

Sounding the South: Mapping Musical and Intermedial Imaginaries of Regional Spaces

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For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.

– JACQUES ATTALI¹

Music is among the deepest means of human connection; it can also be a form of mind control.

– EMILY BINGHAM²

Introduction

Culturally, the American South has been portrayed as a quintessential American region across various forms of media.³ Despite living in a modern, digital era dominated by globalised standards, the “regionalist impulse,” as articulated by Timothy Mahoney and Wendy Katz in *Regionalism and the Humanities*, remains influential.⁴ According to Winfried Fluck, what he termed a “tragic nobility romance” with the South transcends American borders and is tied to a search for American ideals fuelling a desire, particularly in American Studies outside of the United States. As such, it serves as a counterbalance to what is often perceived as a superficial American materialism. Fluck contends that within European American Studies,

1 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 3.

2 Emily Bingham, *My Old Kentucky Home. The Astonishing Lie and Reckoning of an Iconic American Song*. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2022), xvii.

3 The South’s cultural and geographical distinctiveness has long been entrenched in the American consciousness, persisting over centuries, and reinforced internally and externally. Despite attempts to define it strictly by historical events or state borders, “the South” remains elusive in its boundaries, with various interpretations including differing sets of states. Scholars often refer to South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, and North Carolina; others also include Oklahoma and Kentucky. For a discussion of the South in terms of race, see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press 2008); for “the South” as a cultural landscape see Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011); for a historical and geographic overview, see J. William Harris, *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1500-1877* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

4 Timothy Mahoney and Wendy Katz, eds., *Regionalism and the Humanities* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), ix.

Southern culture is seen as an antidote to this materialism, emphasising its tragic existential dimensions.⁵ Adopting a dual perspective that considers the South from both local and international vantage points is crucial. Alongside Antje Kley and Heike Paul, I assert that this approach enables a deeper comprehension of social spaces and their diverse historical, political, and cultural lineages and contexts.⁶

In addition to literature, film, photography, and art, music has been instrumental in shaping the cultural imagination of the American South. It serves as a “powerful medium of social order,” as asserted by Tia DeNora.⁷ Music adds a crucial layer to how we perceive and emotionally engage with depictions of “the South.” In a different context, Jacques Attali elucidated that through the sense of hearing, we comprehend the world around us and navigate based on our knowledge of it.⁸ Attali critiques the conventional approach of attempting to understand the world through visual observation, arguing that this method misses the essence and is ultimately futile. According to Attali, the world is meant to be perceived through hearing rather than sight—it is not something to be read, but rather something to be listened to.⁹ Music possesses the remarkable ability to forge deep connections among individuals. However, it is important to recognise that music also wields the power to shape perceptions, potentially leading to its manipulation as a tool for what some might consider “mind control.”¹⁰ How can we effectively uncover, comprehend, and critically assess the contradictions and hypocrisies that underpin white power and the romanticised notions of “the South”? This exploration leads us to the crossroads of various disciplines, including American studies, music, and media studies. Through this interdisciplinary approach, we can develop novel transnational perspectives on the roles and impacts of American culture, both within its borders and beyond.

Significantly, scholars in American Studies and media studies have spearheaded various theoretical and methodological initiatives, illuminating the fluid nature of music in transcending geographical and linguistic

5 Winfried Fluck, “American Studies and the Romance with America: Approaching America through Its Ideals,” in *Romance with America? Essays on Culture, Literature, and American Studies*, ed. Laura Bieger and Johannes Voelz (Heidelberg: Winter, 2009), 90.

6 Antje Kley and Heike Paul, “Rural America: Introduction,” in *Rural America*, ed. Antje Kley and Heike Paul (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 2.

7 Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 163.

