Chapter 2
'Won't You Spare Me Over till Another Year?': Ralph Stanley's Late Voice

We begin with death—with the promise, threat and sound of death—and with a voice pleading for more life. The voice comes to us in a scene from *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the film written and directed by Joel and Ethan Coen and released in 2000. The film's story takes place in Mississippi during the Great Depression of the 1930s and its principal characters are three white southerners, Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney), Pete Hogwallop (John Turturro) and Delmar O'Donnell (Tim Blake Nelson). Having escaped from the notorious Parchman Farm prison, the trio are on a dubious quest for treasure, a quest based loosely on Homer's *Odyssey*. The film makes numerous references to the popular culture (especially music) of the time in which the story is set. For part of their journey, the three escaped convicts are accompanied by a young black blues guitarist named Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King). The scene in question takes place at a point when Tommy has gone missing. The three main protagonists discover how and why when they chance upon a night-time meeting of the Ku Klux Klan; as they watch, the gathering works itself into a frenzy, feet stomping in unison and white-cloaked bodies enacting a bizarre dance before a burning wooden cross. Beneath the cross, a red-cloaked Imperial Wizard stands atop a stationary cart. A bell rings and silence descends, exacerbating the already palpable menace of the rural night. Attention shifts to the scarlet-hooded leader, who now uncrosses his arms and raises them in a kind of embrace. With a voice as old as time, he begins to sing:

> Ohhh-oh-oh-oh-oh-ohhhhhhhh De-uh-eth
> Ohhhhh-oh-oh-oh-oh-ohhhhhhh De-uh-uh-uh-eth
> Won't you spare me over till another yea-uh-uh-er?

The voice is chilling. The stretched words reverberate like a funeral bell, at once precise and out of focus, unearthly phonemes hovering around the edges of the sensible.[1] But the message is not lost and the words hang in the still air. Both voice and song sound ancient, older than

[1] No written transcription will do justice to the sounds made in this rendition and my setting out of the lyrics is primarily intended to highlight the way in which the vocal delivery estranges and delays the understanding of the words. Only witnessing the film or listening to a recording will provide a true experience of the sound: *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, dir. Joel and Ethan Cohn (2000); soundtrack available on CD (Mercury 170069-2, 2000).

anyone present in the scene, not least the spectators (the three protagonists watching the scene unfold from the relative safety of the bushes and the spectators watching from the total safety of the other side of the screen). The singer's wavering voice and the initial lack of accompaniment underline the severity of the words:

> Well, what is this that I can't see
> With ice cold hands takin' hold of me
> Well I am Death, none can excel
> I'll open the door to heaven or hell

As the singer continues, his voice is accompanied by the rough rhythm of the white-clad Klansmen marching in unison. It becomes apparent that their ritual involves a black man who they have captured and who the main characters recognise as Tommy Johnson. Following a rabble-rousing speech, the Klansmen move towards the culmination of their ritual, the murder of the black captive. In a half-serious, half-farcical scene, Ulysses, Pete and Delmar enact a rescue mission and Tommy's day of reckoning is averted. The deferral of death longed for in the song is enacted and both victim and would-be executioner are spared over until another year, or at least another day.

The Imperial Wizard, as we discover when he is unmasked, is the local gubernatorial candidate Homer Stokes, played by Wayne Duvall. But it is not Duvall's voice that we hear singing 'O Death' (sometimes 'Oh Death'; the song is also known as 'Conversation with Death' and has variants entitled 'Awful Death' and 'Money Cannot Buy Your Soul'). Watching the film, we attach an origin to the voice due to the way the camera lingers on the red hood and the body gestures emanating from the cloaked figure; yet there is no obvious vocal gesture because the head is covered. As the camera zooms in, we detect movement through a slit cut in the Wizard's hood, reinforcing the figure as the source of the sound we are hearing. But our desire to connect voice and body still remains frustrated until the Wizard unmasks himself as Stokes/Duvall. During this process, the Grand Wizard is created as a 'vocalic body', as the entity most likely to be singing 'O Death'. As Steven Connor writes, 'the fact that an unassigned voice must always imply a body means that it will always partly supply it as well'. Furthermore,

> so strong is the embodying power of the voice, that this process occurs not only in the case of voices that seem separated from their obvious or natural sources, but also in voices ... that have a clearly identifiable source, but seem in various ways excessive to that source. This voice then conjures for itself a different kind of body; an imaginary body which may contradict, compete with, replace, or even reshape the actual, visible body of the speaker.[2]

Although a source is presented to us in the scene I am describing, the masks of the cloak and hood obscure most traces of humanity, leaving us to fill in the gaps via the fantasy of the vocalic body. Given the inhuman figure before us and the subject matter of the song we are hearing, we might equally imagine this as a 'vocalic skeleton', as perhaps the figure of Death itself. The cloak and hood add to the suggestion, as does the subsequent assertion of this entity as one authorised to pronounce judgement on mortal subjects such as Tommy Johnson.[3]

The Wizard's subsequent unmasking is, in its way, as farcical and potentially game-changing as that in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. Mladen Dolar uses that film's Wizard as an example of the deceptive nature of the voice and of the machinery necessary to create and maintain its authority.[4] When the Wizard of Oz is revealed as a weak old man whose vocalic power is reliant on amplification, or when The Klan's Grand Wizard is revealed—in the scene already described and also later in *O Brother*—as an ineffectual leader out of touch with his community, the authority of the disembodied voice crumbles. The voice in Dolar's formulation is always already removed from the body in that we cannot locate its source or account for its power over us. The contract between speaker and listener is what Connor would call a 'ventriloquial' one in which both parties are used as puppets by the voice. This

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[2] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36.

[3] Issues of mortality appear earlier in the film when Tommy Johnson reveals he's been to the crossroads to sell his soul to the devil, a play on the famous blues myth; he's asked by one of the protagonists what the devil looks like and he tells them he's 'as white as you fellas'. The lynching scene can be read as the 'white devil' calling in the debt, though it should also be pointed out that this the particular devil that Tommy met is identified with the lawman who is chasing the runaway prisoners and who enacts his own 'sentencing' scene later on. No doubt there were multiple instantiations of white devils for someone in Tommy's position at this time and place.

[4] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 62-9.

proves to be the case in *O Brother*, when neither the unmasked Homer Stokes nor the actor portraying him proves to be the real voice of 'O Death'. Just as the Wizard's song defers death in its message and obscures origin in its status as a traditional song, so we have to wait until another moment—the movie credits—to find the true origin of that chilling voice.[5]

This is the voice that I am interested in, this voice imbued with all the lateness of tradition, severity and age. It belongs to Ralph Stanley, former member of singing duo the Stanley Brothers, a pioneering figure in the world of bluegrass and old-time music, born in the Virginia mountains in 1927 and seventy three years of age at the time of *O Brother*'s release. Because of this voice and the way it connected so effectively to this ancient, death-defying text, Stanley would go on to enjoy a revival of interest in his music, gaining a whole new audience as he approached his eightieth year. Do we follow the man, the song, or the voice? Is it a matter of biography, lyrics or sound? In what follows I consider each in turn, though, not surprisingly given the subject of this book, I privilege the voice. But voice is not only sound and all the aforementioned focal points are important due to the ways in which they intersect to tell us something about lateness and the mediation of age and experience. As I do with other case studies in this book, I use biographical information where I believe it illuminates the textual material of the song, where it adds something to the exegesis, or where it makes thinkable certain issues relating to age, time or experience. In the case of Ralph Stanley, I am drawing mostly on his memoir *Man of Constant Sorrow*, a fascinating and moving account of Stanley's life and of the development of American old-time music in the

[5] I speak of finding a true origin even though Mladen Dolar warns us such a thing is impossible (see previous chapter). I do so for the same reason my description shifts between the fantasy of presence (or these things really happening) and the deconstructive mode of Dolar and Connor; in witnessing this voice I can be both caught up in its power and aware of its falsity. The use of Ralph Stanley's voice and this particular song in the KKK scene, meanwhile, is something that has occasionally vexed me, as it has others. Stanley himself has expressed satisfaction in his performance and in the Coens' film while not only distancing himself from the Grand Wizard, but also asserting his confidence in his audience to be willing to do the same. However, viewed critically, this could be seen as an essentially solipsistic gesture which ignores the unfortunately all-too-easy connection between this 'type' of voice/singing and the racial politics of the era depicted in the film—something which the Coens explicitly play on by attaching Stanley's voice to the Klansman; they and their audience know that the voice 'fits'. It is also worth noting here the oddness of the voices of the song and the people being depicted. Why is this song even a diegetic song? Why would the Klansman be singing this when he only represents part of the conversation? Shouldn't Tommy Johnson be taking part in the 'conversation with death'? If this was non-diegetic music, we might be more likely to hear the song as a dialogue between two sides.

twentieth century. Published in Stanley's eighty-third year, the book is also a fine example of that aspect of the late voice concerned with what we might call, after Norberto Bobbio, 'real old age', as distinct from 'imagined and feared' old age.[6] When I talk about the late voice of Ralph Stanley in his seventy-third and eighty-third years—in *O Brother* and in the memoir respectively—I am referring not only to the timbre of voice with which he sings and speaks, but also to the writerly voice that he utilises in interviews and via the pages of the book. And when I say that we hear (and read) a late voice engaged with 'real old age', I mean that we are not encountering a voice that anticipates experience, that is older or wiser than its years, but a very real voice of experience, a voice nearer the end of its life than its beginning.

The Boy with the Hundred-Year-Old Voice

Ralph Stanley packs plenty of realism into the pages of his memoir, spending much of the opening section meditating on mortality, his place in the world and the family plot where he will be buried.

> At the top of the cemetery, close by a pair of big cedar trees planted by my aunt many years ago, my grave is ready for me when it's my time to go. It's next to the graves of Carter and his wife, Mary. ... I used to go the cemetery a lot. I don't go there as often anymore. When you get to be my age, you figure you'll be there soon enough. But it's still a place where I can spend some time and look around and linger awhile.[7]

Carter was the other half of the Stanley Brothers, the group with which Ralph found initial fame and which ended with Carter's death in 1966. Not surprisingly, much of Ralph's narrative focuses on Carter and on the brothers' shared discoveries and experiences. Carter functions for much of the text as the listener Ralph is speaking to or imagining and his ghost animates the pages, as in this early appearance, which recalls the ways in which places—not least final resting places—serve as mnemonic devices for those who pass through or linger in them.[8]

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[6] Norberto Bobbio, *Old Age and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Allan Cameron (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 16.

[7] Ralph Stanley and Eddie Dean, *Man of Constant Sorrow: My Life and Times* (New York: Gotham, 2010), 10-11. Further quotations from this text will be cited in the text as *MCS*, followed by a page number.

