever else may be said about the dream of America rising out of the Folkways

¹ Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Picador, 1997), 106-7.

Anthology, its form is one of ceaseless heterogeneous activity located not at a particular point in the past, but in a wider field of disintegrated time revealed to us by the door that the retrieved collection opens onto it.”² Dissolution and disintegration: both Marcus and Cantwell push against the historical specificities of the songs on this disc. In contrast, in his recent account of folk song and American history, Robert V. Wells has rightly posited that “Historians have had surprisingly little to say about or from folk songs [...] no one has systematically examined how folk songs fit into our past or what they can tell us about American history.” Faced with this lack, Wells puts forward a manifesto, of sorts, for thinking through this relationship: “that folks songs must be understood via the context of the past from which they emerged, that they provide additional sources for understanding earlier times, and that songs themselves develop histories as they are transformed consciously and unconsciously by singers who find some merit in them.”³ Yet this prescription also raises questions, particularly when faced with the *Anthology*: when we think about the “context of the past” and “earlier times” in relation to these songs, what context and times do we mean? The late nineteenth century, say, when these events took place and these songs, or versions of them, were originally composed? The 1920s, when these particular performances were recorded? The 1950s, when Smith compiled the *Anthology*? Faced with the layered multiplicity of these songs and their meanings, it seems difficult to read them so neatly (or, one might say, reductively) as historical artefacts.

² Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 199.

³ Robert V. Wells, *Life Flows On in Endless Song: Folk Songs and American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), xi.

In what follows, I want to try and walk a middle-ground between these two poles, and think about history, history songs, and the *Anthology*. I don't want to collapse the historical narrative on display on disc two – either into amorphous “dream” or specific source. Instead, I want to attempt to tease apart the jumbled layers of historical lamination that surround just two of these performances, and explore the ways that we hear history when we listen to these particular songs in the context of the *Anthology of American Folk Music* – and, perhaps, when we listen to any such recordings. For it's when we encounter “Charles Guiteau” and “White House Blues” in this collection that the larger stories of American history and politics intrude upon the scene most vividly.

Both songs commemorate, in distinctive ways, the assassination of a President – James Garfield, murdered in 1881, and William McKinley, shot in 1901. That Smith should include both assassinations – but not that of Lincoln – immediately raises questions about the version of American history that is being narrated by the songs on this disc. And the questions are further compounded when we think about the performers themselves: Poole and Harrell both spent most of their lives in and around the South's textile mills – a vital space and place for the development of what we now call country music. We are also provoked to ponder, therefore, what these songs of historical violence against political leaders meant to these men and their communities in the newly industrialized Southern landscape? What does it signify for these dead Presidents to walk the streets of Smithville, alongside their assassins and other assorted outlaws? What do these selections tell us about these assassinations, these musicians, Harry Smith's editorial choices, and the way that we imagine the past in song?

“The world does not yet appreciate my mission”

When John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford's Theatre on Good Friday in April 1865, Americans – however disparate their interpretations of the event – understood how to incorporate that act within the larger narrative of American history. At least in the North, for example, in Anne Norton's words, "Lincoln became a secular avatar of Jesus Christ [...] the redeemer of a broken covenant, the restorer of that *corpus mysticum* the body politic."⁴ When Charles Guiteau shot James A. Garfield in 1881, and when Leon Czolgosz shot William McKinley in 1901, the meaning of those events was more difficult to grasp – and still remains elusive. Guiteau was insane – a disappointed office seeker and religious fanatic whose palpable craziness still didn't spare him execution; Czolgosz was an anarchist – the son of Polish immigrants who, despite his peripheral attachments to the wider anarchist movement, nevertheless committed one of the most prominent acts of political terror in an era marked by such moments of violence. Neither of their motivations fitted neatly into mythic national narratives; both murders challenged the story of American exceptionalism in uncomfortable ways. The late nineteenth century witnessed a wave of politically motivated violence across the Old World. But Americans, in Candice Millard's words, "felt somehow immune to this streak of political killings [...] Americans reasoned that, because they had the power to choose their own head of state, there was little cause for angry rebellion."⁵ Guiteau and Czolgosz put the lie to that easy security and limned the limits of American Democracy. In various ways, they highlighted (like the *Anthology*) that America was just as weird and dangerous as the Old World, and was embroiled in the same social tensions.

⁴ Anne Norton, "Lincoln on Hallowed Ground", in Shirley Samuels, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 204.

⁵ Candice Millard, *Destiny of the Republic* (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 105.

Despite their disparities, both assassins and their acts of violence were similarly symbolically charged. Both murders opened up issues near the heart of American life, in ways that connected to much larger stories. Both assassins were associated with what we might describe as the nineteenth century's nascent counterculture – from Utopian communities to anarchist cells. Both crimes took place at symbolically potent locations: Garfield was shot at a railroad station, McKinley was murdered at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo – one of the many World's Fairs which marked the latter part of the American nineteenth century, narrating stories of prosperity and progress – outside, no less, the Temple of Music. In other ways, these terrorist acts feel shockingly modern. Both crimes took place in a cultural moment when profound advances in communication and technology had, to quote Richard Menke, created “discourse networks” driven by “the era's new media (telegraph, telephone, wire-based press) and the emerging conceptions of instantaneity, publicity, and technological unity they helped to produce and circulate.” In short, Garfield's wounding and slow death was “America's first live media event.”⁶ Equally, some of the final moments of McKinley's life – a speech in which, amongst other signs of the age, he celebrated the “quick gathering and transmission of the news [...] made possible by the genius of the inventor and the courage of the inventor” – were filmed by Thomas Edison (and can now be watched on YouTube).⁷ But as Menke also notes, these were events marked by a (familiar to us) “media saturation” which, while it stimulated “an ostensible sense of unprecedented mass involvement”, only terminated in “mass amnesia.”⁸ Garfield and McKinley are now largely forgotten, and figure

⁶ Richard Menke, “Media in America, 1881: Garfield, Guiteau, Bell, Whitman”, *Critical Inquiry*, 31:3 (Spring 2005), 638-664, 639.

⁷ *The Last Speech of President McKinley* (New York: James M. Davis, 1901), 5.

⁸ Menke, “Made in America”, 640.

only fleetingly in the popular imagination. What did their deaths once mean? And what might they mean in the *Anthology*'s alternative history?

