Encoding Authenticity in Radio Music: Renfro Valley Barn Dance and Kentucky Folk Music.

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Abstract
First broadcast in 1937, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance was the first American barn dance radio programme to be performed and recorded in an actual barn as opposed to a radio studio. This article explores how the programme’s producer, John Lair, propagated in this programme his single-minded reconstruction of an idealised past and his own personal image of authenticity in American folk music. Drawing on archived recordings, production files, and interviews with radio participants in the Kentucky area, this article examines how Lair constructed his aesthetic within Appalachian stereotypes and definitions of genre in folk and country music. It explores Lair’s interactions with performers, radio regulators, and advertisers to investigate his careful negotiation of the hillbilly icon and of signifiers of truth, sincerity, and authenticity in early country music. With this, the article aims to contribute to musical histories of the Appalachian region, while also highlighting the significance of radio stories to narratives of musical history.

Keywords: Music, radio, hillbilly, authenticity, Appalachia, Renfro Valley Barn Dance.

Introduction
[T]he institutionalization of radio as one of our central social structures for transmission and control of information about the world we live in makes its study relevant to almost all aspects of American social history – hardly anything that has happened in or to this country since 1922 has not been shaped by radio or television in one way or another. (Hilmes, 1997: xvi).

First broadcast in 1937, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance (RVBD) was the first American barn dance radio programme to be performed and recorded in an actual barn as opposed to a radio studio. The weekly Saturday night variety programme drew heavily on themes of nostalgia, family values, and pioneer living. Its producer, John Lair, created it in homage to his native Appalachia, and described it as “The Greatest Cowboy Show Ever Assembled”.¹ On the powerful commercial station WLW, and with Lair’s focused sense of his audience base, the RVBD quickly grew into a popular music radio programme, continuing until 1957. Within a few years, Lair developed the radio broadcast into a concert with a live audience, recorded and syndicated for broadcast by numerous commercial radio stations across the United States. Radio programmes and other events continue to be performed and recorded in the same location today.

RVBD was heavily invested in the concepts of truth, sincerity, and authenticity, a message replicated in much American country music of the twentieth century. As Cecilia Tichi explains: “country music presents itself as authenticity, as the real in human life, essential, unadorned, and fundamental” (1994: 39). In this article, I highlight the cultural codes of authenticity embedded within the RVBD programmes.² The research presented here responds to Hilmes’s call to view radio programming as a
social practice, to Stuart Hall’s (1973) statement that the media do not just reflect, but construct reality, and to Eoin Devereux’s reminder that this construction is never a neutral activity, but instead “reflect(s)…the ideas of the dominant social class or group” (2014: 135). Based on these and other paradigms from the fields of media studies and ethnomusicology, I view Lair’s music radio programmes as part of the social constructions of reality and social life in Kentucky and Appalachia in the early twentieth century. I identify the various elements of production and content in the RVBD, and I look to its imagery, discourse, and reception to illuminate its meaning. For reasons of space and availability of sources, I foreground the work and communications of Renfro Valley producer John Lair over that of the performers.3

This paper is part of a larger project illustrating the contribution of radio stories to narratives of musical history, in which I analyse the RVBD over its twenty-year lifespan. I draw on recordings, production files, promotional materials, advertising documents and other sources from the Special Collections of the Berea College Hutchins Library in Kentucky, and on fieldwork interviews I conducted with Renfro Valley listeners and radio participants in the Berea, Kentucky area.

Authenticity, the Hillbilly and Appalachia

Before continuing, I will clarify my usage of some key terms in this article: “Appalachia,” “authenticity” and the “hillbilly”. Jennifer C. Post (2006: 413) defines the term “authenticity” as relating to “ideas about legitimacy or validity of practices or ideas” and explains how it has been criticised for “its grounding in nostalgia and its adoption by commercial enterprises”. As Timothy Cooley observes in the same volume (73-74), authenticity is not an objectively discoverable facet of real-life experience, but rather “a concept that is made and constructed in a process of ‘authentication’… a cultural construct imbued with meaning”. Cooley urges for a focus on the power relations in such a construction (an urge echoed by Devereux), and he seconds Regina Bendix’s recommendation (1997: 21) that the important question is not what is authentic in any culture, but rather “who needs authenticity and why” and “how has authenticity been used?” In this paper, I illustrate Lair’s construction of the desired aesthetic of authenticity in the RVBD; I examine how he harnessed it, and I ask why and how he did so. How did he and others enact their authenticity through the RVBD stage and radio broadcasts? What part did authentic music play in facilitating the communication of meanings, values, discourses and ideologies of race, class, gender and regional identity over the airwaves? In particular, I ask how the use of the hillbilly label in the RVBD suggested class and gender stereotypes so infamous to the region of Appalachia (Appalachia is known both as a geographic and a cultural region, but here I refer to the region around the central part of the Appalachian Mountains on the eastern part of the United States).
What did the labelling of music on RVBD – as country, hillbilly, home-folks, authentic, folk, mountain, old-time, or traditional – signify to Lair, to his performers, and to his advertisers, and how did it relate to the region of Appalachia? In my conclusion, I briefly widen my focus to suggest some implications of these findings for our knowledge of music in Kentucky and Appalachia in contemporary times.