[8] See Mark C. Taylor and Dietrich Christian Lammerts, *Grave Matters* (London: Reaktion, 2002).

Ralph Stanley's book exemplifies a point made by Norberto Bobbio about the sharpening of long-term memory in later life:

> By remembering you rediscover yourself and your identity, in spite of the many years that have passed and the thousands of events you have experienced. You come across the years lost in time, the games played as a child, the faces, voices and gestures of your school friends, and places, especially the places of childhood, that are the most distant in time but most clearly defined in the memory.[9]

Yet, in Stanley's case, it is this rediscovery of the past that signals, early in his narrative, an aspect of himself that complicates neat teleological development towards a late voice. This revelation comes as he reflects on his earliest experience of the power of singing:

> I'm well past eighty now, but as far back as I can remember, everyone always told me I had an old-time mountain voice: what they call weathered and lived-in, like something you'd hear moaning in the woods late of a night and not from the mouth of a young'un. They called me the boy with the hundred-year-old voice. I reckon if I make it another twenty years, maybe then I'll finally get to sound like my real age. (*MCS*, 2)

This revelatory staging of lateness attained early is accompanied by the story of how, as a boy 'barely eight years old', Stanley was made to sing in the Point Truth Baptist Church of Scott County, Virginia (not his family's regular church).[10] His father had been due to lead the congregation in singing, following the Baptist practice of 'lining out' a hymn (where a leader sings a line or verse and the others repeat it). On this occasion he had forgotten the start of the hymn and pushed Ralph forward to lead in his place. Despite his nerves, the boy succeeded with his task and, in doing so, learned something of the power of song and the possibility of overcoming fear. As Stanley weaves this story into his initial reflections on singing, age, religion and his voice, he moves between remembered wonder at being 'the boy with the hundred-year-old voice' and continued attempts—his own and those of friends and critics—

[9] Bobbio, *Old Age*, 13.

[10] Other versions of the story age Stanley at five years old: see Nicholas Dawidoff, *In the Country of Country*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997, 90-91.

to map that voice onto age and history. In the passage quoted above, he writes of the increasing likelihood of sounding like his 'real age'; elsewhere he suggests that his voice has grown more mournful with life experience and the losses it has brought. There is not necessarily any disagreement here with the narratives of 'real old age' presented by Bobbio or Jean Améry and reported in chapter1; in many ways, Stanley asserts their claims. Yet there is still that moment, perhaps as fleeting as the passing of song itself, where something other could be imagined and a boy of eight could be heard as a man of a hundred. There are elements that once did not seem to fit—a body, a sound—but that are later seen to fit, to come into their own. Stanley here reminds us of the idea of the body as the puppet of the voice, the channel through which it is passing. 'I was too young to know what all the words really meant', he writes, 'but I can tell you now the hymn told my story, plain and simple' (*MCS*, 5).

Stanley thus appears as both boy and old man in the opening pages of his memoir, just as he will do in its moving final passages. At both points his brother is there to accompany him and it is Ralph's career in music-making, at first with Carter and then as a band leader, that fills the bulk of the narrative space between these points. Carter, born two years before Ralph in 1925, was obsessed with music from an early age. As with the fraternal relationship, Carter was very much the lead in the musical partnership and it was he who took the modernising action of getting a guitar and moving the boys away from the strict Primitive Baptist tradition of unaccompanied music. Ralph learned the banjo and followed in his brother's footsteps. The pair developed their musical style and repertoire, becoming modernisers of old-time music, Carter through his singing, guitar playing and songwriting, and Ralph through the adoption of the three-finger 'Scruggs style' of banjo playing. They started out emulating the highly popular styles of Bill Monroe and, later, Flatt & Scruggs and soon gained popularity on the radio, via the 'Farm and Fun Time' programme on Bristol-based station WCYB. They made their first recordings for the Rich-R-Tone label between 1947 and 1949, producing a number of sides featuring traditional duet singing style, with both brothers singing the same parts together. In 1949 and 1950 the Stanleys recorded for Columbia before Ralph took a short break from performing. During this time Carter played in Bill Monroe's band but the brothers reformed for further sessions with Columbia and Rich-R-Tone (their last for both labels) in 1952.

While the Rich-R-Tone recordings present a band still in thrall to standard old-time songs, the sides cut for Columbia highlight the process by which the Stanleys developed, in the words of Charles Wolfe, 'a style that at once harkened back to the mountain music of the past, and looked forward with innovative harmonies and haunting new songs'.[11] The Columbia recordings are notable for innovations in playing and songwriting, influenced by the instrumental virtuosity of Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs, Carter's desire to write songs that reflected his own experience, and the development of a 'high trio' singing style that deployed harmonies in ways which were unheard of at the time, as Stanley explains:

> Usually with trio harmonies, you had a lead vocal and then you had a higher tenor part and a lower baritone. We worked out a new arrangement with Carter on lead, me on tenor and then Pee Wee [Lambert] singing a high baritone way up top of all the voices. You may have heard the term 'high lonesome' to describe bluegrass singing; well, our high trio was the highest and lonesomest thing you ever heard. (*MCS,* 145)

The quality of the Stanleys' sound on the Columbia sides is also notably different from their earlier work, doubtless due to the technological resources available to them at the studio. Stanley describes the Castle Studio, located in the old ballroom of the Tulane Hotel in Nashville, as 'a dump' but the sound achieved was one that 'stood the test of time' (*MCS*, 146). One of the tests of time for recorded music of that era is how well it has been maintained or remastered. Whether the result of better original masters, format transfer or remastering, the Columbia sides compiled on CD sound richer than the Rich-R-Tone sides reissued by Revenant. The latter, as Gary Reid notes, are intimate, exciting and display 'youthful exuberance' and 'the excitement of budding talent taking shape'.[12] But there remains a thinness to the sound which, while useful for expressing urgency (as on their galloping version of Bill Monroe's 'Molly and Tenbrook'), often makes the group sound bunched-up (which they probably were) and also means that the instruments do not come through as well as they might. The Columbia recordings are not only smoother, but there is also more space and separation between voices and instruments. However, as already mentioned, the most notable development is the separation of the voices through new

[11] Charles Wolfe, liner notes to the Stanley Brothers, *The Complete Columbia Stanley Brothers* (CD: Columbia/Legacy CK 53798), 1996, 7.

[12] Gary B. Reid, liner notes to Stanley Brothers, *Earliest Recordings: The Complete Rich-R-Tone 78s (1947-1952)* (CD: Rich-R-Tone/Revenant 203, 1997), 16.

harmony techniques. On some songs, Carter sounds more like a country crooner than an old-time singer and even when he adopts the time-worn, 'high lonesome' style associated with Monroe's bluegrass, the harmony vocals of Ralph and mandolin player Pee Wee Lambert are always there above him, their voices sounding older and 'wilder' in comparison to his. Combined with a less rushed vocal pace on a number of the tracks, Carter's vocals resemble the contemporary honky-tonk styles of Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams but with added bluegrass elements provided by the instrumentation and harmony singing. This is particularly evident on songs such as 'A Vision of Mother', 'The Fields Have Turned Brown' and 'Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet', where Carter sings the verses solo and the others harmonise on the choruses; on 'The Lonesome River' (later recorded by Ralph in duet with Bob Dylan), the opening of the verses have something of Hank Williams's blues inflections. There are still a number of songs where the brothers duet on the verses, including a re-recorded 'Little Glass of Wine' (a song originally cut for Rich-R-Tone) and these tend to sound 'older', made archaic by the new styles being tried out elsewhere.

It was during a Columbia session in 1950 that Ralph Stanley first recorded 'I'm a Man of Constant Sorrow' (later just 'Man of Constant Sorrow'), a song which would become one of his signatures. He had been performing lead vocal on the song for some time in concerts and on radio broadcasts but this was the first time he had recorded a solo vocal. In his memoir, Stanley admits that he has never been happy with the result because he can hear how scared he was. Even though the way he 'worried' his lines was just how he'd learned as a child in church, he felt he 'came up short' due to another kind of worry taking over.

> After you get seasoned and you get used to things, you can put everything you've got in there. I was holding back. When I listen to that record now, I hear how scared I was more than anything. Maybe the fear I hear in my voice fit the story of the song. I do know that the first recording I did of 'Man of Constant Sorrow' helped save the song from dying out. The record on Columbia gave it a new life, and that song has followed me ever since, and I still sing it every show I do. (*MCS*, 148)

It is true that one can detect something of a waver on the long-held notes of the song that contrasts with the confident delivery of Carter on 'The Lonesome River', with Ralph's own harmony vocals on most songs, and with Ralph's lead on 'Pretty Polly' (another song he would continue to revisit throughout his career). Yet, for all the power of the vocal on 'Pretty

Polly', the song is less personal than 'Man of Constant Sorrow' and the latter contains a vulnerability that, along with its pleading, worried lyric, pins it to a confessional style somewhere in the region of contemporaneous blues and country songs such as Hank Williams's 'I'm So Lonesome I Could Cry' or 'I'll Never Get Out of this World Alive'. At the same time the wilder, 'older' singing style sees Stanley bending and dividing words in a manner that connects back to the eccentricities of old-time music.

Stanley's comments about saving 'Man of Constant Sorrow' can be affirmed by noting that both this song and 'Pretty Polly', which were released on two sides of a 78, would prove to be important songs in the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. Bob Dylan would include the former song on his first album and use the latter as the basis for 'The Ballad of Hollis Brown' on his third, while Judy Collins would use the female version of 'Constant Sorrow' as the title track of her debut album (*Maid of Constant Sorrow*, 1961) and perform a folk-rock version of 'Pretty Polly' on her popular *Who Knows Where the Time Goes* in 1968. 'Man of Constant Sorrow' also became the theme song of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* in that it was featured in a number of different versions, both vocal and instrumental, in the film and on its accompanying soundtrack. The three main protagonists, along with Tommy, are seen recording the song in a remote studio in order to earn some money; later, the record becomes a regional hit and the group, going by the 'old-time' name of The Soggy Bottom Boys, become local celebrities. To a certain extent life could be seen to be imitating art when the surprisingly successful soundtrack to *O Brother* helped to make Stanley a celebrity once more; while his most obvious contribution—and the one he would subsequently win a Grammy for—was his version of 'O Death', the Stanley Brothers song 'Angel Band' was also used in the film and it was the distinctive Stanley arrangement of 'Man of Constant Sorrow' that was used in the performance, albeit with Dan Tyminski's vocal rather than Stanley's.