In almost every way except his death, James Garfield's rise to the Presidency followed an exemplary American arc – from log-cabin poverty on the frontier to self-made academic and professional success, from battlefield bravery to residence in the White House. Garfield was a scholar as well as a statesman, a published mathematician who believed firmly in the forces of progress, modernity, and numbers. In a speech to the House of Representatives in 1867 promoting both the Census and the emerging science of statistics – a speech that Garfield's 1881 biographer John Clark Ridpath declared to be “elaborate and remarkable, so unlike any thing to be found elsewhere in all the annals of the American Congress” – he declared:

The scientific spirit has cast out the Demons and presented us with Nature, clothed in her right mind and living under the reign of law. It has given us for the sorceries of the Alchemist, the beautiful laws of chemistry; for the dreams of the Astrologer, the sublime truths of astronomy; for the wild visions of Cosmogony, the monumental records of geology; for the anarchy of Diabolism, the laws of God [...] statistics has been the handmaid of science, and has poured a flood of light upon the dark questions of famine and pestilence, ignorance and crime, disease and death. We no longer hope to predict the career and destiny of a human being by studying the conjunction of planets that presided at his birth. We study rather the laws of life within him, and the elements and forces of nature and society around him.⁹

Guiteau – and, indeed, most of the other American originals keeping him company on the disc two of the *Anthology* – might have disagreed. Indeed, read within this specific context, it

⁹ John Clark Ridpath, *The Life and Work of James A. Garfield* (Cincinnati: Jones Brothers and Company, 1881), 215, 216.

is also difficult not to think of Harry Smith himself – alchemist, astrologer, magician – standing in the shadows of Garfield’s rhetoric. Disc two of the *Anthology* itself seems shaped in direct opposition and contradiction to Garfield’s optimistic narrative of the “best and freest impulses of modern civilization.”¹⁰ It is, rather, a veritable litany of “dark questions”, a cavalcade of “crime, disease and death”, where modernity’s light has failed to penetrate. The flamboyant madness of his assassin is thrown into even sharper relief by Garfield’s rational, scientific, empiricist worldview.

As the *Buffalo Evening News* succinctly summed up his erratic life and career at the time of his execution, Charles Guiteau “oscillated all over the country as a lecturer, free-lover, religionist, politician, stump-speaker, author, office-seeker and boarding-house beat.”¹¹ Here, “beat” – tantalizing echo that it suggests – refers to Guiteau’s frequent habit of skipping out on his rent. As Frank Triplett declared in 1885, comparing Guiteau to one of his Smithville neighbors, “With a high degree of courage such a man would have made a bandit leader of the Jesse James type; as it was, his cunning and his predatory instincts made of him that most contemptible of all sneak thieves, a boarding house beat and a professional borrower.”¹² (Here, perhaps Harry Smith himself again peeks round the corner of Triplett’s description.) Guiteau’s status as “free-lover”, a reference to his unhappy time at the radical, Utopian, socialist Oneida Community founded by John Humphrey Noyes in 1848, was one of many aspects of his alternative beliefs and behaviors that made him an object of popular fascination, derision and disgust during his trial and in the run-up to his execution. As the

¹⁰ Ridpath, *Garfield*, 215.

¹¹ "The Assassin's Life", *Buffalo Evening News*, June 30, 1882, 3.

¹² Frank Triplett, *History, Romance and Philosophy of Great American Crimes and Criminals* (New York: N. D. Thompson, 1885), 618.

subtitle to one of the many accounts of his life declared, “He seems to have been a perfect fiend!!”¹³ Guiteau did little to discourage the media attention, providing endless copy for reporters. In a long interview with the *New York Herald*, for example, Guiteau ended his account of his life and the assassination with both a lonely hearts advert – “I am looking for a wife and see no objection to mentioning it here [...] an elegant Christian lady of wealth, under thirty, belonging to a first-class family” – and with his political ambitions: “For twenty years [...] I have had an idea that I should be President.”¹⁴ During his trial he was equally eccentric – quoting Triplett again, “In all the records of criminal trials we have nothing so grotesquely horrible as this vulgar egotist [...] mad with a thirst for any sort of what he deemed fame [...] determined to make his fight for life as grim and furious a farce as possible.”¹⁵

In the original liner notes to the *Anthology*, Smith fostered the myth that the song that bears his name “is also alleged to be the work of Guiteau himself who sang it to visitors in his death cell.”¹⁶ Far stranger than that apocrypha were the actual artistic creations that Guiteau composed during his time in jail, given access to pen and paper. Not long before his death, for example, he drafted a dramatic “Tableaux” that imagined a day of judgement for those who opposed him:

¹³ *Guiteau's Confession* (Philadelphia: The Old Franklin Publishing House, 1881), title page.

¹⁴ “Guiteau: Autobiography of President Garfield's Assassin”, *New York Herald*, October 6, 1881, 5-6, 6.

¹⁵ Triplett, *History*, 620.

¹⁶ Harry Smith, liner notes, *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952), reprinted in *A Booklet of Essays, Appreciations, and Annotations Pertaining to the Anthology of American Folk Music Edited by Harry Smith*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW 400900, CD, 1997, no page.

Scene between the Almighty and my murderers [...]

The Almighty, (To newspaper men)

Why did you hound my man to death?

We did not believe he was your man.

“No excuse. Go to Hell.”

Also condemned to eternal suffering are Guiteau’s prison warden, President Arthur, and the entirety of the American people – “I will get even with you for killing Mr. Guiteau. You are doomed!”¹⁷ But that was as nothing to the song that Guiteau did indeed compose and perform on the scaffold before his hanging. As the correspondent for the New York *Sun* described, those in attendance at his hanging were “wholly unprepared” for his performance. Following a bible reading and a self-justifying prayer – “The world does not yet appreciate my mission, but Thou knowest it” – Guiteau addressed the crowd “in the most familiar, off-hand manner”:

I am now going to read some verses, which are intended to indicate my feelings at the moment of leaving this world. If set to music they may be rendered effective. The idea is that of a child babbling to babbling to his mamma and to his papa.

“He then began to chant,” the *Sun*’s correspondent continued, “and the most pitiful spectacle of the day was this. He could not sing, he could not even chant, but he droned the doggerel off and the effect was startling and painful upon the people, and seemed to be saddening to himself.” The song, “I am going to the Lordy”, was almost a proto-blues:

I am going to the Lordy – I am so glad!

I am going to the Lordy – I am so glad!

I am going to the Lordy – Glory, Hallelujah!

Glory, Hallelujah! I am going to the Lord.

¹⁷ Quoted in Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Trial of the Assassin Guiteau: Psychiatry and the Law in the Gilded Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1976), 234.