The “hillbilly” was a recurring word throughout the discourse of the RVBD. As an icon of American popular culture, the hillbilly was one of the most stereotypical portrayals of Appalachia in the twentieth century. The meanings attached to the hillbilly in the 1930s and 1940s were conveyed by this radio programme in various ways. “Hillbilly” was one of the most commonly referenced genre descriptors of the RVBD. Others included “country”, “old-time”, “home-folks”, “down-home”, and “mountain”, as well as “authentic”, “unaffected”, “original”, “gayest”, “real”, “natural”, and “a cross-section of everyday life as it is lived”, amongst others. “Hillbilly” has been described as one of the most semantically malleable terms (Harkins 2004: 6). As Richard Peterson explains, it was a pejorative term suggesting someone rough, illiterate, simple, and moronic. It was, he outlines, a harsh description, created by the music industry in contempt for performers and listeners of country music in the 1920s, describing all those “whose appearance, mode of talking, or accent suggested unschooled rural origins” (1997:4-5). Speaking about musical performances, Martin Stokes observes that “good” ones “are often described in a complex semantic terrain of vocabulary”. (1994: 5). As dependent as radio is on verbal descriptions of a performance, a similar statement could be made for good radio performances: good radio broadcasts, as exemplified by those of the RVBD, cover a complex verbal terrain. In their discussions of the ideology of the barn dance radio genre, writers Petersen (1997), Harkins (2004), Kristine McCusker (2004), and Pamela Fox (2009) identify the derisive image of the simple, uneducated, poor, white, mountain hillbilly as one of the two main images the genre facilitated; the second, contrasting image the genre propagated was that of the proud image of the keeper of traditional values in a romanticised version of the ideal past.

Harkins echoes these discussions in his description of the term “hillbilly” as being “suffused with ambiguity”, and “reflecting a divided self-identity”. (2004: 71). Furthermore, he states that the hillbilly is a “myth space through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to reconcile the past and the present”. According to Harkins, the dual aspects of the
hillbilly label incorporate both otherness and self-identification in the American past and present, allowing non-rural middle-class white American audiences to simultaneously embrace and reject aspects of the past. (2004: 6). Other iconic media programming incorporating the hillbilly image provokes similar dual reactions. Write and Appalachian native, Silas House, tells of feelings of resentment and adoration towards the hillbilly image with respect to the long-running CBS television show *Hee Haw*:

The show was a sort of Appalachian Laugh-In, after all, with people wearing floppy hillbilly hats popping out of the corn to trade one-liners, or Archie Campbell and Grandpa Jones stretched out on a porch with their hound dog and a crock of shine nearby. In short, it made fun of country people…and the jokes were sometimes lame. Still, everyone loved it. We still love it. I know I do. (House 2016: web source).

According to folklorist David E. Whisnant, this duality was not an immediate feature of the hillbilly, but part of the icon’s transformation over time. At first, the hillbilly image was constructed and used as a label of authenticity. Later, it became recognised as a type of caricature of the people of Appalachia.9

The hillbilly, then, has an unstable history as a cultural icon. Certainly, both romanticism and caricature were on plentiful display in John Lair’s Renfro Valley. Lair sometimes used the descriptor “mountain”, and usually in a positive light, aligning it with honesty; “Renfro Valley was folk music in its natural setting with real mountain people…bring[ing] to the air…the true simplicity of honest country life and honest folk music”.10 Lair liberally used “hillbilly,” and with a range of connotations, once purportedly stating that “the hill-billy is a lazy lout who gets off his back only when it’s time to eat or to go down to get a fresh jug of corn at the spring house”. (Harkins 2004: 84). Though Lair frequently described the music on his programme as hillbilly in discussions with advertisers, he sometimes denied this in public:

Hillbillies in radio? They ain’t no such thing. Mountaineers and folk from the hill country, maybe, but no hill billies. ‘Tin Pan Alley’ hung this name on certain types of music and entertainers. (Green 1965: 222).