Songs like 'Angel Band' and 'Man of Constant Sorrow' are among the most famous of the Stanley Brothers, but the group also produced a number of new compositions or arrangements that would become staples of the bluegrass genre, including Carter's compositions 'A Vision of Mother' and 'The Fields Have Turned Brown'. Carter's songwriting was characterised by themes of loss and regret, often articulated in songs about errant sons or departed parents. 'The Fields Have Turned Brown', a classic of the genre, describes a son who leaves home and spends 'many long years' travelling 'in sorrow'.

Despite his parents' entreaties for him to not go astray—emphasised in the Stanleys' rendition by the 'highest lonesomist' harmony trios used in the chorus—the son does not return until a letter reaches him to tell him that his parents are long dead and the fields have turned brown. Such images of earthly decay contrast with the emphasis in other songs about the brightness of the life hereafter. While homecomings on Earth are often occasions for sorrow, the 'home' that awaits in Heaven is presented as a reward for the 'short life of trouble' to which mortals are sentenced. The songs of the Stanleys, not unlike those of other singing brother groups (the Monroes, the Delmores, the Louvins, the Blue Sky Boys) and of southern country music more generally, alternate tales of sin (drink, adultery, murder) with songs of Christian faith. Often this is articulated in gospel music settings and here again the Stanleys were innovators in terms of the harmony vocals they developed. On Columbia recordings such as 'Gathering Flowers for the Master's Bouquet', there is a clear template for subsequent bluegrass groups. But like the flowers hymned in that song that last for only a short while on Earth, the Stanleys' success was to be transient:

> That's how it is when you're young and never had nothing and don't know any better. When some good things finally come your way, you think it'll always be that way. Kind of like a hog under an acorn tree. The hog never looks up to see where they're coming from or how many are left. When the acorns fall, he just grabs however many he can and gobbles 'em down. Well, we felt like that old hog, and it took us a while before we realized that trees run out of acorns. (*MCS*, 119)

The acorns would become thinner on the ground as the Stanleys worked their way through the 1950s, a decade that saw them and the broader country music world sidelined by the rise of rock 'n' roll and its accompanying youth culture. From 1953 to 1958 the brothers and their accompanists, the Clinch Mountain Boys, recorded for Mercury, producing a series of recordings that are considered by many to be their best. It was not a question of quality that would prevent them becoming more famous. To a certain extent the tradition they exemplified had been anachronistic long before they began performing in the 1940s and the group would always be considered traditionalists who innovated only as far as they could go without leaving the essential style of what was called, for good reason, 'old time music'. New instrumental and vocal techniques would only take the group so far as long as the instruments and voices were still associated with the ways of the past. The songs they recorded continued to speak, in Gary Reid's words, 'of lost loves, aging parents at home, a longing for a simple

life in the hills, and a love and respect for God—themes universal to the Stanleys and their rural audiences'.[13] Nicholas Dawidoff also writes of the always-already oldness of bluegrass:

> Just as the instruments are old-fashioned, the lyrical content of a bluegrass song is emphatically pre-Edison. These wistful songs of faith, family, love, loss, pain, and redemption are anchored in a distant rural past. ... Because bluegrass songs tend to be crowded with infidels who, in fact, do stray far from home, drown their lovers in rivers, and soak themselves in moonshine, bluegrass generally features high, keening vocal harmonies that singers summon by tamping down the backs of their throats.[14]

They were not the kind of songs, messages, instruments or voices that would survive the youth culture onslaught to come. In 1954 Bill Monroe played the Stanley Brothers a recording of his song 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' that had been recorded but not yet released by Elvis Presley. Sensing the new version was going to be a hit, Monroe urged the Stanleys to record it quickly and release their version first. They did so, mimicking Presley's style and sounding quite unlike either Monroe's Bluegrass Boys or the regular Stanley Brothers. Presley's version, of course, was the hit and a strong taste of what was to come. As Colin Escott notes, 'By the time the Stanleys parted from Mercury in 1958, bluegrass was on its way to being marginalized and, later, festivalized.'[15] In his memoir Stanley puts it bluntly: 'Elvis just about starved us out' (*MCS*, 184). The brothers continued, however, and from 1958 to 1965 recorded for the connected companies King and Starday. In response to label owner Nathan King's desire for a sound like that of the earlier Delmore Brothers, the group moved the guitar to a more prominent role in place of the mandolin and fiddle; this also helped to distinguish them from Monroe and other bluegrass acts. In Stanley's words, 'We just fought to survive the best we could. ... All we wanted to do was keep making music, and the way we made it was staying on the road. Only now we weren't so young and carefree. We were getting tired, feeling whipped. But we just kept on.' (*MCS*, 182)

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[13] Gary B. Reid, liner notes to Stanley Brothers, *The Stanley Brothers & The Clinch Mountain Boys: 1953-1958 & 1959* (CD: Bear Family BCD 15681 BH, 1993), 4.

[14] Dawidoff, *Country of Country*, 86.

[15] Colin Escott, liner notes to Stanley Brothers, *Angel Band: The Classic Mercury Recordings* (CD: Mercury/Polygram 314-528 191-2, 1995), np.

If rock 'n' roll is to be thought of as a revolution, it is worth remembering that revolutionary moments do not merely do away with the old. They also bring about a level of evaluation of what went before and this can lead to 'old ways' attaining a new aura. In the case of old-time music, this entailed a reevaluation that can partly be seen as a response to the rise of rock. This reevaluation came in the form of the American Folk Revival, which had been gathering pace throughout the 1950s and, by the start of the new decade, was encouraging a generation of young performers and audiences to turn to folk and roots music as an alternative to commercial pop. From the perspective of the Stanley Brothers, fighting to survive as they were, what was notable was the number of young people from far away who started to seek them out. This was a fairly common feature of the time, as it was discovered that many of the musicians who young folk fans had heard on old or reissued recordings were still alive, albeit hidden away. This sense of discovery is encapsulated by the folksinger Eric Von Schmidt, who, like many of his peers, was influenced by the music to be found on the *Anthology of American Folk Music* compiled by Harry Smith and released by Moses Asch's Folkways label in 1952:

> For this music sounded like it came right out of the ground. Songs like the clods of rich dark earth, fecund, timeless. Naively we thought these Old Time Singers all dead. We assumed our Heros [sic], who had recorded these songs mostly in the late twenties and early thirties, were old even then. Actually, many were young when the records were made, as we were to realize when they started showing up – fiddles, guitars, banjos in hand – at folk festivals in the sixties. Before that we had thought only of reviving the songs, not the singers.[16]

The Stanleys do not quite belong in the category of musicians mentioned by Von Schmidt and found on Smith's Anthology, which collected recordings from the late 1920s, a generation before the brothers began performing. Furthermore, the Stanleys had been continuously performing and recording up to the time of the folk revival, unlike many of the

[16] Eric Von Schmidt, liner note to booklet accompanying the reissue of *The Anthology of American Folk Music* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways SFW40090, 1997), 44. Von Schmidt's observation that the singers collected on the Anthology sounded 'old even then' connects to a number of observations made in this book, including the idea of a late voice attained early (due to the fact that many of the singers were young when recorded), the sound of lateness being associated with tradition, and the patina of age that accrues with old recordings, however well remastered.

Anthology artists who had given up professional music making before or during the Great Depression. Even so, for a band struggling to make a mark in the newly electrified world of rock 'n' roll, the Stanleys were as well placed as any to capitalise on any publicity the revival might create. As well as performing at musical festivals, they appeared on Pete Seeger's television show *Rainbow Quest* in the mid-1960s and toured Europe with other folk and old-time artists.

This brief renaissance for the group was not to last long, however. Carter Stanley, a heavy drinker, died in 1966, leaving his brother to continue alone. At first unsure whether he could make it as a solo artist, Ralph Stanley decided to continue with the job to which he was best suited and continued to perform and to recorded for King before moving to another independent label, Rebel. Nicholas Dawidoff suggests that, after Carter's death, Ralph 'allowed a tragic timbre to sink into his voice' and it became ever more a voice of grief. He also suggests that, in taking lead of the Clinch Mountain Boys, Ralph removed a number of Carter's innovations and moved the music back to an older-sounding format, leaving other musicians such as Monroe to appear as modernisers instead:

> Stanley went to great lengths to apply a layer of dust to his music. He sometimes played the banjo in the claw-hammer style his mother had taught him, he wrote songs notable for their lyrical austerity, and he stripped down the Clinch Mountain sound so that his voice rang clean and spare above the strings. Stanley made it seem that his was the kind of traditional string music that Bill Monroe transformed into bluegrass. And it was, except that Stanley had emphasized his connection to it in response to Monroe's discovery of bluegrass.[17]

Stanley's numerous post-Carter recordings with the Clinch Mountain Boys certainly sound like conservation projects to try and perfect and fix the classic repertoire that the group had been performing for decades. Many of the songs recorded for Rebel are 'newer' versions of those released on Columbia, Mercury, Starday and King; as with many jazz singers and instrumentalists who work with standards, the focus is on the process of making subtle changes to the material's fabric rather than cutting it into new patterns. In his memoir, Stanley is often critical of the progressive bluegrass (or 'newgrass') groups who emerged in

[17] Dawidoff, *Country of Country*, 97.

the late 1960s and 1970s and clearly sees what he has done with his group as a preservation project.