As three further stanzas followed, Guiteau became increasingly distressed: “Never did a more sorrowful or plaintive wail go from the gallows [...] That sadly wailed doggerel had unnerved the officers.” His song done, Guiteau regained his composure. He was hooded, the noose placed around his neck. Announcing “The angels are coming to me. Glory! glory! ready!”, he dropped his poem, and then dropped into – and soon out of – history.¹⁸

Leon Czolgosz – no outsider artist he – was distinctly less colorful than his fellow assassin. Yet his crime was arguably more discomfiting to his fellow Americans. The motiveless malignity of Guiteau, to borrow Millard’s words, “had not been carried out in the name of personal or political freedom, national unity, or even war. It had addressed no wrong, been the consequence of no injustice.”¹⁹ Czolgosz, however, was always clear that his action at the Pan-American was an explicitly political act motivated by his anarchist beliefs; even those who worked to play down that aspect of his crime had to tangle with its implications. In his deposition, Czolgosz was clear about his links to the anarchist movement – and to one anarchist in particular: “what started the craze to kill was a lecture I heard some little time ago by Emma Goldman [...] She set me on fire. Her doctrine that all rulers should be exterminated was what set me to thinking [...] when I left the lecture I had made up my mind that I would that I would have to do something heroic for the cause I loved.”²⁰ To the end, Czolgosz maintained that his crime was a political gesture. Immediately before his execution, he asserted: “I killed the President because he was an enemy of the good people – of the working people [...] I am not sorry for my crime.”²¹ Whilst Czolgosz was executed in the

¹⁸ "The Gallows Scene", *The Sun*, July 1 1882, 1.

¹⁹ Millard, *Destiny*, 213

²⁰ "The Assassin Makes a Full Confession", *New York Times*, September 8, 1901, 1-2.

²¹ "Assassin Czolgosz is Executed at Auburn", *New York Times*, October 30, 1901, 1.

electric chair – itself a potent symbol of the age – the Edison Company filmed the exterior of the prison. The footage – interpolated with a dramatization of Czolgosz’s electrocution – can also be viewed on YouTube.

The implications of Czolgosz’s politics and actions – a signal moment in what Mary S. Barton has described as “the first phase of modern terrorism” – were profound (and, in many ways, as relevant now as they were to Poole and Harrell in the mid-1920s and Harry Smith in 1952).²² Immediately, there were significant ramifications for individuals like Emma Goldman herself – the most visible and notorious voice of anarchism in America. She was swiftly arrested on the strength of Czolgosz’s testimony. Even though Czolgosz had previously been viewed with suspicion by those in the movement (he had even been accused of being a police spy), and despite her own precarious legal position, Goldman resolutely remained one of his only public defenders. In *Free Society*, the leading anarchist newspaper, she asserted: “Leon Czolgosz and other men of his type [...] are to driven to some violent expression, even at the sacrifice of their own lives, because they cannot supinely witness the misery and suffering of their fellows. The blame for such acts must be laid at the door of those who are responsible for the injustice and inhumanity which dominate the world.”²³ But decades later, she was still pondering Czolgosz’s actions. Why, she wondered in her autobiography, “had he chosen the President rather than some more direct representative of the system of economic oppression and misery? Was it because he saw in McKinley the

²² Mary S. Barton, “The Global War on Anarchism: The United States and International Anarchist Terrorism, 1898-1904”, *Diplomatic History*, 39:2 (2015), 303-330, 303.

²³ Quoted in Emma Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One* (New York: Dover, 1970), 312.

willing tool of Wall Street and the new American imperialism that flowered under his administration?”²⁴

Certainly, William McKinley was a potent symbol of those forces in American life. The last Civil War veteran to serve as President, McKinley, in Eric Rauchway’s words, was “the embodiment of conservatism” whose priorities were big business, industry and, after his reluctant entry into the Spanish-American War, a new spirit of imperialism.²⁵ Despite presiding over a period of profound economic inequality and industrial strife, the day before his death, in his final speech at the Pan-American, McKinley took time to laud what he saw as the universal prosperity of the age:

Trade statistics indicate that this country is in a state of unexampled prosperity. The figures are almost appalling. They show that we are utilizing our fields and forests and mines, and that we are furnishing profitable employment to the millions of workingmen throughout the United States, bringing comforts and happiness to their homes [...] That all the people are participating in this great prosperity is seen in every American community.²⁶

But Czolgosz and many others like him – including, perhaps, most of the denizens of Smithville, including textile workers like Harrell and Poole – would have been hard pushed to recognise the “appalling” comfort and happiness that McKinley assured them was theirs.

²⁴ Goldman, *Life, Volume 1*, 309.

²⁵ Eric Rauchway, *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt’s America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 4.

²⁶ *Last Speech*, 6.

Whatever Czolgosz's real motivations for murdering McKinley, what followed the assassination was an attempt to purge anarchism and its uncomfortable assertions from American life – to make it, indeed, seem entirely un-American. After his execution, Czolgosz's body was dissolved with acid and his clothes were burned. The symbolism of those acts was reflected in both the national debate and official policy. In ways that have significant resonances with the moment of the *Anthology*'s creation at the height of McCarthyism in 1952, this was, as Nathaniel Hong has asserted, the moment of America's "first Red scare." Anarchism "was made the bogeyman to guard the borders of the political allegiances, loyalties, and obedience of American citizens."²⁷ America's physical borders were equally scrutinized, and the issue of immigration was stridently debated. Even though Czolgosz himself was born in America, a month after his mother's arrival from Poland, his essential otherness was forcefully asserted. As one contemporary commentator noted, "despite the fact that the assassin of our President was born on our soil, he was to all intents and purposes alien; he was of alien birth and alien stock; his whole mind was alien."²⁸ This, too, found expression in policy terms. As Mary Barton narrates, "Congress came to view anarchism as a foreign and revolutionary doctrine that threatened domestic security, taken to mean American institutions of government, democratic processes, and beliefs about citizenship and civic participation. Restrictive and exclusionary immigration law became a means of safeguarding the United States from an external dangers."²⁹ The Immigration Act of 1903 prohibited anarchists from entering the United States. Subversive political beliefs became a reason for arrest and deportation.

²⁷ Nathaniel Hong, "Constructing the Anarchist Beast in American Periodical Literature, 1880-1903", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9:1 (1992), 110-130, 110-111.

²⁸ Quoted in Hong, "Anarchist Beast", 125.

²⁹ Barton, "Global War", 304.