Provocative statements of this type were scattered throughout Lair’s written and broadcast communications. In general, the images of *RVBD* did not do much to contradict the stereotypes of the time, which proposed the Appalachian people as illiterate, lazy, wild, inarticulate, and uneducated.11 The detail with which Lair discusses clothing worn by the female performers (but not, in the same sources, the clothing of other personnel) is indicative of how conscious radio directors like Lair and their music industry colleagues were of the importance of imagery and clearly-defined gender roles to the success of their acts. In so doing, Lair aligned his show with both the positive and negative connotations of the hillbilly, as well as its associations of nostalgia, simplicity, honesty, and – as I will now describe – authenticity.

**Constructing Authenticity in the Renfro Valley Barn Dance**

The idea behind producing a barn dance in Kentucky from a real barn originated for Lair in the early 1930s, as he worked at Chicago’s major radio station, WLS with the *National Barn Dance*. (Rice 1997: 4, 20-21). There, Lair forged links between the commercial radio and country music industries, and developed his knowledge in folk and country music. (Wolfe 1983: 76-77). He noted that many Appalachians who had been forced to move, initially by the depression, and later on by the second world war, longed for their old homesteads and ways of life, and that they used the new technology of radio to keep in touch with their rural heritage. In 1937, Lair left Chicago for Cincinnati’s rival station, WLW, and on 9 October of that year, he directed the first broadcast of his new show, the *RVBD*. Two years later, Lair continued the show from a fully constructed barn in Mount Vernon, Kentucky.
The *RVBD* was a highly structured presentation; surviving scripts show that the dance was timed to the second. Performers segued easily from the song “Gonna have a Big Time Tonight” into a square dance. The musicians swapped smoothly from one tune to the other, giving the programme an informal and laissez faire sound. Its set-list and schedule remained relatively consistent throughout the first years of its broadcast, using a familiar sequence of performers. As Hilmes describes, all early American radio followed this block-based programming, and this standard format formed an important ingredient in the ‘sound’ and recognisability of any programme and station. (Hilmes 1997: 119).

For the careers of many country music artists in the United States, the well-known *National Barn Dance* (on which Lair first worked) and the *Grand Ole Opry* acted as radio gatekeepers of country music. Satellite programmes like the *Louisiana Hayride* and the *RVBD* acted in their shadows, as launchpads to these more famous arenas. (Laird 2005: 5).

From its very beginnings, Lair promoted Renfro Valley not only as a tourist location and a radio attraction, but also primarily as a source of authentic folk music. He repeated the “authentic,” “real,” “genuine,” “sincere” aspects of his radio show. However, the features of the programme on which he based his claims were carefully staged and managed by Lair himself. Lair constructed his programme’s aesthetic of ‘authenticity’ from various features, including dialect, domesticity, nostalgia, architecture, his establishment of himself as a historian and collector of music, his careful adherence to industry constructions of the music played on his show as a primarily white music, and in his alignment of the show and its music with morality, amongst others. These varied features, described by him as being connected because of their link with ‘older’ times, strengthened the overall ethos of the complex and contributed to the authenticity of the programme content and the declarations of Lair himself and the performers. I will focus on each of these features in turn.

Lair wrote all of his scripts in local dialect. Even though he was always going to be the person to read the script and to announce the performers, Lair spelled the word “women” in his programme scripts as “w-i-m-e-n.”14 His practice of writing scripts in dialect continued on at least into the early 1940s.15 Lair’s efforts to highlight the use of dialect in his show and to foreground what others described as “indigenous genuineness of dialect and twang,”16 illustrate his conscious attempts to situate *RVBD* in the eyes of his advertisers as not only emulating contemporary radio trends, but as pre-eminent of them. In the performances of the show, Lair repeatedly lauds the importance of domesticity and the skills of pioneer times, including musket shooting, baking, pot-lucks and sing-ins, corn-shuckings, hunting, making equipment using older...
pre-industrial techniques. Nostalgic references to things “the way they used to be” became a familiar refrain to Lair’s listeners, and he strove to communicate that a sincere welcome was waiting in Renfro Valley for those who felt lonely for home. Lair regularly referenced the emotional and cultural disturbances caused to his listening audience by the recent depression and world war.