However, as a musician, Stanley has also been imaginative and curious to see what other musicians are up to and how he might work with them. This has led to numerous collaborations over the years, even before his greatest renaissance when he was rediscovered through the Coens' film. These collaborations—sometimes his own ideas, sometimes the result of invitations or suggestions from others—have included the albums *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1992), *Clinch Mountain Country* (1997) and *Clinch Mountain Sweethearts* (2001). *Clinch Mountain Country* is a particularly successful project, teaming Stanley with a range of contemporary figures from the worlds of rock, folk, country and bluegrass such as Dwight Yoakam, George Jones, Bob Dylan, Gillian Welch, Alison Krauss and Porter Wagoner. *Clinch Mountain Sweethearts* includes a version of 'Oh Death' on which Stanley duets with Welch and which is modelled on the call-and-response duet versions recorded by the Stanley Brothers in 1964 and the Clinch Mountain Boys in 1977. The dialectic of old and new can be found in Stanley's account of how he came to record 'O Death' the way he did for the *O Brother* soundtrack. He became involved with the project after hearing from T-Bone Burnett, the musical director for the film. Although a fan of the old Stanley Brothers sounds, Burnett 'didn't want to make copies of the old records' but 'something new that had the old-time sound'; Burnett understood that Stanley had 'had to go back to go forward' (*MCS*, 425):

> [Burnett] wanted to re-create the feel of the old-time music, same as when you make a piece of antique-style furniture using all the materials and tools and techniques from bygone days: It's new but it's done the old way. ... We talked about what songs would be right for my voice. T-Bone had already got some younger musicians like Alison Krauss and Gillian Welch to do some old country songs. ... But something was missing. The last piece of the puzzle. What T-Bone wanted was something in the old-time lonesome style. ... The song [he] wanted for [the big dramatic scene] was 'O Death,' and he thought I was the man to do it. He wanted me to play it solo and real backwoods. Just me and my banjo, the way Dock Boggs done it back in the twenties. ... I strapped on my banjo and played 'O Death' in the Dock Boggs style. I done two takes and it went over well. ... [But] I didn't think the song needed a banjo. It was getting in the way of the words and the meaning. I wanted to take that song back even

> farther than Dock took it. I wanted to give it the old Primitive Baptist treatment. ... I laid my banjo down and stood up to the microphone. I stuck my hands in my pockets and I sang him about three verses in the a cappella style from my church. It's where you worry out the lines so very word means something. Where you can stretch the melody out. When I don't have my banjo, I can focus more on my singing. I put my crooks and turns on the words. (*MCS*, 426-8)

The resulting recording not only played a central role in the 'big dramatic scene' already described; it also won Stanley a Grammy for Best Male Country Vocal Performance. At the award ceremony in February 2002, Stanley sang the song that had made him famous again, no longer hidden behind the screen but in the full glare of the world's media. Once again, Stanley describes it best:

> I reckon I'd come a long way since I was a scared kid leading a hymn at the Point Truth Baptist Church in Nickelsville, Virginia. I was an old man with an old man's voice, and I just sang it natural and it came out just right. Bob Dylan told me it was the highlight of his career when he sang with me on 'Lonesome River.' I'd have to say the highlight of my career was singing 'O Death' on national TV. (*MCS*, 435)

O Death

Earlier I described 'O Death' as a song that could have been older than the USA. But there is compelling evidence to suggest that this is not the case. Over the years there have been various attempts to account for the origin of the song, including suggestions of broadside ballads entitled 'Death and a Lady' or 'Death and the Lady' as sources, such songs having migrated to the USA from Britain. A study carried out in the 1960s by Susan Katherine Barks concluded that 'Death and a Lady' was the source of all the versions recorded in the USA in the twentieth century, including 'O Death', 'Conversation with Death', 'Death is Awful' and others. However, in an issue of the *Journal of Folklore Research* in 2004, considerable space was given over to detailed claims that the authorship of 'Conversation with Death', and therefore of much of 'O Death', should be attributed to Lloyd Chandler, a North Carolina preacher who had composed the song around 1915 following a life-changing vision. Chandler's words are printed in the journal alongside the two articles—one by Barbara Chandler, Lloyd's daughter-in-law, the other by folklorist Carl Lindahl—as a way of

acknowledging authorship and establishing copyright.[18] Lindahl's article contains a table detailing variations in a number of versions of the song. While its main purpose is to provide evidence for the claims being made for authorship, the table also provides a useful reference for anyone interested in tracing the history of the song. What remains unclear from Lindahl's account is how the song as performed by Dock Boggs, the Stanley Brothers, Nimrod Workman and others—the version on which Stanley's solo performance in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is based—came to be hybridised so that one of its most notable features was the refrain 'O Death, O Death / Won't you spare me over till another year'.

With the growth of digital media and the availability of such information via networks, most obviously the internet, the story becomes both more detailed and more confused. The community is wider than it was and we have to move beyond the community of song custodians that Lindahl was writing about to the recording community and the digital community. As well as having access to information about songs—whether on a Mudcat Cafe forum or a Smithsonian Folkways web archive—it has become easier in recent years to be able to get straight at the music itself via online music streaming sites. This has led to a privileging of audio recording over oral tradition, and to audio recordings that have some level of commercial release in that they are available to buy and to be included in online music services such as iTunes, Spotify or Last FM (although video sites such as YouTube are dominant music streaming services that offer possibilities for oral transmission of material in a partly 'traditional' manner). It also means that the archaeological work of uncovering a song's history becomes an invitation and a possibility for a different group of people, a new community. I am not suggesting that the access to information about multiple versions, or to the versions themselves, in itself creates a community of song scholars. Rather, it makes available the conditions of possibility for comparison, though one would still need to know of the different titles used for a song like 'O Death'. The chronology of discovery will not

[18] The three texts can all be found in the *Journal of Folklore Research* 41, no. 2 (2004). They are: Lloyd Chandler, 'Conversation with Death' (125-6); Barbara Chandler, 'Why I Believe That Lloyd Chandler Wrote "Conversation with Death," also Known as "O Death"' (127-32); Carl Lindahl, 'Thrills and Miracles: Legends of Lloyd Chandler' (133-71).

necessarily match the chronology of the release dates, although listeners might subsequently create a narrative based on those dates.[19]

If, following Lindahl, we take Chandler's version of the song as our original, we might wish to start with a recording of him singing, even though this is not the first available recording (that honour seems to go to Vernon Dalhart's 1928 disc). Chandler was recorded singing 'Conversation with Death' unaccompanied in 1965 by folklorist and musician John Cohen, who released this version a decade later on a stunning collection entitled *High Atmosphere: Ballads and Banjo Tunes from Virginia and North Carolina*. The album came with a cover emphasising age (as do many old-time collections on Rounder) and a strong sense of being out of time. When the collection was reissued on CD twenty years later, it came with a note from Cohen that emphasised its importance in archiving old-time music. The original record had by then gone out of print, a reminder that the music was always in danger of slipping out of earshot. The same realisation had driven the original desire to capture the music: 'This record celebrates some of the particular riches of [the Appalachian] tradition, and asks if it also celebrates their passing'. Chandler, sixty-nine at the time of the recording, had recently suffered a stroke and was 'weakened by heart trouble', yet 'sang ['Conversation with Death'] so strongly that I could hear it echo off the surrounding hills'. Cohen suggests that recording does not do justice to the 'range of volume' and 'sheer physical force' of Chandler's singing, yet it is still a powerful reading and a quite distinct example of late voice.[20] This version is indeed presented as a conversation, albeit voiced by one man, and its main purpose seems to be to convey the religious message that a sinner is as unable to bargain with God as any mortal is with Death. Cohen had also been partly responsible for a set of recordings released on Moses Asch's Folkways label in 1964 entitled *Old Love Songs and Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina*. The performances were by members of the Chandler and Wallin families. Burzilla Wallin, Lloyd Chandler's sister, was seventy years old at the time of the recording and performed a version of 'Conversation with Death' that is every bit as severe as her brother's. Singing unaccompanied, she emphasised the emotional weight of certain lines

[19] At the time of writing there were at least twenty versions of 'O Death'/'Oh Death' on Spotify and eight of 'Conversation with Death' and derivatives. A number of these overlap with Lindahl's list, though there are some that don't, suggesting the possibility of such platforms as an additional archive.

[20] All quotations taken from John Cohen's liner notes to *High Atmosphere: Ballads and Banjo Tunes from Virginia and North Carolina* (CD: Rounder CD 0028, 1995). Chandler's late (and only) recording can be found on this collection.

(mostly the second and fourth of each verse), furnishing the delivery with a forceful imperative.[21]

Whether or not Chandler was the source of versions of 'Conversation with Death' recorded earlier in the century, there are strong relationships between the Chandler/Wallin renditions and those of the Anglin Brothers, who recorded a version entitled 'Money Cannot Buy Your Soul' in the late 1930s, and Charlie Monroe's Boys, who recorded the song as 'Oh Death'. Neither the Anglins nor Monroe attain the kind of severity that can be found in Chandler or Wallin, achieving what now sound like rather lighthearted, breezy conversations with the song. The Anglins were a trio, unlike many of the more famous brother acts of the time (such as the Monroes, Dixons, Delmores and the Blue Sky Boys) and deployed trio harmonies over guitar and occasional bass. in 'Money Cannot Buy Your Soul', they sing three of Chandler's verses as verses and adapt a fourth to use as chorus after each verse: 'Oh Death, oh Death, how can it be / That I must come and go with thee / Oh Death, oh Death, how can it be / I'm unprepared (I'm unprepared) for eternity'. In the last line of the chorus, a high harmony vocal is added, echoing the words 'I'm unprepared', giving the song a gospel feel. Rhythmic guitar strumming accompanies the verses, with occasional picking on the higher guitar strings, while after each chorus there is some brief, effective blues picking on both high and bass strings in a manner that recalls the Delmore Brothers and which would also be adopted occasionally by the Stanley Brothers when they came to record for King/Starday. Chandler's song, then, undergoes a fairly radical transformation. Though the faster tempo, gospel harmony and guitar picking make it less severe, there is still a spookiness to the recording, partly due to the fact that this is another mostly discontinued style of singing, playing and recording. The themes of the Anglin Brothers, like those of the Monroes and Stanleys, were far from carefree, whatever their style might occasionally suggest; in a liner note to a 1970s reissue of the Anglins' music, Ivan Tribe noted that Jim Anglin, in later years, 'gained something of a reputation as a "grave-yard songwriter" since so many of his lyrics were so sad and mournful'.[22]

[21] Burzilla Wallin, 'Conversation with Death', *Old Love Songs & Ballads from the Big Laurel, North Carolina* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways FA2309, 2006).

[22] Ivan M. Tribe, liner note to *The Anglin Brothers* (LP: Old Homestead OHCS-122, 1979); the Anglins' 'Money Cannot Buy Your Soul' is included on this record.