Yet anarchism proved surprisingly tenuous; it was still a very live issue at the moment that Harrell and Poole were recording their assassination ballads in 1926 and 1927. There was a resurgence of anarchist terrorist activity in the wake of the First World War – most significantly, a mail bombing campaign through 1919 (the same year that Emma Goldman was deported from the United States) and the explosion of a bomb on a horse-drawn cart on Wall Street in September 1920 that killed 38 people and injured hundreds more. In 1927, anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti were executed for murder and armed robbery. Harry Smith, at least, clearly remembered this history. Talking in 1977 about the production of his final film, *Mahagonny*, Smith mentioned “photographing the Morgan Bank to get the pockmarks made when the milk-wagon blew up loaded with dynamite. (They still get nervous despite the fact that there are no anarchists around. They get nervous on Wall Street. They began closing bronze doors at the mere sight of a camera.)”³⁰ And so, on disc two of the *Anthology*, Smith put anarchism and madness back where they belonged – at the violent center of the American story at the birth of the twentieth century.

“Goodbye, boys, we’re gone!”

For Charlie Poole and Kelly Harrell, growing up in the south at the turn of the twentieth century, much of this tangled history was part of their lived experience. Harrell was born in 1889, Poole in 1892; Garfield’s assassination was a recent national trauma, and McKinley’s murder would have been a signal moment in their childhoods. Outside this shared historical experience, common to all Americans of their generation, the lives of both men were intimately intertwined with two institutions: the Piedmont textile mill and the early world of

³⁰ Quoted in Rani Singh ed., *Think of the Self Speaking: Harry Smith – Selected Interviews* (Seattle: Elbow Press / Cityful Press, 1999), 107.

recorded country music. Harrell entered the textile mill in his early adolescence; Poole was a second-generation mill hand who began work at the age of twelve. They (and their art) were therefore part and parcel of one of the defining social narratives of the early twentieth century – the move from the land to industrialized labor motivated by the kinds of rural hardships amply documented in the *Anthology*.

In other ways, as their performances suggest, they were very different characters. Charlie Poole was one of the earliest stars of recorded country music, maintaining a prolific recording career from his first sessions in 1925 until his death in 1931. He was also, arguably, country music's first great hell raiser, as influential for his hard-living antics as he was for his singing and banjo playing. In Patrick Huber's definition, Poole "epitomizes the hard-drinking, work-shy rambler."³¹ Or as his first wife remembered, perhaps not entirely fondly, "Ramble! He couldn't be still! He loved to go."³² Performing, recording, drinking, fighting, narrowly avoiding the law (mostly) and regular work (when he could), Poole's rounder antics finally caught up with him at the age of 39. In an extraordinary act of self-sabotage, Poole died at the peak of a prolonged bender that was a celebration of his impending Hollywood debut. Kelly Harrell was never as famous as his rough and rowdy acquaintance, but he was still a relatively prolific early country music artist who recorded from 1925 to 1929. Tony Russell has described Harrell's vocal style (unusually, he played no instrument) as "sober" and

³¹ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), xix.

³² Kinney Rorrer, *Rambling Blues: The Life & Songs of Charlie Poole* (London: Old Time Music, 1982), 9.

“declamatory”, suffused with “moving gravity and eerie beauty.”³³ The pictures that survive of him echo that apparent seriousness. But Harrell, too, clearly had his ornery, self-destructive side, as demonstrated by the apparent circumstances of his death:

[He] suffered from asthma, and one day, back at work after a spell in hospital, chose to prove his fitness to his workmates by jumping out of a window on to the path not far below. He landed, took a few steps and collapsed. He died on the way to hospital, on July 9, 1942, aged 52.³⁴

So while they probably weren't anarchists, and they weren't (quite) insane, they were certainly both touched with an oppositional spirit that manifested in a variety of ways.

Many *Anthology* listeners may still assume (just as many listeners of the original 78s in the 1920s assumed, encouraged by recording company marketing patter) that the mysterious cultural products presented to them by Harry Smith, whatever else they might be, were rural artefacts, antiquarian at the moment of their production. But to understand the world that gave birth to the men who gave birth to these recordings of “Charles Guiteau” and “White House Blues”, it is necessary to understand that it was, in many ways, more urban than rural, and more modern than antiquarian. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall *et al.* put it at the beginning of their definitive oral history of the southern cotton mill world, “Textile mills built the New South.” Though agriculture “continued to dominate the southern economy until well into the twentieth century”, in the Piedmont – an area stretching from southern Virginia through the Carolinas into northern Georgia and as far as Alabama – “a new society rapidly took shape”,

³³ Tony Russell, liner notes, *Kelly Harrell: Complete Recorded Works in Chronological Order Volume 2 (1926-1929)* (Document Records, 1998), no page.

³⁴ Russell, liner notes, *Kelly Harrell, Volume 2*.

and it was both urban and industrial.³⁵ From 1880 onwards, the region came to be increasingly defined both by its textile mills and, just as crucially, by the company-owned towns and cities that were built around them. This was, then, a swift and profound process of industrial and urban growth, “unrivaled by any other region in the United States” at this time.³⁶ Very quickly, this slice of the New South and its mill-working inhabitants became embroiled with all the challenges of modernity, creating a world that was defined by industry and its demands (and possibilities) but which hearkened back to rural lives that had recently been left behind.

Mill towns were, undoubtedly, contradictory and ambiguous spaces for their inhabitants. As Dowd *et al.* summarize, mill workers undoubtedly “suffered poverty and exploitation,” often with little recourse for their suffering; mills could be oppressive and dangerous places. And yet, mill workers “did not live in a closed society that stripped them of independence, hope and dignity.” They created distinct and vibrant communities forged out of “kinship, shared occupational experiences, and popular culture”, in ways that took them out of their immediate locales and joined them up to a wider web of mill-towns. Social and cultural networks meant that, as one mill worker remembered, “We had a pretty fair picture, generally speaking, of what you might say was a 200-mile radius.”³⁷ And in ways that were arguably more direct

³⁵ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), xi.

³⁶ Huber, *Linthead*, 9.

³⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Robert Korstad and James Leloudis, “Cotton Mill People: Work, Community, and Protest in the Textile South, 1880-1940”, *American Historical Review*, 91:2 (April 1986), 245-286, 285, 261.

and intense than many of their fellow southerners, mill workers were presented with the opportunities of modernity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, at the time of McKinley's murder, urban centers like Charlotte, Atlanta and Richmond offered young mill hands like Harrell and Poole "vaudeville shows, musical concerts, theatrical productions, nickelodeons, dance halls and dime museums" – and movies, radio and recorded music followed swiftly.³⁸ All of those diverse influences, and more, made their way into Poole and Harrell's recorded work. Even though mill-towns were rigorously segregated spaces – more than once, white mill workers went on strike to protest against the hiring of black workers – unfiltered and unmediated black musical culture still made its way into mill towns, and was certainly accessible to ramblers like Poole.