Lair’s stated interest in the preservation of local architecture also formed part of his construction of authenticity. Though Lair described the barn buildings as a “typical barn for a genuine barn dance,” writer Michael Ann Williams has emphasised the self-referential nature of Lair’s claims, describing RVBD as country music’s first auto-tourism site, and as using romanticised notions of rural vernacular architecture. Williams distinguishes Lair’s buildings as alluding to, rather than being, traditional, and connects this with features of country music at that time:

Since the 1920s, country music has been strongly self-referential, constantly making notes of its own authenticity. This referencing also takes place on the individual level; it is not enough to perform, write or produce country music, one must authenticate one’s own life experiences… The main historical texts that Lair employed in his work were his own experiences. (Williams 2000: 162).

This self-referentiality is maintained in Renfro Valley even in contemporary times, with the presence at the site of a self-proclaimed “Kentucky Music Hall of Fame,” in an effort, as Bill Malone describes it, to make “fantasy become reality”. (1994: 73).

Lair further claimed for the authenticity of the musical repertoire and performances on his shows by his growing reputation as an amateur music historian. He began to be described in newspaper articles as a recognized authority on song histories, partly due to his owning a library of valuable manuscripts, and partly from his claims of copyright ownership in relation to those manuscripts. In the following excerpt from the Courier Journal, 1941, Lair’s expertise is alluded to in several ways:

Lair has a passion for authenticity that manifests itself in several ways. For one, he has probably the world’s largest collection of folk music, songs that date back to the early Eighteenth Century in this country and still further back in England. He owns exclusive rights to much of this music, which is preserved in old manuscripts and colonial song books.

Lair’s reputation as a collector gave his choices of repertoire credence, and his song histories the air of historical accuracy. As Bill Malone and others have critiqued (Malone 1994: 70-71), the image of Appalachia presented in Cecil Sharp’s work was a whitewashed one, stating that “[v]ariety was present, though ignored, when Sharp made his first forays into the mountains in 1916”. Lair was greatly influenced by the work of Sharp, and followed his understanding of Appalachian music to be of distinctly English origin. Any conception Lair had of the African-American, native-American or German cultural influences in the region was generally unacknowledged, as in this quote of his:

Every time we get a chance to give the restless mountain kid a better conception of their homeland and their race I think we have done something…A diet of juke box and tin pan alley pseudo-musical culture…is lower in the scale by far than the old ballads of English Lords and Ladies or of our own people directly descended from them.

That the depiction of race in the RVBD was overwhelmingly white is possibly partly explained by the fact that Kentucky was at that time a segregated state. However, that there were many African American and Native American as well as varied European influences in the music of the area was a point not explored by either Sharp or Lair. Though Lair publicly prided himself on the accuracy of his lyrics and song histories, and the morality of the Renfro Valley project, he resisted modifying his music when faced with regulatory disapproval of racist lyrics, as exemplified in the following letter to the Columbia Broadcasting Company music clearance department:
On a number of occasions, we’ve been asked by your music clearance department to delete the word ‘darky’ from old southern songs. Personally I think the negro groups are making a very serious mistake when they discriminate against the old-time songs, which in a measure endears the race to people throughout the country. The last straw however, was the change your music clearance department demanded in our state song, “My Old Kentucky Home,” which we had scheduled for the Ballard and Ballard Sunday morning show, April 11th. We have substituted another number which we would like to have cleared, as I certainly have no intention of presenting this song on the air in such a garbled version, in order to soothe the delicate sensitivities of the coloured listeners. (I understand that the race objects even to the term “colored”.) Please remember that our programmes go only to the south, and I am sure you will find no objections in that section to our presenting these old numbers exactly the way they were written. As matters now stand, it appears that we are being discriminated against. I frequently hear other programmes on your network and NBC the in which the word darky...appears exactly as it was used in the original song. I wonder what special privileges these singers are given in this matter, and I wonder how I can go about getting this same consideration.