When the Stanley Brothers recorded 'Oh Death' in 1964 for the Starday label, they also provided a surprisingly uptempo rendition. But their version, which seems to have been sourced from fellow Starday artist John Reedy, is a changed song, with fewer of the 'Chandler' verses and the addition of the new refrain: 'won't you spare me over till another year', which they or Reedy may have learned from black gospel or spiritual versions. The song begins with this refrain, sung as an interesting mixture of smooth gospel harmony and rougher old-time style singing and playing. The former style is evident on the initial words 'Oh death, oh death', sung in high, blended harmony register without instrumental backing (save an initial guitar strum to establish key), with the 'oh' and the 'death' stretched out on both occasions. The words 'won't you' act as a very brief bridge to a shift to regular (non-gospel) Stanley singing (Carter low, Ralph high), the voices immediately rougher as they sing 'spare me over till another year'. At 'spare' the band (guitar, banjo mandolin, bass) enter and the speed picks up, a sudden shift from sacred to secular music making. Ralph then takes the lead on the first line ('well, what is this that I can't see ...?), with Carter answering as 'Death' ('well, this is Death, none can excel...'), the whole band then falling silent again for the gospel refrain. The pattern continues, with Ralph calling and Carter responding (though not always as Death; the pattern follows the logic of the arrangement rather than the lyric). Other notable features include a brief, startling mandolin break by Earl Taylor and the use of 'won't you spare me over till another year' as a repeated one-line refrain at the close of the song, its final message. The range of textures and styles, combined with the occasionally jarring recording style (typical 1960s stereo techniques, with clear channel separation of voices and instruments) evoke mixed moods. While the performance sounds rather stilted and gimmicky when listened to after Stanley's more famous later version or Chandler's contemporaneous recording, it has a different effect when listened to in the context of the album on which it appeared, an all-gospel set entitled *Hymns of the Cross* and which features some of Carter's most moving vocals and brilliant musicianship from all involved.[23]

By this time Dock Boggs had recorded a version of the song with the same refrain used by the Stanleys but delivered in the austere style with which it is now associated. Where the Stanleys presented a stop-start dynamic, Boggs, accompanying himself on banjo, moves more

[23] The Stanley Brothers, 'Oh Death', on *Hymns of the Cross* (LP: King 918, 1964). For exhaustive coverage of this era of Stanley recordings, see and hear the four-disc set *The King Years: 1961-1965* (CD: King KG-09502, 2003).

smoothly between verse and refrain and stresses the poetic quality of the lines during many parts of the song. However, the rhythm of Boggs's banjo leads the singing in most of the verses, resulting in some lines being rushed and lost. Mike Seeger, who has recorded the song a number of times, follows Boggs in style. Seeger had recorded Boggs's version in 1963, at which point Seeger was working with John Cohen in the folk revival group New Lost City Ramblers. In 1997 the group released a reunion disc, their first recordings together for twenty years. *There Ain't No Way Out* included a recording of 'Oh Death' with Seeger on fiddle and bandmate Tracy Schwarz providing vocal and guitar. Schwarz provides a liner note that details his debt to the singing of Kentucky mountain musician Roscoe Holcomb (claiming he 'would never have been able to tackle this extremely moving piece without it') and the performance certainly captures the 'high lonesome sound' associated with Holcomb.[24]

Other notable renditions of 'O Death' include those by Vera Hall and Bessie Jones, who both provide versions from the African American tradition; Hall's version is called 'Awful Death' and uses the 'spare me over till another year' refrain, as does Jones's 'Oh Death' (recorded by Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins on their trip to the Georgia Sea Islands in 1959).[25] Jones can also be found making reference to the song in an interview conducted by Studs Terkel in 1969, where she describes it as 'the song of the dying sinner, a person that's dying without the Lord ... He's begging death to spare him over another year, begging death to have mercy. Also, it helps that person that is in sin to try to live up and do better ... It's a spiritual'.[26] Jones's 'O Death', along with other songs recorded by Lomax and Collins, was sampled by the band Tangle Eye in 2004 for their CD *Alan Lomax's Southern Journey Remixed*, although Jones was not credited (another of Jones's recordings was sampled by Moby for his successful 1998 single 'Honey'). In 2000, the same year as *O Brother, Where Thou?* was

[24] Tracy Schwarz, liner note to New Lost City Ramblers, *There Ain't No Way Out* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40098, 1997). Holcomb did not record 'Oh Death' as far as I can ascertain, though anyone familiar with his style can easily imagine him singing it; hear Roscoe Holcomb, *The High Lonesome Sound* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40104, 1998). Boggs's 1963 recording of 'Oh Death' is on Dock Boggs, *His Folkway Years 1963-1968* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways SF 40108, 1998).

[25] Hall's 'Awful Death' can be found on Dock Reed and Vera Hall, *Spirituals* (LP: Folkways 2038, 1953); Jones's 'O Death' has been compiled on a number of Folkways projects and more recently in Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers and Others, *Get In Union: Recordings by Alan Lomax 1959-1966* (CD: Tompkins Square TSQ 5074, 2014).

[26] Bessie Jones, quoted in Studs Terkel, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?: Reflections on Death and Dignity* (London: Granta, 2002), 263.

released, the film *Songcatcher*, about a collector of Appalachian music, included a scene in which three singers (including the seventy-five year-old West Virginian bluegrass singer Hazel Dickens) perform 'Conversation with Death'. The song was also included on the *Songcatcher* soundtrack album, creating an interesting potential conversation between two film-related albums that year.[27]

Stories could be woven around other remarkable versions of this song, such as those of Kentucky-born Nimrod Workman (recorded by Mike Seeger in 1982, when Workman was in his late nineties: an exceedingly late voice); Kentucky-born singer-songwriter Sarah Ogan Gunning (on her 1965 collection *Girl of Constant Sorrow*); American folk revivalist and song collector Mike Seeger (both solo and with his group the New Lost City Ramblers); English folk singer Peter Bellamy (an unaccompanied 'Conversation with Death' on his 1983 cassette *Fair Annie*); ethnomusicologist Tim Eriksen (a startling live version with fiddle); 1960s experimental rock group Kaleidoscope; improviser Eugene Chadbourne.[28] The versions of 'O Death' that seem to work the best, that both summon the spectre of death and enact impassioned pleading and deferral, are those that emphasise starkness of arrangement. For Stanley, this is achieved by unaccompanied singing. For Mike Seeger, following Dock Boggs, it is the tone of the banjo as much as the nasal singing style. Tim Eriksen uses a nasal tone and also adds reverb to the voice and the violin to give a sense of the song going out into a void. The applause at the end of Eriksen's recording, a reminder that this is a concert performance, adds to the effect of the silent void. Eriksen also prolongs the final word of each verse and runs this into the microtonal inflections of the refrain.[29] Through his particular style

[27] *Songcatcher*, dir, Maggie Greenwald (2000). The soundtrack CD is Vanguard 79586-2 (2001). Anne Dhu McLucas uses this performance as part of a discussion of Dickens's singing style in *The Musical Ear: Oral Tradition in the USA* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 11-16.

[28] At the time of writing, these versions and others could be found on the Spotify music streaming service. They could thus be placed into an online playlist and compared and contrasted. Such a process can lead to a strange flattening of the archive, where a field recording made for posterity or education ends up sitting alongside recordings made for commercial gain.

[29] For another fine example of Eriksen's use of late voice as style and content, hear 'Village Churchyard', an unaccompanied song drenched in lyrics of death and burial lyrics, the words stretched out to infinity by Eriksen's formidable breath control. This performance models the kind of excessive grief found in vernacular cultures elsewhere (for example, in fado, flamenco or rebetiko); listeners either give themselves over to it or long for resolution (much like mourning itself). Eriksen's 'O Death' can be witnessed on his *Northern Roots*

of singing, Eriksen makes evident, to an even greater extent than late Ralph Stanley, that singing can be an act of deferral, of putting something off at least until the end of the song (which, in this style of singing, can often be a long time). At least while one is given a chance to plead for one's life—while one is part of a conversation—the outcome is irrelevant. Stanley and Eriksen take this deferral to extreme lengths by taking apart the words themselves, stretching their phonemes into a seemingly eternal plea.

To hear the changing versions of 'O Death' is to hear how the representation of lateness has developed over a number of decades. Through the recorded archive we bear witness to different aesthetic choices, technologies and relationships between voice, lyric and instrumentation. If we think of a dialogical model of the musical 'work', as Richard Middleton does by applying the theories of Bakhtin to popular music, we can understand these multiple version to be conversations with each other.[30] If we think also of the work of Jacques Derrida, we might connect the deferral of death begged for in the song to the seemingly doomed search for the song's origins; each iteration brings with it another difference, another deferral of the true, theological meaning. Song, in this sense, outlasts all singers, so it is significant that the song appears as a series of traces and deferrals that make it impossible to fix to a single source. In the end, the song is the only thing that defers death, that lives on as *différance*.[31]

The presence of death in life is a notable feature of 'O Death', as it is of much American old-time, blues, and religious music. On occasion, as in 'O Death', the end is something to be feared (though we should note that, in Chandler's 'Conversation with Death', this fear is the result of not having got right with God; the extra time is only needed for the sinner to make amends in order to avoid eternity in Hell). In other songs, especially those which serve as hymns, the end of earthly life is welcomed as the beginning of the afterlife: in 'Why Should

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Live In Náměšť (CD: Indies Scope MAM451-2, 2009); 'Village Churchyard' can be found on *Tim Eriksen* (CD: Appleseed APR CD 1053, 2001).

[30] Richard Middleton, *Musical Belongings: Selected Essays* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 145-74.

[31] These suggestions are not proffered as an argument against the claim to authorship by Lloyd Chandler's family. Just as *différance* is just what there is, so authorial attribution also exists. If the song is Chandler's, there is no reason why his family shouldn't seek to have his name attached as author. For *différance*, see Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in his *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 1-28.

We Start and Fear to Die', a song recorded by Ralph Stanley, we hear that 'Death is a gateway to joy'. Stanley includes this performance on the religiously-themed *Shine On*, an album that contains a number of references to death, departure, going home, flying away and being carried off. One of the most compelling of his late performances can be found in his stark rendition of 'The Old Church Yard', which he delivers in the Primitive Baptist style.[32]

The theme of joining those who have gone before is one that Stanley also takes up at the beginning and end of his memoir; the book is framed and punctuated by the reflections on the graveyard and the gone. While to a great extent the presence of such imagery can be seen as the preoccupations of a man frankly and realistically facing up to the last stage of his (earthly) life, it is also important to note that the Stanley Brothers made something of a career of such preoccupations and many of Carter Stanley's songs dwelled on images of dying mothers and children. The old-time guitarist and singer Doc Watson, a contemporary of the Stanleys from neighbouring North Carolina, put it this way:

> From the time I can remember, I was vaguely aware of death. My first memories of music, in the form of singing, unaccompanied singing, were at the church. I was sitting on my mother's lap, I must have been about two, and they were singing 'The Lone Pilgrim' and 'There's a Foundation Filled with Blood.' 'The Lone Pilgrim' speaks of death. I can remember thinking about the fellow who went to the old boy's grave and stood there in contemplation of the man's life ... They didn't fully understand how to clarify the truths to young children. ... But death was certainly there, very present from the time I was a little boy.[33]

Arkansas-born folk singer Almeda Riddle, a generation older than Watson and Stanley, recalled that her community 'oftimes sang songs about death. "Come Angel Band and Around Me Stand" ... People lived within that song and they died by that. I remember in my childhood people asking me to sing it to them in their last hours'.[34] Stanley speaks in his

[32] Ralph Stanley, 'Why Should We Start and Fear to Die' and 'The Old Churchyard', on *Shine On*. CD. Rebel REB-CD-1810, 2005

[33] Doc Watson, quoted in Terkel, *Will the Circle*, 236.