Country music – hillbilly music, as it would be known in its earliest commercial incarnations – was the defining cultural product of the young southerners who grew up in this exciting and dangerous new world. Any notions of hermetic folk purity that the *Anthology* might engender are radically destabilized by the prominence of mill workers in the early annals of country music. As Patrick Huber has carefully demonstrated, "no other group of southern industrial workers did more to create this commercial music than Piedmont textile millhands [...]. Piedmont textile workers made up the single largest occupational group to sing and play in front of radio and recording studio microphones before World War II."³⁹ In many ways, this is unsurprising. Mills fostered musical expression in a wide variety of ways, and the meaning of that music was as diverse as the mills' inhabitants.

³⁸ Huber, *Linthead*, 16.

³⁹ Huber, *Linthead*, 22.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the often antagonistic relationship between mills and their workers, the kind of support that these institutions offered to Piedmont musical culture was often surprisingly practical. As part of the welfare programs that many mills introduced in the wake of industrial strife at the beginning of the twentieth century, mills sponsored company bands, arranged formal music classes for workers, and organized a plethora of music competitions. More broadly, musicians earned significant social status within their local communities, providing music for dances, parties and other community celebrations. Thus the concentration of a diverse group of musically literate southerners in a space that, formally and informally, supported music-making, allowed mill workers to develop their talents and hybridize their traditional musical legacies with the new cultural forms that they now found around them – ragtime, blues, minstrelsy, Tin Pan Alley songs. More, the cultural and personal networks that linked mill-town to mill-town generated “vibrant musical cross-pollination among millhands”, as well as the sharing of talent between bands. For example, musicians from North Carolina (like Poole) “performed and sometimes even recorded with their colleagues from [...] neighboring Virginia textile mills” (like Harrell).⁴⁰ This was how Poole and Harrell knew each other. In the early 1920s, just before their recording careers, they were located less than thirty miles apart – Poole in Spray, North Carolina, Harrell in Fieldale, Virginia. The two men “traveled together in the local area and on occasion staged shows together.”⁴¹ Posey Rorer, Poole’s long-time friend and accompanist in the North Carolina Ramblers, also fiddled for Kelly Harrell on his 1927 recordings, including both “My Name is John Johanna” and “Charles Guiteau”.

⁴⁰ Huber, *Linthead*, 125

⁴¹ Rorer *Rambling Blues*, 30

Conversely, music could also serve as a way out of the drudge and grind of mill town life. This was deeply true for Charlie Poole, who bristled against the constraints of industrial work more than most. When Poole, Rorer and fellow bandmate Norman Woodlieff decided to quit their mill jobs in June 1925 in order to attempt a recording career (perhaps inspired by Harrell's first recording experiences earlier that year), they didn't go quietly:

They came early in the morning, before the looms started, to draw their last paychecks. Bringing their instruments into the mill with them, they sat down at the end of one of the rows of looms. As their fellow millworkers gathered around, they played *Don't Let Your Good Deal Go Down*. When they finished, Poole spoke up and said, 'Goodbye, boys, we're gone!'⁴²

Despite his eventual success, even Poole couldn't quite escape the occasional necessity of mill work (and Harrell never left, working in the mill until the end of his life). But for a moment, in the immediate wake of the 1926 recording session at which he performed "White House Blues" (an immediate hit, selling 76000 copies), music allowed Poole "for the first time in his life, freedom from employment in the cotton mills."⁴³ And so a song commemorating an act of labor-movement violence at the turn of the twentieth century finally helped to liberate at least one working American from industrial toil a quarter of a century later.

At times, mill music could also perform more obviously political functions. Parsing out the politics of country music is a notoriously tricky exercise. As Bill C. Malone put it, country music "has historically defied explicit political categorization or ideological identification. Like the southern folk culture that produced it, country music has exhibited eclectic and

⁴² Rorer, *Rambling Blues*, 30.

⁴³ Rorer, *Rambling Blues*, 36.

contradictory traits.”⁴⁴ Robert van Sickle has asserted that most country songs evince an actual “rejection and apparent unawareness of social and economic conditions outside the lives of the song characters themselves.”⁴⁵ But that is not to say that country music has not, at times, voiced very particular political viewpoints. In the mill-towns of the South which shaped the lives of Charlie Poole and Kelly Harrell, this was emphatically the case. As Doug DeNatale and Glenn Hinson have demonstrated, “Song had power in addressing the conditions of mill life.” At times of particular industrial strife, music became the chosen means of expression for mill communities. Indeed, only miners “produced more songs of social and economic protest.”⁴⁶ This was a trend that would reach a powerful crescendo very soon after Poole and Harrell recorded these songs. From 1929 to the General Strike of 1934, mill-towns were the locus of significant and sustained strike action. During such moments, Vincent Roscigno and William Danaher have demonstrated that music was ever-present “on the picket lines and in mass meetings”, as well as on radio, and was also used to sustain strikers “who were arrested and taken to jail.”⁴⁷ In such circumstances, it wasn’t only political material that provided the soundtrack. Communist agitator Vera Buch Weisbord

⁴⁴ Bill C. Malone, *Don’t Get Above Your Raisin’: Country Music and the Southern Working Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 212.

⁴⁵ Robert W. Van, “A World Without Citizenship: On (the Absence of) Politics and Ideology in Country Music Lyrics, 1960-2000,” *Popular Music and Society*, 28:3 (2005), 313-331, 313.

⁴⁶ Doug DeNatale and Glenn Hinson, “The Southern Textile Song Tradition Reconsidered”, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 28:2/3 (1991), 103-133, 103-4.

⁴⁷ Vincent J. Roscigno and William F. Danaher, *The Voice of Southern Labor: Radio, Music, and Textile Strikes, 1929-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 85.

remembered: “The strikers sang their own beautiful plaintive ballads, ‘Barbry Allen’ and many more.”⁴⁸

No less important was the role that music played in providing a means of commenting on aspects of everyday life in the mill town. It was, particularly, humor that was the hallmark of such commentary, both as a critique of daily experience, but also as a means of allowing performers to comment on their lives “within limits, to avoid retribution” and “management reprisals.”⁴⁹ In that vein, it is also compelling to think about the way that music must have served as a bolster against the kinds of prejudice faced by mill-workers on a daily basis – the stigmatization of “lintheads” that was pervasive in the early twentieth century, finding enormously popular expression in a text like Erskine Caldwell’s *God’s Little Acre* (1933). Indeed, criticism of mill-workers and mill-life often came from those, like Caldwell, who felt themselves allies. Frank Tannenbaum was a labor leader and radical political activist – and one-time associate of Emma Goldman (a “vivid youth”, as she recalled him in her autobiography).⁵⁰ His 1924 book *Darker Phases of the South* is best remembered as a pioneering study of race and racial violence. Whilst conducting his research in the south, however, Tannenbaum also spent some time visiting mill villages, and denounced both the places (“generously fruitful in immorality, dope, consumption, and social degradation”) and the people that he found there:

They are like children [...] Their faces seem stripped, denuded, and empty. They give the impression of being beyond the realm of things daily lived and experienced by other people or children: they exhibit little of the frolicsome and joyous, little of

⁴⁸ Roscigno and Danaher, *Southern Labor*, 85.