Lair’s letter is dated in 1948, from just before the civil rights movement gained significant momentum in the United States. His assertive tone is possibly symptomatic of how unused he was to being challenged on issues of racially-offensive lyrics. The lyrics of the song mentioned in Lair’s letter, “My Old Kentucky Home,” were the subject of state-level discussions as recently as the 1980s. In March, 1986, Kentucky legislature passed House Resolution 159, which officially replaced the old lyrics “the darkies are gay” with the line, “Tis summer, the people are gay”. Such debates ring on in contemporary times. This careful formulation of Appalachian or hillbilly music as a raced music was achieved not so much by the people who were making the music, as musicologist Ron Pen explains, as by the emerging musical industry of which Lair was a major figure. Lair’s documentation of the history and ethnic origins of the hillbilly music played on his programme adhered to the prevailing industry marketisation of hillbilly music as a primarily white music, in spite of evidence that musical culture in Appalachia was very much a product of diverse European, native-American and African-American influences.

Lair’s pursuit of scholarly activities and his inhabitation of the space between radio performer, promoter, and scholar were used regularly on-air as justifications for his claims of authenticity for his programme and for the repertoire and performers that he employed. His practice of expanding on the background of the music and songs in his programmes, and of relating each song clearly to the idea of an exclusive body of American folk music contributed to the impression of the RVBD programme as being authentic, historically accurate, and as coming from an identifiable source. These activities follow the pattern of what Allan Moore describes as establishing a purity of practice.

Lair’s frequent allusions to the morality of the performances in his show were a common practice in the genre of country music. Jeff Todd Titon describes country music as distilling and representing lived experience, and thus as a way for Appalachians “to repossess a past of which they could be rightly proud”. Thus it is no surprise to hear prominent Renfro Valley and Grand Ole’ Opry musician Bradley Kincaid stating that what he called ‘mountain’ music was “not simply old, it was also deeply moral, just as its creators and preservators were”. In Renfro Valley, morality was seen as stemming directly from the authenticity of its music, from its presentation style, and from its associated advertised products. Lair’s attempt at a genuine presentation style, a genuine Appalachian welcome, a genuine “hillbilly” dialect, and his endorsement of “genuine” consumer and farming goods on the shows all contributed towards the construction of this sense of morality. Radio scholar Bill Kirkpatrick identifies the attempt by national barn dance radio programmes to
harness “unpretentiousness” and “neighbourliness” as aesthetic markers to sound local as an ironic feature of national radio across the US in the 1930s. (2010: 215).

Throughout his written communications, Lair’s commercial and folklorist categorisations of music that he makes merge and intertwine continuously. In private, Lair’s opinions were sometimes in direct contrast with his public front:

As far as, as loving country music and the sounds go, actually, I’ve never said this before, I don’t believe, but my favorite music was old popular, actually what I enjoyed listening to most (LJ: Mm-hmm). I liked the folk songs because of their culture and their words and the stories that they opened up, but as far as the musical sounds went, I liked things like “Silver Threads Among the Gold” and stuff like that better (laughs) did any of the real old kinds of stuff.32

Harnessing the Authenticity of the Renfro Valley Barn Dance

Thus far, I have described how John Lair took pains to present an image of an authentic Appalachia in his radio programmes. According to Allan Moore, however, it is the reception of a purportedly authentic performance that tells us most about that performance:

It is the success with which a particular performance conveys its impression [of authenticity] that counts… Whether such perceivers are necessarily fooled by doing so is, perhaps, beside the point since we may learn as much from creative misunderstanding as from understanding. (Moore 2002: 220).

The transmission of Lair’s idea of authenticity as presented in this show can be considered successful for several reasons. The most telling example is that of the advertising documents associated with the show. Lair’s investment in these concepts enabled him to realise the RVBD as an enduring characterisation of the authentic folk music of Kentucky and Appalachia, and to sell the RVBD to advertisers on this basis.

American radio was commercially funded from its very beginnings, and the RVBD was no different, with several different advertisers involved in the show. It came to be dominated by corporate interests and advertising agencies, embedded with competing ideologies. Hilmes notes that radio advertising in the period of the 1920s and 1930s created the concept of the “ideal consuming family”. (Hilmes 1997: 6-7). In speaking about the earliest years of American broadcasting, Hilmes continues that:

Whoever…Americans were, they would be defined… most importantly as consumers living in a marketplace. Industry, particularly the booming consumer products and media industries, would serve as the essential link among conflicting concepts of the people, the public, the audience, the nation. (Hilmes 2011: 41).