[34] Almeda Riddle, quoted in Terkel, *Will the Circle*, 263. This account occurs in tandem with that of Bessie Jones quoted above. 'Angel Band' was another song associated with the Stanley Brothers and used in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou*?

memoir of how, as a child, the final lines of the folk song 'Barbara Allen' stuck with him more than the long, grisly story itself. These are the lines about the rose and the briar growing from the graves of the doomed lovers, who are only truly united in death, or at least in that life that comes from their death. The connection between the religious obsession with death and the life hereafter and that found in folk music is not coincidental, with both traditions feeding each other. As Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus note in the introduction to *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*, 'if the work collected here is any clue, it says that our nation—dedicated to the proposition that liberty is real—is obsessed with death'.[35]

Death was central to the music of rural performers such as Dock Boggs, as Marcus highlights:

> Dock Boggs made primitive-modernist music about death. Primitive because the music was put together out of junk you could find in anyone's yard, hand-me-down melodies, folk-lyric fragments, pieces of Child ballads, mail-order instruments, and the new women's blues records they were making in the northern cities in the early years of the twenties; modernist because the music was about the choices you made in a world a disinterested God had plainly left to its own devices, where you were thrown completely back on yourself, a world where only art or revolution, the symbolic remaking of the world, could take you out of yourself.[36]

Community and Politics

Narratives about Appalachia invariably refer to isolation. It was cultural isolation that preserved the old ways and the old songs and that projected the region onto the national imaginary as a place of backwardness. The late twentieth century narrative was invariably about the threat to that isolation as the region became connected to the world by roads, railways, radio and subsequent broadcast media. This is one of the main themes of *Voices*

[35] Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus, 'Introduction', *The Rose & the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*, edited by Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 1.

[36] Greil Marcus, liner notes to Dock Boggs, *Country Blues: Complete Early Recordings (1927-29)* (CD: Revenant 205, 1997), 5.

from the Mountains, the 1975 publication by Guy and Candie Carawan that collected pictures, testimonies and songs of Appalachian people. The aim of the collection was not primarily to look back at the lost past in the hope of restoring it, but rather to highlight the political, economic and social challenges faced by Appalachian people in the face of poverty brought about by industry and post-industry; those whose memories were recorded had seen the area destroyed by the introduction of strip mining and then again by the decline of the mining industry. Songs played an important role in the documentation of the changing landscape and industrial relations. Those of Sarah Ogan Gunning and Nimrod Workman feature in *Voices from the Mountain*, as they do in the acclaimed 1976 documentary *Harlan County U.S.A.* (1976).

Other songs, such as 'The L& N Don't Stop Here Anymore' detail lateness at the end of industry. This body of work is a reminder of the industrial side of the *O Brother* universe, a fact made more obvious by Sarah Ogan Gunning's 'I Am a Girl of Constant Sorrow', 'Down on the Picket Line' and 'Oh, Death' (the last also recorded by mining union activist Nimrod Workman).[37] 'Girl of Constant Sorrow' is obviously related to the song recorded by the Stanley Brothers and to the female equivalent (often 'Maid of Constant Sorrow') as sung by Judy Collins and Joan Baez, but it is distinct from all of them, bearing lyrics that detail the hardships of the coal miners of Appalachia. 'Down on the Picket Line' is related to the song performed in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as 'Down to the River to Pray' but it replaces the Baptist-themed religious experience of that song with a report on industrial action by the miners. As performed by Alison Krauss for the Coen Brothers film (and in her own concerts), 'Down to the River to Pray' is a sublimely beautiful sound object full of emotional resonance and aesthetic permanence. Gunning's song has a different emotional register, attained through political rhetoric rather than aesthetic beauty.[38] Both songs succeed in modelling community, Krauss's via the call and response of the solo voice and choir, Gunning's by the call to solidarity. Discussing the singing of Gunning and Workman, Wilfrid Mellers wrote of a 'monody of deprivation' in which 'the flatness, the rasping tone, the lack of vocal bloom

[37] These songs can be found on Sarah Ogan Gunning, *Girl of Constant Sorrow* (CD: Folk-Legacy CD-26, 2006).

[38] I am not meaning to say that these two features can't mix (as they do, for example, in the performances of many of history's more inspiring political speakers), but I don't feel they do in these particular performances of Gunning's, which, as Wilfrid Mellers argued, seem to emphasise a 'monody of deprivation' rather than 'vocal bloom'. See Wilfrid Mellers, *A Darker Shade of Pale: A Backdrop to Bob Dylan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 51.

become themselves a kind of lyricism, embracing more than the mere will to endure'. Workman's singing achieves, for Mellers, the 'incantory quality of epic lament'.[39] It may also be worth noting here the description by Simon Frith of the Stanley Brothers as modelling a 'collective voice of religious submission' that results in a kind of disembodiment in which the voice is robbed of individuality.[40] This notion of submission (which might equally be applied to Alison Krauss singing with a gospel choir on 'Down to the River to Pray') exists in interesting, but sympathetic, tension with political incantation

Where nostalgia for the pre-industrial era was voiced in the recollections, songs and images compiled in *Voices from the Mountain*, the political impetus meant that it was largely a critical one, what Svetlana Boym has termed a 'reflective' rather than 'restorative' nostalgia.[41] While such distinctions are useful as a way of critiquing the oversimplification of nostalgia as always already conservative, Boym's two modes can be said to be interdependent. Restorative nostalgias may well contain implicitly reflective, critical strands and reflective nostalgias may contain tropes of the restorative, implicit wishes not only for lost futures, but also for lost pasts.[42] Such narratives are often articulated via reference to lost things and ways of life. For example when Harriette Simpson Arnow—whose narrative is collected in the Carawans' book—is offering a critically nostalgic account of the devastation wrought by industry in eastern Kentucky, it is the detailing of lost things that provides an implicit desire for restoration:

> The hills are still there—that is most of them—though strip mining and super highways have taken their toll. Yet the life of the twenties and thirties that revolved about the communities in the shut away valleys is gone. One can walk for miles and miles through the upper reaches of the creek valleys and find only tumble-down houses, often the chimney alone, a rusted post office sign wind-lodged in a young

[39] Mellers, *Darker Shade of Pale*, 51-2.

[40] Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 196.

[41] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

[42] For more on this, see Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 112-38.

> pine tree, or a leaf-choked spring, around it scattered blocks of stone to remind the passerby that once a spring-house stood there…[43]

On the page facing this account, Mike Smathers's narrative offers a reflective perspective that desires 'to re-create a renewed and authentic form of what the mountains have always been':

> From the time that the first white settlers deliberately cut their ties with the coastal culture of colonial America to start a new life in this wilderness, the mountains have offered an alternative to mainstream America. This alternative is nearer to being absorbed today than it ever has been in the past. The task before us is to renew this alternative and endow it with the capabilities (including an adequate economic base) it will need to survive in late-twentieth-century America.[44]

But, as if conversing from her place on the opposite page, Harriette Simpson Arnow uses the evocation of lost details to suggest the impossibility of achieving such a task: 'The world I first saw in the summer of 1926 is gone; it cannot be excavated and re-created. And anyway, who can excavate a fiddle tune, the coolness of a cave now choked with the water of Lake Cumberland, or the creakings and sighing of an old log house?'[45] The Carawans' book provides numerous examples of the intangible and seemingly un-archivable as a way of marking lateness, none more evocative perhaps than one of the first entries, a narrative by Everette Tharp, born in 1899 in eastern Kentucky:

> I knew the whistle of the ground hog, the call of the crow, the songs of the birds, the cunning of the fox, and the squall of the bobcat. I knew the art and expertise of teaching an oxen [sic] to put his neck to the yoke and to kneel down low when his load was too heavy. These things that can't be taught in the classroom.[46]

Tharp refers to the region as 'a Garden of Eden', a romantic metaphor that finds a bitter echo in John Prine's song 'Paradise', also collected in *Voices from the Mountains*. Prine, a singer-

[43] Harriette Simpson Arnow, collected in Guy Carawan and Candie Carawan, *Voices from the Mountains* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 12.

[44] In Carawan and Carawan, *Voices*, 13.

[45] Simpson Arnow in Carawan and Carawan, *Voices*, 12.

[46] Everette Tharp, collected in In Carawan and Carawan, *Voices*, 9.

songwriter born in Chicago in 1946, made frequent childhood trips to the area of Muhlenberg County in Kentucky, where his family came from. His song 'Paradise' recalls these trips via reference to Paradise, a small town in Muhlenberg that no longer exists. Prine places the cause of the town's destruction and disappearance with the Peabody coal company, whose trains 'hauled it away' through years of mining. The song mixes childhood reminiscence with a critique of destructive industrial processes which get officially written down as 'the progress of man'. Musically, Prine's song evokes rural country music, mixing straightforward narrative verses that evoke old-time ballads with a chorus that juxtaposes a pleading question—'Daddy, won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County … where Paradise lay?'—with a sorrowful reply: 'Well I'm sorry my son, but you're too late in asking / Mr. Peabody's coal train has hauled it away'.[47] In the Carawans' book, the words and music of 'Paradise' are printed alongside pictures of the Peabody machinery used to strip and transport the coal ('the world's largest shovel', as memorialised in the song) and descriptions of the destruction of Paradise, KY, and the popularity of Prine's recording of the song amongst local coal miners and residents. The continued popularity of 'Paradise'—a song that Prine has maintained as a staple of his concerts, often performing it in duet with other artists—serves as a reminder of music's potential to bear witness to the past. The recording allows this to an even greater extent in that it has the potential to outlive the author and to inspire others to take up and renew the text. So too with the Carawans' book, which records the testimonies of a number of people born in the nineteenth century who bore witness to a different, now vanquished, world. To note this is to note once more the role of recording technologies (writing, photography, sound recording) in fixing and keeping the past.

Universal and Particular

[47] Prine's recording of 'Paradise can be found on *John Prine* (LP: Atlantic DS8296, 1972). Prine's vocal style generally by its use of what cr also connects to its subject matter and to rural music moreitic Roger Ebert referred to, at the time of Prine's first performances, as a 'ghost of a Kentucky accent' and his tendency, especially on this song, to affect the 'high lonesome' tone of classic bluegrass and old-time music (Ebert is quoted in vintage press materials included in John Prine, *The Singing Mailman Delivers*, CD: Oh Boy OBR-040, 2011). That Prine was only 23 at the time he first started performing 'Paradise' and other self-written songs was, as Ebert noted, remarkable. This early attainment of a late voice (whether by the voicing of 'late' lyrics, by the attachment of a singing/writing style to 'old' music formats, or a combination of these and other factors) is a theme which recurs throughout this book.