⁴⁹ DeNatale and Hinson, “Southern Textile”, 116.

⁵⁰ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume 2* (New York: Dover, 1970), 523.

shouting and play. Their faces are wan, and their eyes drawn and stupid. Unhappy children, if children at all. But really they are men and women who have been lost to the world and have forgotten its existence.⁵¹

According to Tannenbaum, mill people “give the South no poets, no artists.” And so, he concluded, “It were far better that they had remained on the farm and scratched the soil with their nails. It were far better that they had starved on bitter roots.”⁵²

It is difficult to reconcile this ostensibly well-meaning observer’s assessments with the evidence of the cultural life of mill towns represented on record and in Harry Smith’s *Anthology*. Tannenbaum obviously never heard Charlie Poole sing. There is, of course, much irony in the fact that Tannenbaum made these pronouncements at precisely the moment that – whatever compromises and accommodations with record companies had to be made – the profound and deeply rooted artistry of the mill-town was poised to become a vital and integral part of America’s musical life. And two of the most significant fruits of that blossoming were “Charles Guiteau” and “White House Blues” – old songs made new again by Poole and Harrell, before being made new again by Harry Smith.

“Brutal jocularity”

In 1915, during the early traumas of the First World War, D. H. Lawrence was ensconced deep in the Sussex countryside. It’s a long way from Spray, North Carolina to the South Downs – but not as far as we might think. More than one of Lawrence’s visitors that summer were treated to an impromptu performance of a song that had captured his imagination. As

⁵¹ Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), 48, 42.

⁵² Tannenbaum, *Darker*, 56, 70.

one put it: “Lawrence sang the first Negro Spirituals we had heard, and set our brains jingling with an American ballad on the murder of President McKinley with words of brutal jocularly sung to an air of lilting sweetness.”⁵³ This is, perhaps, the most vivid reminder that both of these songs had a life that was separate from the events they described and the performers who first recorded them. Though plenty of Poole and Harrell’s recorded material was rooted in other parts of commercial musical culture – minstrelsy and Tin Pan Alley, particularly – it seems that both “Charles Guiteau” and “White House Blues” were likely to have been received by them as orally transmitted folk artefacts in their mill-town milieus. If we can’t quite reconstruct how, when and where Poole and Harrell first heard these songs, we can at least say, with some certainty, that they were already old songs at the time of their first recordings, and had been in wide circulation in the decades following these Presidents’ deaths – wide enough to reach Lawrence in Sussex.

“Charles Guiteau” was, it seems, grafted onto an even older song. Pioneering ballad collectors and folklorists Henry Marvin Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson recorded that the song was almost entirely “based on an earlier murder ballad, printed by J. Andrews, a penny song publisher of New York, ‘*Lament of James Rodgers, Who Was Executed November 12th 1858, for the Murder of Mr. Swanston.*’”⁵⁴ That song itself had been repurposed numerous times for other gallows confessions – as, for example, “My Name is John T. Williams” in

⁵³ Quoted in Mark Kinkead-Weekes, *D. H. Lawrence: Triumph to Exile 1912-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 229.

⁵⁴ Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson eds, *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, Volume Two: Folk Ballads from North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 572.

1860 (a predecessor listed by Smith, too).⁵⁵ The tune seems to have been supplied, with no apparent incongruity, by George F. Root's popular antebellum sentimental ballad "Bright Eyed Little Nell of Narragansett Bay" (1860).⁵⁶ Belden and Hudson also posit that a printed broadside of the song was released at the time of Guiteau's execution, though no such text has yet been discovered. One way or another, "Charles Guiteau" travelled. Belden cites versions recorded by song collectors in West Virginia, North Carolina, Mississippi, Illinois, Iowa, and South Dakota, and it seems to have been "well known in the lumbercamps" of the Catskills.⁵⁷ Belden felt that, even then, the song was "probably much more widely known than the record [...] would indicate."⁵⁸ When musician and song-collector Bascom Lamar Lunsford – born in 1882, also of *Anthology* fame – recorded the song for the Library of Congress in 1949, he noted, "I've known this all my life."⁵⁹

In some aspects, "White House Blues" is more difficult to trace. In his 1968 examination of the song's tangled lineage, Neil Rosenberg noted that this was a classic example of a ballad

⁵⁵ Norman Cazden, Herbert Haufrecht and Norman Studer eds, *Folk Songs of the Catskills* (Albany: State University of New York, 1982), 407.

⁵⁶ Cazden, Haufrecht and Studer, *Catskills*, 407.

⁵⁷ Henry M. Belden, "Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society", *University of Missouri Studies*, 15:1 (January 1940), 1-520, 412; Cazden, Haufrecht and Studer, *Catskills*, 407.

⁵⁸ Belden, Missouri, 412.

⁵⁹ Bascom Lamar Lunsford, "Charles Guiteau", from Duncan Emrich ed., *Songs and Ballads of American History and of the Assassination of Presidents*, Rounder CD 1509, 1998.

Originally released in the *Folk Music of the United States* series by the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress as Long-Playing Record L29, 1952.

that whilst emerging “from folk tradition” was “recorded commercially more often than by folksong collectors.” He concluded that there was “only limited evidence for the existence of the song in tradition” – not forgetting, of course, D. H. Lawrence’s renditions.⁶⁰ Norm and David Cohen have asserted that the song had its genesis in a blues ballad that emerged in the immediate wake of the assassination, “almost certainly by black singers.” They have traced a link, too, to the famous early blues murder ballad “Delia”, originating in Georgia somewhere around 1900 – at exactly the moment of McKinley’s death.⁶¹ Whatever its genesis, it “achieved wide circulation by the 1920s.”⁶² Lumsford, again, recalled collecting a variant of “White House Blues”, titled “Zolgotz”, in 1923.⁶³ Fellow pioneering country star Ernest Stoneman (who recorded his own version) remembered “hearing Poole sing the song” whilst the two travelled together in the early 1920s.⁶⁴ After Poole recorded his version, renditions of “White House Blues” multiplied exponentially. At least in one case, the mutations and hybridizations of folk transmission resulted in a compelling musical conflation of these assassinations. In 1920, one version of “Charles Guiteau” collected in North Carolina – gloriously transcribed as “Charles Guitar” – was prefaced with an explanation by the singer:

⁶⁰ Neil Rosenberg, "Biblio-Discographies: ‘The White House Blues’-‘McKinley’-‘Cannonball Blues’ Complex", *John Edwards Memorial Foundation Newsletter*, 4:10 (June 1968), 45-58, 46.