Lair and his advertisers readily ascribed to these ideas, and they proved important to the success of the Renfro Valley franchise. (Hilmes 2011:69). Lair’s idea of a franchise of radio programmes also stemmed from the advertisers. The group of products chosen for advertising on RVBD was closely associated with agrarian or family values, and was matched to different buildings on the Renfro Valley settlement. The themes of his song repertoire were chosen to resonate with the ideas discussed in the advertisements. The development of Renfro Valley into a franchise of programmes, with associated products, marked an important point in its business narrative.

Lair’s promotional materials for advertising companies stated the corporate interest in his programme very clearly. Even though the programme was described as ‘corny,’ Lair clarified that the programme was aimed not at the class of advertising executives, but instead at the working classes:

which make up such a tremendous part of this nation’s purchasing power…the large group of people so fundamental to anyone selling a mass market item to this nation.33
Benton and Bowles advertising company, in their proposal for General Foods before they became a Renfro Valley advertiser, said that GF needed:

an economically sound way of reaching the predominantly rural populations of the Southern states... We have reason to believe that in the rural areas of the South, small local stations with programming we would term ‘corny’ receive a higher rate of listenership than do the network stations when the run of programmes of national advertisers such as ourselves are on the air...Lair’s audience knows there is never anything phoney about his program. If he says he’s broadcasting from a hayride, they know it’s true... If he calls attention to the noise of the water mill grinding corn, it’s no sound effect, but the real thing. This tends to lend added credibility to his commercials as well....³⁴

The belief in the persuasive powers of Lair to create the image of a preserved, idealised, romantic version of an Appalachian mountain community that would repay the financial investment of advertisers, is replicated throughout documents in John Lair’s papers in the Berea College sound archives. Advertisers discussed the social cues provided by the music and the other features of the programmes, and made decisions about what social ramifications each genre and style of music connoted to their target market listeners. The Russell M. Seeds Advertising company stated that RVBD was “specifically designed to carry your sales message to urban industrial workers, small town folks and farmers,”³⁵ and that Lair created “loyal” customers important to anyone selling a mass-market item. The sponsors of Renfro Valley listened closely to the programmes, and would provide regular weekly written feedback to Lair on the performance of their product spot, or on how their product was represented on the programmes. They would also quite easily make requests for changes for the next week, while still emphasising that it was Lair who was in charge – of course.

Advertising revenue associated with the show, ticket sales for the concert from which the show broadcast, and the revenue from visitors to the Renfro Valley settlement point to the show's positive response from listeners. One letter to Lair began with the words: “Dear friend, I say friend because I think you are friends to everybody”.³⁶ Lair replied to many of these letters. Jacob Podber has written that many listeners saw Lair as a friend but also a patron, and he likens the correspondence between Lair and his listeners to fan interactivity with mass media through social media in contemporary times. (Podber 2016). The archives at Berea College Kentucky contain many of these letters exhibiting support for Lair and his ideal of a ‘Valley Where Time Stands Still.’ Lair encouraged this practice by referring often to the importance of communication with his listeners, including the many letters of support and encouragement that he received, as in the following example:

Folks, a few years ago when that song was first written, we didn’t know we’d be back in Renfro Valley this soon. Course we knew we’d make it some day. We’d planned on it so much that we knew we just couldn’t fail. But we figured it was years ahead of us. And then you folks got behind us, and you gave us such loyal support, by attending our shows and everything, that we were able to go ahead with what for us has been a mighty big and mighty important undertaking and tonight thanks to you, we’re right back down here in Renfro Valley.³⁷
In interviews, Lair stressed that his musicians sang with the audience, not down to them, and that his musicians thought of their audience as equals. This was an example of radio at its most powerful - making possible a profound “physical, cultural, linguistic and institutional unity,” as Hilmes describes. (2011: 13). Stokes reminds us that music radio is a context for other things to occur, and that music has the power to attune social relationships. “Tuning in,” as Stokes explains, was a powerful affective experience, where tuning in meant tuning in to communal relationships. (1994: 12). The idea of the RVBD being a spiritual and community experience abides today. Writer Silas House remarked of such a feeling during a childhood visit to a live concert in Renfro Valley. There he discovered that other families loved country music as well, and likened the visit to a non-religious spiritual experience. “As we listened, we were all in tune. It was like being in a crowd where everyone is saying the same prayer”. (House, 2016b). That the listeners thought of the personality of Renfro Valley as “a living real thing” was part of advertisers’ sales pitch for the programme. Promotional materials produced by advertising agencies not only emphasised that many of its performers were natives to the area, but also repeatedly promoted the programme as being the “only barndance programme ever put on in a real barn by the actual residents of a real community”. Lair’s practice of listing names of listeners, (a practice that is still common amongst radio disc jockeys today), promoted that sense of intimacy and realism.