Ralph Stanley and Dock Boggs were near neighbours, though Stanley claims not to have known of Boggs or his work until the two met at the Newport Folk Festival in the 1960s. Songs such as 'O Death' and 'Pretty Polly' were in the air:

> Back in our little part of the world, singing was part of everyday living, one of the natural sounds all around us: the water running through the rocks on Big Spraddle Creek and the coon dogs barking down the hollow and the train whistle blowing as the freight cars hauled coal on the Clinchfield Railroad. Course, we didn't pay no mind to it. When you're so used to something, you don't go around making a fuss over it. (*MCS*, 2)

Such a passage clearly resonates with issues of community, geography and folklore. It is also telling in its mixture of the old and the new, and of nature and industry. Stanley seems keen to root his connection to music-making in this world, even as his career has seen him move beyond it and transfer those 'natural' sounds to what, for many, could be seen as the non-natural environment of the modern entertainment industry. It is slightly unfortunate, perhaps, that this invites an analogy between what the coal companies did with the natural resources of his homeland and what the recording industries did. The analogy, if pursued, would doubtless break down given the different kinds of 'natural resources' in question and the differences in their ultimate sustainability.[48] More pertinent for my purposes is what such a passage suggests about the universal and the particular and how we might relate that to voices, especially voices singing songs. To give a sense of what I mean, I want to briefly consider the way in which Dock Boggs has been singled out as a unique performer while also being seen as a representative of a community, whether that community is the actual homeland he shared with the Stanley Brothers or the more general, mythologised 'old, weird America' that Greil Marcus has written about.[49] Boggs is exemplary here partly because he is older than the Stanleys and therefore of the generation of Southerners who took part in the recording

[48] Patrick Huber's work on the creation of country music among millworkers in the heavily industrialised and urbanised Piedmont area is illuminating here in that it invites a comparison between the textile and music industries. As Huber observes, 'the commercial broadcasting and recording of hillbilly music between 1922 and 1942 marked the first time that the southern white working class played a central role in shaping American popular music and mass culture'. Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 22.

[49] Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997), 87-126.

'boom' of the 1920s; partly because he was included on the influential *Anthology of American Folk Music* in 1952 and subsequently rediscovered, 'revived' and reimagined to an extent that the Stanleys were not; partly, too, because he was more eccentric in his performances than Ralph Stanley, an aspect that raises interesting questions about Stanley's individuality.

In 2007, a collection of Dock Boggs' early recordings was selected by *The Guardian* as one of '1000 albums to hear before you die'. The brief accompanying text notes that 'individuality screams from his recordings, his minimal banjo playing and miserable narratives reaching beyond his Appalachian home to achieve a universal solemnity'.[50] This not untypical paean to Boggs highlights the interaction of the particular and the universal that often plays out in accounts of notable artists. Boggs is an individual and an eccentric, a performer to be singled out from among the many (including his community, which may 'explain' his background but not his genius); at the same time what he does has the possibility of speaking to—and meaning something to—anyone who can recognise 'solemnity'. Boggs can confidently take his place in another community, that of the artists who have produced the varied one thousand albums that every discerning music-lover should hear during the course of their life. Although it is only implied in the *Guardian* text, Boggs's reaching-out covers time as well as space: not just a dispatch from Appalachia, but from an Appalachia of the distant past. This is part of the territory described by Greil Marcus as 'the old, weird America' and it is no coincidence that Boggs features prominently in Marcus's essay of that name. Marcus also provides the liner notes for *The Complete Early Recordings*, where he writes of Boggs as an individual who was unusual among his fellow Appalachians. 'Country Blues', one of the most well-known songs on the collection, was 'as commonplace as any piece in the mountains. Boggs performed it as if it were the story of his own life, as if it were coming out of his mouth for the first time anywhere.'[51]

In approaching Boggs's voice, Marcus settles on the word 'yowl', describing it as 'a smaller, fluttering presence, a creature darting out of a mouth and into the words of a song like a tiny, magical bird; it draws attention not to the singer, as a real person, but away from him, so that

[50] '1000 Albums to Hear before You Die', *The Guardian* supplement (17 November, 2007), 11. The collection, cited earlier, is Boggs, *Country Blues*.

[51] Greil Marcus, liner notes to Boggs, *Country Blues*, 12.

he too becomes a presence, a spectre, his own haunt'.[52] Here and in his influential book *Invisible Republic* (also published under the title *The Old, Weird America*), Marcus makes of Boggs something exceptional, someone both extra-terrestrial (as much out of time as out of place) and prototypically American. Boggs can thus be treated with the same combination of 'star quality' and contextual detail that had shaped the rock journalism developed by Marcus and his peers from the 1960s onwards. In treating an old-time musician as a 'star', Marcus is arguably writing against the grain of folklorists who had covered the same styles and periods. Harold Courlander, for example, had written in the liner notes to the collection of spirituals by Vera Hall Ward and Dock Reed on which 'Awful Death' was included that 'There is no question of interpretation or performance. Their singing is direct, faithful and invocative'.[53] What Courlander suggests here is surely what many collectors have sought, a direct connection to the past without 'interpretation'. This is another way of thinking about the late voice: a voice that does not interpret but that delivers its listeners 'faithfully' and 'without performance' to the past. While there is no denying the impression of directness that Courlander is expressing, it could be argued that performance and interpretation are being deliberately overlooked in such an account. And while many of us may be tempted to do this, we might want to ask ourselves why we desire such unbroken continuum.

The positions taken by Marcus and Courlander would seem to be quite distant, the former emphasising the singularity of the performer and the latter placing performers as a representative part of a larger body. But Marcus's account, on closer inspection, can actually be seen to be veering between quite different positions, at certain points marking Boggs out for individuality—a biography, a unique style, a modernist understanding of his material—and at others making a myth of Boggs that, drawn irresistibly to the non-human, actually threatens to remove agency and individuality from him. This arguably removes the humanity from the singer, making of him a channel through which time flows, with Boggs's voice becoming the voice of death (something that I also intimated earlier could be said of Stanley's singing). As conduit, the singer is subject to something other than himself. Perhaps what is missing in such narratives (my own included) is the work necessary to make the communally known notable. Here I would recall the observations made in the preceding chapter about aesthetic experience by John Dewey: 'The act of producing that is directed by

[52] Marcus, liner notes to Boggs, *Country Blues*, 21.

[53] Harold Courlander, liner notes to Reed and Hall, *Spirituals*.

intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving has qualities that a spontaneous or uncontrolled activity does not have. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works'.[54] There is a relationship with the perceiver of a text, for the latter must be encouraged not only to recognise what is being communicated (which, for Dewey, is merely a taking note of the familiar) but to be encouraged to perceive something new in the encounter. Carl Lindahl makes a similar argument for the effectiveness of Lloyd Chandler's singing and preaching, although he refuses to describe this as an aesthetic process. What seems to be common to these position is what we might call the event of the encounter: what is made new about what one already (thought one) knew. As Lindahl suggests, this combination of strangeness and familiarity is what helps to make a particular text memorable.

In the preceding chapter, I also quoted the Scottish folk singer Dick Gaughan on the attachment of commitment, personal experience and individual expression to traditional songs. I want to return to Gaughan's comments, this time focussing on what he says about work:

> Learning the words is not the job, it is merely the beginning of the preparation to do the job. The people who wrote those songs wrote them from personal experience, they have been kept alive because they say something of eternal relevence [*sic*] to the universality of human experience and it is the job of the singer, more than anything else, to put in the work necessary to study, understand and translate that experience so as to communicate it to the listener.[55]

'The job' is, although Gaughan doesn't use the word, an act of interpretation; not a mere carrying out of banal duties but taking ownership of the work at hand, making it a part of oneself and how one operates in the world. The singer here is not a passive vessel through which melody, words and breath travel, but a *worker* manipulating the tools, technologies and techniques at one's disposal. Ralph Stanley, while he is keen to emphasise the conservative aspects of his singing style, seems to be sympathetic to the above points when, in his memoir,

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[54] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 2005), 50.

[55] Dick Gaughan on Sandy Denny's 'Banks of the Nile, official website of Dick Gaughan, http://www.dickgaughan.co.uk/chain/sandy-denny.html (accessed 30 August 2013).

he emphasises his individual contributions to the tradition. He also says that 'every singer needs to find the right songs to fit his voice' which fits with the idea of appropriate tools (*MCS*, 101).

Observing this work dynamic may help us to navigate a course between the occasional excesses of the mythographer and the occasional strategic essentialism of the tradition-focussed folklorist. For my part, I would simply want to rescue the humanity back from Marcus's account of Dock Boggs, while still agreeing on the individual articulation of collective experience. Indeed, I would argue that all the singers discussed in this chapter, and in the rest of the book, are simultaneously singular voices, artists and representatives of communities. In the same way that Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison use the terms 'movement intellectuals' and 'movement artists' to describe those public figures—singers, filmmakers, visual artists and broadcasters as much as the more traditionally understood writers and scholars—who play a fundamental role in social movements, so I would think of the singers discussed here as 'community intellectuals'.[56] I believe we can do so by taking the lead from Stanley himself, from letting him line out the song, as it were, so that we can respond. To say as much is not necessarily to return to an earlier conception of the Author as fount of all meaning. Rather, it is to be attuned to the ways in authorial self-construction works alongside other factors such as tradition, myth, interpretation and the everyday to create symbolic meaning for cultural products such as recorded songs. As with any discussion of commodity, ownership is important. I said at the outset of the chapter that the voice that sings 'O Death' in the dramatic lynching scene of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* belongs to Ralph Stanley. But I might equally say that, although the voice once belonged to him, it now belongs to us.

What I think is clear is that the voice of Ralph Stanley has come to many of us as both a 'real late voice' and a voice 'as old as time'. Stanley may have grown from a boy with a hundred-year-old voice to an eighty-year-old with a hundred-year-old voice but it is the latter who has become recognised 'universally' as an artist. He has done so because he presents to us a voice that is different and one that defers meaning, that opens up the space of ambiguity that all great art does. If we listen, for example, to what his voice actually does with the word 'death'

[56] Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 164.

in 'O Death', we may find it hard to count the number of syllables: possibly as many as ten, possibly many more given the microtonal inflections. Encountering a similar difficulty when describing Dock Boggs's voice, Greil Marcus draws a pattern in his text to try and capture his subject's wavering voice. At the start of this chapter I made my own strange transcription of what I heard (at one point, perhaps not at another) when I listened to Stanley. Neither of us get it and nor would any visual transcription; it has to be heard. And when I hear it, I hear a voice and a throat and a diaphragm working at these vowels; I hear the technology of vocal production in action. And at the same time I find myself thinking that this is just the style these men and women sing in. What can be heard as singular may just be style, with its own sets of rules, community standards and ideologies. As Ralph Stanley constantly reminds his readers, his singing comes from the church.[57] But we don't put many Old Regular or Primitive Baptists on the soundtracks of films or on the stage of the Grammy Awards.