⁶¹ Norm Cohen and David Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 417-8.

⁶² Cohen, *Rail*, 417.

⁶³ Bascom Lamar Lunsford, “Zolgotz”, *Songs and Ballads*.

⁶⁴ Rorrer, *Rambling Blues*, 73

“This poem was sung by Charles Guitar after he had been placed upon the scaffold to be hung. Charles Guitar came from a Christian home but had joined the Anarchist [sic].”⁶⁵

In the midst of the *Anthology*'s mixture of songs which are, arguably, more obviously and immediately eccentric, it is easy to miss, cloaked as they are in the respectable patina of historical detail, how strange these recordings are. On a basic level, reading these songs as history is fraught with peril – both are profoundly inaccurate in their narration of the events they purport to describe. But perhaps more significant are the attitudes that they demonstrate to the assassins and assassinations that are their subject. Neither song seems to provide the condemnation that we might expect. Kelly Harrell's first person narration, for example, presents an extraordinarily sympathetic rendering of Charles Guiteau, an effect only heightened by Harrell's style, both sober and emotive; certainly, the Guiteau of song is far less strange than the real thing. He becomes not the crazed assassin of contemporary record, nor the frantic performer of “I am going to the Lordy”, but a stoic outcast, close kin to the musical outlaws around him. In this respect, the juxtaposition with “Bandit Cole the Younger” seems telling. Rather than wishing apocalypse on the American people, Harrell's Guiteau expresses stock sentiment for his “aged parents” (both of whom were actually dead) and his loving sister (that the real Guiteau apparently threatened with an ax).⁶⁶ The chorus, particularly, echoes the apparent respect that is afforded Guiteau in the rest of the song, not least because of the fact that another singer joins Harrell for these lines. The rousing refrain, “My name I'll never deny”, therefore becomes an unwavering declaration of identity in the face of imminent death and existential despair.

⁶⁵ Belden and Hudson, *Folk Ballads*, 576-7.

⁶⁶ Millard, *Destiny*, 63.

If Harrell's incarnation of Guiteau is characterized by profound empathy, Poole's account of McKinley's death is marked by a sublime indifference for the suffering it narrates. Poole is at once world-weary and insouciant; a bleak hilarity pervades the song. The effect is perhaps heightened by what some have taken to be his drunkenness at this recording session – Huber notes, “His rendition of “White House Blues [...] seems particularly marred by intoxication; though usually a commanding vocalist, at a couple of moments during the recording Poole forgets the lyrics and just mumbles along until he recalls them.”⁶⁷ But such stumbles only add to the gonzo qualities of this particular history lesson. At times Poole is cruel (“McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled”), at times cynical (“Hush up, little children, now don't you fret, You'll draw a pension at your papa's death” – though, in truth, McKinley's daughters were both dead) – but he is always, like Lawrence, brutally jocular. All told, it is a profoundly irreverent retelling of a President's death – the kind of text and performance that is almost unimaginable today.

So how do we account for the attitudes on display in these songs? Should we view them as political statements on the part of Harrell and Poole – a politics rooted in the struggles, personal and organized, of mill work and mill town life? Because of the explicitly political motivations espoused by Leon Czolgosz, equally political interpretations of Poole's “White House Blues” have been suggested. Josh Dunson and Ethel Raim, in their 1973 sheet music edition of the *Anthology*, note in the introduction to the song: “Little love was lost between McKinley and populist-minded Southern farmers and mill hands, whose hero was William Jennings Bryan. Since McKinley beat Bryan at the polls, it's no wonder that this song about

⁶⁷ Huber, *Linthead*, 133

McKinley's assassination has a lively tune and a teasing tone."⁶⁸ That not everyone mourned McKinley (or condemned Czolgosz), even in 1901, was also suggested by another source close to the heart of events. Whilst in jail in the immediate aftermath of the killing, Emma Goldman was surprised to find support from the prison "matron", some of the guards, and particularly "an admirer" who owned "a saloon round the corner":

One day she brought me the message that he was going to send a grand supper for the coming Sunday. "Who is the man and why should he admire me?" I inquired. "Well, we're all Democrats, and McKinley is a Republican [...] he hates the Republicans worse than the devil" [...] "You don't mean you're glad McKinley was shot?" I exclaimed. "Not glad exactly, but not sorry, neither," she said; "we have to pretend, you know, but we're none of us excited about it" [...] I wondered how many more people in America were pretending the same kind of sympathy with the stricken President.⁶⁹

According to Kinney Rorrer, Poole was not likely to have even pretended much sympathy:

In 1923, during one of his wide-ranging rambles, Poole was standing on the train depot when the body of President Harding passed through on the way to Ohio for burial. A bystander noticed that Poole didn't remove his hat when the body passed by, and remarked on it. Poole replied that he didn't 'take his hat off to no damn Republican, whether he was alive or dead.'⁷⁰

Certainly, there is little hat-tipping on display in "White House Blues", and at least some such partisan feeling must make its way into Poole's recording.

⁶⁸ Josh Dunson and Ethel Raim, *Anthology of American Folk Music* (New York: Oak Publications, 1973), 56.

⁶⁹ Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume 1*, 305-6.

⁷⁰ Rorrer, *Rambling Blues*, 73

But to try and understand the meaning of these performances entirely in the light of party politics feels reductive. After all, D. H. Lawrence's recitals of "White House Blues" confirm that the "brutal jocularity" of the song transcended party lines and national borders – as it still transcends them, a century later. If these songs have a political meaning, it is perhaps – in keeping with the opaque allegiances of much country music – a personal politics that has less to do with strikes and picket lines and more to do with the inequities and injustices of life in America – whether Gilded Age, Jazz Age, 1952 or beyond. In relation to the development of the blues in the early twentieth century, R. A. Lawson has argued that rather than seeing the form as either an accommodation or a voice of resistance, it is more productive to think about this musical style as the "subtle and complex" product of a "counterculture", riven by "dualities" and "necessarily accepting of prevailing Jim Crow social norms" whilst still "hoping to evade or subvert them."⁷¹ It is hardly a stretch to see early country music in a similar light: though very different stakes were involved for hillbilly and blues musicians, both groups were involved in negotiations with oppressive forces and mainstream culture – negotiations that were mediated by music. And perhaps these late, unlamented presidents are a vivid symbol of that negotiation. Though approaching the same goal from different ends, both "Charles Guiteau" and "White House Blues" seem interested in the events they narrate only to the extent that it allows them to explore the fatalism that resides at their heart. We can enjoy the deaths of presidents and even celebrate their assassins – but we are still, inevitably, brought back to our own mortality. Death, at least, produces a radical equality between murdered presidents, manic assassins, mill-town musicians – and the *Anthology* listener.