That performances of country music have historically been particularly prone to usage by corporate interests is nothing new. Diane Pecknold identifies country music as one type of popular culture whose development was shaped significantly by the dependence of commercialism on the concept of authenticity, stating that “though its apparent realism, sincerity, and frank depictions of everyday life are its most obvious stylistic hallmarks, it has always been defined as a genre by its relationship to business”. (Pecknold 2007:2). The meanings attached to the label of hillbilly, which was similarly manipulated by corporate interests, have been renegotiated in modern times; it is no longer guaranteed to bring a pejorative meaning. As Silas House attests,
Appalachians have recently reclaimed the general use of the word “hillbilly” for themselves by using it without a negative connotation. However, this change of meaning is clearly still under negotiation when it comes to music, as House states that most musicians would still not describe their music as “hillbilly music,” choosing the words “Appalachian” (or other) instead.

**Conclusion**

In his presentation of Renfro Valley as the ‘Valley Where Time Stands Still’, Lair created a radio show that expressed his nostalgia for a time gone past. He pushed for the re-creation of a performance context and homestead reflective of his idealised wishes. Some aspects of the presentations in his show piggybacked on gender, class, regional, and racial stereotypes. The detail available about this music radio programme gives us some insight into the choices made and the debates conducted around folk/old-time/country/traditional music on US radio in the early 20th century.

Debates on the musical labels used in his show – hillbilly, or country – and concerning the treatment of racially offensive lyrics in old songs continue as topics of conversation to this day. In addition to increasing our understanding of the historical forces to have influenced the discourses around traditional, folk and country music in Appalachia in the twentieth century, the story of Lair’s Renfro Valley illuminates how the single-minded reconstruction of an idealised past, in conjunction with powerful advertising interests, enabled a particular image of what was authentic in “country music” in the early 20th century to be successfully transmitted through the mass media of radio. The Renfro Valley programmes emphasized the importance of music in the link between diasporic Appalachia and its homeland, and complex and shifting images of Appalachian identity developed and were contested on the programme over the decades of its broadcast.

As Stuart Hall argues, the media do not just reflect, but also construct reality for audiences. The construction and use of ideas of authenticity as in Renfro Valley persist in various forms today, feeding continuously into modern representations of Appalachian music and identity. Words such as “hillbilly,” “sophisticated,” “old-time,” “authentic,” and “down-home” are significant in the case of the RVBD. Devereux cautions us to note the power relations involved in any form of media production; in this case, Lair wielded both power over the music and the musical contexts in the performance context of Renfro Valley. Lair’s RVBD did not just reflect, but performed images of Appalachia, and performed them in public to a mass audience over a period of twenty years.

Renfro Valley programmes continue to broadcast from the same location, and they still involve some of the show’s original performing groups – the Coon Creek Girls, for example, albeit in a different lineup. The story of Renfro Valley is implicated in any narrative of Appalachian music, culture and identity in modern times. As Hilmes advocates, music radio formats are not “mere commercial formulas,” but rather are “important culture-defining and boundary-enforcing exercises” (Hilmes 2002: 13). How John Lair constructed a network of signifiers of authenticity around his radio programme in the earliest years of its formation and went on to develop and propagate that network are of consequence not only to the history of radio stations WHAS, WLW and others, but to our knowledge and understanding of the country, old-time and folk musics in the region in the twentieth century. Arguably, spotlighting the musical, cultural and economic matrix out of which came the earliest of our radio programming gives insights into musical expressions by the mass media and, more generally, to cultural changes into contemporary times.
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References


Hilmes, Michele –


House, Silas. –


The Cincinnati Times-Star

The Courier Journal


Discography

Personal Interviews
House, Silas (2016) Interview.
Howard, Jason (2016) Interview
Jamison, Phil (2008) Interview.