Last Things and Lost Things

Given what has now been said about style and the labour of song, it is perhaps worth revisiting the idea of a late voice attained early in the case of Ralph Stanley. Among those texts which support this idea we might list Stanley's own account of the boy with the hundred-year-old voice, along with the many commentators over the years who have claimed to have heard something ancient in his singing. John Wright, for example, has claimed that 'Stanley's art, unlike that of, say, most modern country artists, is classic; it is no more dependent on the events of his life or the quirks of his personality than is the art of an opera singer.' The work is everything and there has been a continuum (also asserted by Stanley) that stretches from his earliest musical experiences to his latest. Age, as a matter of course, plays a part but it is a gradual evolution; Wright quotes Stanley as saying 'it took me a *long time* to reach the age of sixty'.[58] From a different perspective, we have other commentators

[57] For a good overview of the kind of lined-out singing style that Stanley bases much of his vocal work on, see Jeff Todd Titon's liner notes to—and hear the Old Regular Baptists of Defeated Creek Church, Linefork, Kentucky sing on—*Songs of the Old Regular Baptists: Lined-out Hymnody from Southeastern Kentucky* (CD: Smithsonian Folkways SFCD 40106, 1997.

[58] John Wright, *Traveling the High Way Home: Ralph Stanley and the World of Traditional Bluegrass Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), xii, 21. Wright also uses the example of song as labour when he writes that 'For over two decades Stanley's Works and Days have been as predictable and unchanging as those of a farmer' (xii). This is somewhat different to the emphasis I have placed on aesthetic labour and individuality,

who wish to emphasise an evolution of severity in that voice. Larry Ehrlich, for example writes:

> I have heard people say that Ralph's voice sounded old when he was young and that he has grown into his voice. I don't think so. I think Ralph's voice has always reflected a mysterious blend of the cerebral and the instinctual that reflected his life experience at the time. Since Carter's death Ralph's voice has changed. More and more it has echoed the pain of loss, emptiness, incompleteness. More and more it is the voice of grief.[59]

Stanley himself follows up on this, by writing 'A friend of mine says he hears more grief in my singing down through the years, and I think he's right. I mourn out my songs more than I did as a young man. Like anyone my age, I've had my share of sorrows, losing people closest to me, one by one' (*MCS*, 6). This would be a more conventional description of a late voice, one that carries extra layers of experience. I wonder whether both positions might be maintained, for the voicing of lateness can play itself out in various ways including lyrical content, vocal delivery and style and the unavoidable 'real' ageing of the voice. This is how I will approach other case studies in this book, a number of whom make more obvious authorial choices than Stanley does (by which I mean that his authorial choices are more subtle and specialist). With him, we have to take into account the oldness of the music (old in terms of origin, but also mature in theme); as Ehrlich notes, what drew him to the music of the Stanley Brothers was the way 'they sang of death—before and after … they told us of things we already knew, and they told it in ways thrilling, beguiling and comforting'.[60]

But we also need to recognise the role of technology in bringing Stanley's voice to us. Recording and playback technology have also changed that voice, reflecting the times it lived through in ways that go beyond personal experience. When Stanley says that more grief is audible in his singing now, it is also the case that more voice is audible to us now. As we

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which, in my presentation, make Stanley seem unpredictable. I wonder whether Wright and I are really so far apart, though; I'm sure his account is spot on in terms of how Stanley goes about his job; perhaps what I have been trying to get at is the different way this comes over to a perceiver of the sounds.

[59] Larry Ehrlich, liner notes to the Stanley Brothers, *An Evening Long Ago* (CD: Columbia/DMZ/Legacy CK 86747, 2004).

[60] Ehrlich, liner notes, *An Evening.*

have seen with the changing versions of 'O Death' and other songs during Stanley's career, more emphasis has been placed on the voice over the other instrumental textures. For a long time those who have recorded that voice, or presented it for public performance, have realised that it is the most unique quality of Ralph Stanley and have understandably sought to foreground it before all else. This is not to deny the changing qualities of Stanley's voice and singing style, the ways he has mastered the 'worrying out' and 'mourning out' of song lines; rather, it is to say that that process has been interwoven with the technological devices that both record the wonder of the voice and allow the conditions of possibility for it to develop.

When I speak of technology, however, I am not only referring to the objects used to record, filter, focus and sustain vocal performance. The voice itself should be considered as a technology, a word that has its roots in the Greek word for art and craft (*techne*) and which shares those roots with the word 'technique'. If one useful definition of 'technology' is the manipulation of raw materials towards a particular end, then the way in which the raw materials of the body are manipulated to create vocal art affirm the voice as a process of technology/technique. Stanley, as alive to this as any professional singer, is keen to underline that the increase in vocal grief has come not only from the experience of loss, but also from the gains that a lifetime's devotion to one's art can bring:

> So many funerals. So many friends and family gone. Through the years you never stop missing them. And I wish they could hear me now, because, strange as it is and as old as I am, I believe I'm a better singer now than when I made my first records in the 1940s. I can put more into it now, not as much holding back as I used to. I'm not afraid to let all the feeling out, everything I've lived for eighty-two years. And not only the experiences I've been through, but my experience as a singer. I've worked at it more the last few years. Had to, really, because I can't lean on the banjo anymore.
>
> Now, I won't lie to you. My voice ain't what it used to be. My tenor has thinned out some. It's got more cracks in it and can get mighty rough around the edges and I can't hit all the high notes anymore. But it ain't all tore down just yet, and I know how to use my voice better. I can put a lot more feeling in now. I started adding some crooks and turns and I can worry those lines like I never could before. (*MCS*, 7)

The anxiety about decrepitude that slips out here in the reference to being 'tore down' emerges also when Stanley describes a 'famous photographer' who visited him to take pictures in his 'natural setting'. The photos, he says, 'made me look freakish, I think, more like Mr. Death than Dr. Ralph. That's maybe the way she saw me, but I don't see myself that way.' (*MCS,* 13) He had a similar experience with a painter who portrayed him in his mountain landscape: 'The mountains look fine, but the banjo player don't look a bit like me. "Now, who in the world is that old fellow" I thought to myself.' (*MCS,* 13). Such reactions come up again and again in the discipline of critical gerontology, whether reported by real life respondents in ethnographic research or found in texts by literary scholars. Kathleen Woodward, writing about age in Proust's work, describes this as 'the mirror stage of old age', a misrecognition of one's self in later life that offers a bookend to the Lacanian mirror stage of infancy. For Stanley, this manifests in the experience of others projecting age, time or death onto him.

In considering the 'real old age' of Stanley, it is worth considering the observations made by Robert Cantwell of older bluegrass and country stars. In his book *Bluegrass Breakdown*, Cantwell describes a gathering of stars at a music festival, among them the sixty-five year-old Bill Monroe:

> For people who know bluegrass, Monroe is an august, even an awesome presence in whom age figures as a moral trait, not a physical affliction. It is not only that he has ascended to eminence as the founder of a music with respectable folk ancestors, an ardent and cohesive following, and an incipient classical form, or even that he carries himself with the natural patriarchal elegance of a man who expects, by experience, to be admired. It is that he is simply a great musician and that, like all great musicians and poets, he lives in closer communion with the tyrannies of imagination than people less understanding, less reckless, or less innocent than himself.[61]

This description relates to the foregoing discussion of individuality and community in that Monroe is presented as an exceptional figure, authenticated by talent, age and experience. But there is also the notable recourse to innocence, to a different kind of authenticity that we

[61] Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (New York: Da Capo, 1992), 6.

might think of as being true to one's artistic vision. It is the kind of innocence that Bob Dylan has described as the artist's need to become rather than to be (see chapter 4). But Cantwell is also keen to pay tribute to experience, noting that, at his current age, 'Monroe seems closer than he has been at any other period of his life to realizing the idea of himself which has grown in him, subject to innumerable influences, over the years'. Later, Cantwell compares the voice of another veteran country singer, Roy Acuff, to that of Monroe: 'His voice … had, even when he was a young man, the ineffable quality of *age*: a certain angularity of tone, a quaver hidden in the recesses of pitch, a bite-like articulation that is produced somehow by a certain set of the jaw and attitude of the throat.'[62]

These observations all seem to describe Ralph Stanley, as does Cantwell's description of musicians who continue to pursue their profession in a music business that doesn't have the time, resources or inclination to support them. Wright, too, presents his profile of Stanley and other bluegrass musicians and aficionados as a process of bearing witness to tradition in a world that wants to eradicate it. He introduces his 'witnesses' in a manner which recalls the moments and memories isolated in the Carawans' *Voices from the Mountains*, while also having the quality of one of Roland Barthes's late texts:

> A band bus crawling doggedly through the night with no illumination but its parking lights; a blind prematurely aged ex-miner tending a mountain garden on two wooden legs; a small boy running away from an inhuman job at a cotton mill; a puzzled mountaineer encountering pizza for the first time; a farm wife riding an old gray mare to church; a cross-cut sawmill in Virginia; a Kentucky truck mine; a flooding creek in North Carolina; ginseng; chinquapins; fried apple pie—these images are as much a part of the music and the world that produced it as an account of a song origin or a description of a recording studio.[63]

They are also a part of the world that, for the most part, has disappeared, lending an inevitably elegiac quality to Wright's (and my) usage of such a list. At the end of his brilliant memoir, Ralph Stanley too meditates on things that have disappeared from the world

[62] Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 15, 79.

[63] Wright, *Traveling the High Way Home*, xiv. In making a comparison to Barthes, I am anticipating my use of his concept of the 'biographeme' later in this book.

(including people like Bill Monroe): 'things you don't see anymore' or, in the starker final words of the text, 'things that ain't no more'. 'When I was a boy', he writes, in one last memory of the brother who led him into a music career in the first place, 'there was chinquapin bushes all around these parts … I remember Carter and me roaming the hillsides, picking chinquapins and gobbling handfuls down like they was going out of style. And don't you know, they did'. As for fruit, so for people: 'We take it for granted that we'll always be around somehow, and that the world we knew, at least our memories of it, will be around, too. And then one day, it's all gone, and the mountains bury that world forever'.[64]

[64] These quotations all come from the final two pages of Stanley's memoir (*MCS*, 451-2) but I have changed the order in which they appear in his text. On a final note, it was announced in the summer of 2013 that Ralph Stanley would embark on a year-long, 80-date 'farewell tour', to culminate in December 2014.