⁷¹ R. A. Lawson, *Jim Crow's Counterculture: The Blues and Black Southerners, 1890-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), x, 17.

Containing Multitudes

And so we are brought back to the question: what might all of this layered history tell us about Smith's editorial method in 1952? As with "White House Blues", it is also possible to read the prominence of these songs as a direct political statement on Smith's part: the only Presidents in Smithville are dead presidents, after all, and anarchy, of one form or another, seems the prevailing mood. Certainly, viewed from any angle, this is a subaltern history of Gilded Age America performed, mostly, by those marginalized by the economic inequities of that period – a history by the people, for the people. In some senses, then, these might be taken as the most directly political moments on the whole of the *Anthology*, linking Smith and the *Anthology* back to earlier countercultural moments, and such Beat-favored forebears as Emma Goldman.

Yet again, its reading of American history seems to transcend such explicit political concerns. Some illumination can be found by way of a counterpoint – to *Songs and Ballads of American History and of the Assassinations of Presidents*, another anthology released in 1952, by the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. Made up of field recordings in the Archive's collection, its goal was explicitly preservationist. Duncan Emrich, chief archivist and editor, hoped that the first half of the disc, dedicated to the Civil War, would stimulate the collection of songs "from the immediate descendants of veterans [...] in order that the traditional, or folk, documentation of that period in our history may be the more complete."⁷² The second half of the collection is entirely made-up of assassination songs performed by Bascom Lamar Lunsford during a recording session held at the Library of Congress in 1949. They are a fragment of the more than 350 songs that he committed to the archive that week, collected from friends and neighbors in North Carolina over the preceding

⁷² Duncan Emrich, liner notes, *Songs and Ballads*.

decades. Alongside “Charles Guiteau” and “Zolgotz” – his variant of “White House Blues” – Lunsford also performed the half-sung, half-spoken, story-song “Mr. Garfield”, later popularized by Johnny Cash, and two versions of “Booth Killed Lincoln.”

Passing over the fascinating conjunctions on display here – that Lunsford should appear in this collection in the same year that he was given a starring role in the *Anthology*, that assassination songs should be showcased in both anthologies – it can at least be asserted that the comparison these collections offer helps to highlight much of what is compelling about Smith’s method. On one level, it can be quickly noted that Emrich is interested in this grouping of assassination songs precisely as a collection. Emrich marveled at the “rarity of the group”, noting that Lunsford’s store of assassination songs was “most unusual”: “To the best of our knowledge at this time of writing, only one of them – ‘Charles Guiteau’ – has appeared in various scholarly folksong anthologies, while a variant of ‘Zolgotz’ has been collected only once.”⁷³ To Emrich, they are rare; to Poole and Harrell (and Lunsford), these songs were part and parcel of Piedmont musical life. Here, the schism between Emrich’s use of field-recordings and Smith’s use of commercial recordings – and the gaps that Rosenberg identified in the “folk tradition” – makes itself felt. In the Library of Congress collection, these “history” songs are hermetically sealed off from the wider contexts from which they emerged. In such an airtight setting, they become fossilized artefacts, not living parts of an ongoing story in which historical events become grist to the musical folklore mill and find new meaning in everyday life.

Ultimately, the greatest difference between these two collections comes down to narrative. Emrich’s collection tells a story only about the assassination songs it gathers together. The

⁷³ Duncan Emrich, liner notes, *Songs and Ballads*.

Anthology, however, allows those same songs to play their part in a much broader narrative of life in Gilded Age America – and beyond. Even if Emrich’s liner notes tell us far more about the explicit context of these songs in their original moment, it is Smith, ultimately, who telegraphs far more about their ultimate meanings through their juxtaposition with the songs – and the histories – that surround them. Just as he integrates black and white performers, so Smith integrates macro- and micro-history. We might think of Smith’s use of history here as modernist – a Faulknerian sense of the ever-presentness of the past – or as a proto-post-modern attack on the metanarrative of history itself – and at moments, at other points in the *Anthology*, those models might well serve. But here, on disc two, we might also look further backwards – appropriately – to an earlier, more romantic, forbear. In spirit, the account of American history that Smith presents to us is perhaps closest kin to the panoramic vision of American life that Walt Whitman conjured a century earlier in *Song of Myself*:

The opium eater reclines with rigid head and just-opened lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you,)
The President holds a cabinet council, he is surrounded by the great secretaries,
On the piazza walk five friendly matrons with twined arms;
The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut in the hold,
The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and his cattle⁷⁴

Here, too, Presidents rub shoulders with outcasts, outlaws, and agricultural workers of various stripes; as in the *Anthology*, the contained multitudes sing to us, and it is a song of ourselves and America. Whichever way we hear them, whichever context we read them in, the presence of “White House Blues” and “Charles Guiteau” in the *Anthology*, and in this

⁷⁴ [Walt Whitman], *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn: published for the author, 1855), 22-23

particular sequence, are exemplars of the kind of democratic spirit that sustains the whole collection and places it in a very particular radical American grain.

On some level, Smith's history lesson acknowledges that, perhaps more than any other artform, recordings like these will always ultimately transcend contextualization and confound our attempts to think of a historical happening as a single event, delimited by and decipherable through chronology. But it also understands that neither do they collapse history into a wholly decontextualized quagmire: it still matters, on some level, that these are songs about Presidents Garfield and McKinley, assassins Guiteau and Czolgosz, performed by some-time mill-hands and musicians Harrell and Poole. Through these recordings, for all their unreliable details, we better understand the nuances of lived history as it manifests through the particular performances of these songs, and the connectedness of such history to daily life. When we listen in the context of the *Anthology*, we better understand how these stories are intrinsically and irrevocably connected to the stories that surround them. And when we play these songs, six forgotten men who died violent and untimely deaths are resurrected, now and forever – Presidents, assassins, and musicians – ready to make history all over again.