Endnotes

1 Quoted in newspaper articles, John Lair papers, Series 1 – John Lair, Box 1, folder 8.
2 As television in the US didn’t become mainstream until the early 1950s, the 1930s to 1950s were a much more simplified media environment.
3 This choice follows the methods of Jennifer Doctor in her historiographical examination of the cultural-expansionist policy of the BBC in the early decades of the twentieth century (1999).
7 JL Collection, Box no. 35, folders 3-9, radio programme scripts. 35-6. March 9th 1940.
9 Folklorist Archie Green archly notes in 1965 that “it was no longer considered in good taste amongst American diplomats to display an awareness of hillbilly music or to discuss the poetry of Walt Whitman.” (1965: 204-228).
12 Image: http://community.berea.edu/hutchinslibrary/specialcollections/saa66.asp Source: Sound Archives, Special Collections, Hutchins Library, Berea College, KY, USA.
13 The following sound clip, though taken from the later period of the 1950s, is indicative of this smooth-changing format of the programme of the late 1930s. An earlier recording is unavailable for online reproduction here.
The name of performer Aunt Idy was variously spelled as Ain’t Idy’ and ‘Aint Idy,’ and the spelling ‘intertainment’ was used instead of ‘entertainment.’

John Lair papers, Box 35, folders 3-9, radio scripts. Script date: 07-20-40. One possible explanation for this practice is that in the early years, scripts were sent to advertising companies sometime before broadcast; thus, the use of dialect in the scripts was for the benefit of the urban-based advertisers. In contrast, Lair wrote in standard American English when writing directly to those same advertising companies himself, or in corporate promotional materials, as is illustrated by all his private written correspondences I viewed in the Berea College archive.


As heard in a sound recording of the RVBD, broadcast on 30th December 1939.


John Lair papers, Series 1 – John Lair, Box 1, folder 8, copy of a newspaper article. The Cincinnati Times-Star (1938). “True Hill-Billies on WLW Barn Dance: Saturday Night Show to Change Time.”


Sharp made his first Kentucky collecting trip in 1916, and Lonesome Tunes: Folk songs from the Kentucky Mountains published by Lorraine Wyman and Howard Brockman the same year, As Sharp arrived to the southern Appalachian mountains already persuaded that most of the musical material was of English origin, he declined to look for other material. Sharp & Karpeles 1932: iv.


The Day Law, “An Act to Prohibit White and Colored Persons from Attending the Same School,” was signed into law in the Commonwealth of Kentucky by Governor J.C.W. Beckham in March 1904 and cemented the arrival of segregation in Kentucky.

This was pointed out to me by Phil Jamison in an interview on 20th July, 2008 and in interview with Jason Howard, on 19th February 2016. See further discussion in Jamison, 2015.

As suggested by Silas House, in a personal interview, February 2016.

According to ongoing conversations I have had over several years with various Appalachian residents.

Personal interview, Swannanoa, NC, 20th July 2008.

John Lair Collection, Tape AC-CT-025-003: April 30 1974


SAA Sound Recording, JL DT 005-A-13, John Lair Collection.

Sound Archives, John Lair Collection, Listeners’ Letters, Hutchins Library, Berea College, KY, USA.


See description of RVBD singer Red Foley in The Courier Journal in 1941, Saturday April 26, Section 2.


For example, House presents a regular online radio show entitled Hillbilly Solid.

I use ‘preform’ in the manner suggested by Stokes, 1994: 5.

THE RENFRO VALLEY BARN DANCE is not really a dance, but a stage and radio show held each Saturday night in the BIG BARN in Renfro Valley. Since its first broadcast back in 1939 it has been heard on major stations such as WHAS, WLW, and over NBC, CBS, and Mutual Radio networks. More than three million visitors, coming from each of the 49 states and 7 foreign countries, have paid admission to see Renfro Valley Folks put on the only radio program of its kind presented in a real barn by the actual residents of the surrounding community. Located on U.S. 25 in Renfro Valley, Kentucky. Folk Music can consist of Folk Songs (music with lyrics) or instrumental Folk Music (often played to accompany Folk Dancing). Although there are many contemporary artists writing new folk music in traditional styles, most people think of Folk Music as being the older Traditional Music itself. Folk Music often has a National flavour to it with different countries or cultural groups having their our distinctive styles, though there can often be an overlap in styles either between neighbouring countries or following the movement or emigration of large numbers of people. Encoding authenticity in radio music: Renfro Valley Barn Dance and Kentucky Folk Music. July 2017. Helen Gubbins. First broadcast in 1937, the Renfro Valley Barn Dance was the first American barn dance radio programme to be performed and recorded in an actual barn as opposed to a radio studio. This article explores how the programme’s producer, John Lair, propagated in this programme his single-minded reconstruction of an idealised past and his own personal image of authenticity in American folk music.