8 Attali, *Noise*, 3.

9 Attali, *Noise*, 3.

10 Emily Bingham, *My Old Kentucky Home. The Astonishing Lie and Reckoning of an Iconic American Song* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2022), xvii.

boundaries. This has given rise to new cultural contact zones. For example, David Garrett and John Street explore the intersection of music and politics as a means of protest, resistance, propaganda, subversion, and ideology in national and transnational contexts. Frank Mehring and Erik Redling focus on the interplay between music and other art forms such as literature, painting, photography, video, film, television, graphic novels, and performance cultures as a practice that needs to be analysed in a multidisciplinary and transnational fashion.¹¹ Wilfried Rausert and John Miller Jones argue that the medium of music travels easily across borders and language barriers and thereby creates new cultural contact zones. In his pioneering study on jazz, Reinhold Wagnleitner has emphasised how music can contribute to processes of self-Americanization in European cultural contexts.¹² Shifting our focus to the domain of popular music and musical theatre from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, my investigation commences with an exploration of sheet music before delving into the complexities of musical theatre. These elements serve as portals through which I contemplate the intermedial construction of “the South.”¹³

As W. J. T. Mitchell and Gabriele Rippl have asserted, singular media do not exist in isolation; rather, they are inherently mixed.¹⁴ For example, sheet music cover art and photographic liner notes blend images and text to contextualise the auditory experience. While I concur with Hebel’s assertion that the concept of interpictureoriality is well-suited to the concerns of American studies,¹⁵ enabling an exploration of contexts, functions, national

11 Frank Mehring and Erik Redling, “Introduction to Sound and Vision: Intermediality and American Music”, Special issue of *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 4 (2017): unpaginated, <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/12384>.

12 Reinhold Wagnleitner, “Jazz—The Classical Music of Globalization.” In *Travelling Sounds: Music, Migration, and Identity in the U.S. and Beyond*, ed. Wilfried Rausert and James Miller Jones (Berlin: LIT, 2008), 23–60.

13 Building on our previous discussions, Erik Redling and I have asserted in a different context that in “comparison to communication theorists, we, as transnational American Studies scholars, are particularly interested in the interplay between music and other art forms such as literature, painting, photography, video, film, television, graphic novels, and performance cultures”. Mehring and Redling, “Introduction to Sound and Vision”.

14 See W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL: Chicago UP, 2005), 211; and Gabriele Rippl, “Introduction”, in *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature – Image – Sound – Music*, ed. Gabriele Rippl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1–31.

15 An effective method for recognising patterns in image production, utilisation, (re)mediation, and distribution involves the exploration of music and interpictureorial clusters, a term introduced by the German American-studies scholar Udo Hebel. He emphasises the importance of considering the contextual and political aspects of images, the often-concealed motives behind image production, the inter-medial contexts of image dissemination, and the cultural dimensions associated with viewing images. To grasp what Hebel defines as the “implicit or explicit interplay between pictures”—especially in political photography and

narratives, as well as sociopolitical and cultural implications,¹⁶ it can also be applied to the realm of music. This approach facilitates a productive examination of my perspective on mapping musical and intermedial imaginaries of “the South” as a regional space. In order to critically analyse musical examples spanning from murder ballads to minstrel songs and folk operas, I will illuminate how folk music has played a pivotal role in shaping a distinct cultural representation of the South.¹⁷ It is crucial to recognise that the sonic portrayal of “the South” does not solely stem from composers rooted in a specific United States region. On the contrary, artists from outside the southern region and culture have effectively contributed to imaginative representations that have garnered recognition both nationally and internationally.

In the following, I will explore the emotive influence of music in shaping the cultural perception of “the South” within contexts that transcend the local and national framework in favour of transnational perspectives. If we align with John Street’s assertion that “music embodies political values and experiences and organises our response to society as political thought and action,”¹⁸ then it becomes imperative to include this medium in our examination of the imagined construction of “the South.” To exemplify, I will examine the contributions of two pivotal composers in the realms of popular music and musical theatre: Stephen Foster, often hailed as the “father

other visual media—it is crucial to have a clear understanding of the semiotic structure of interpictureorially charged images and combine them with musicology and sound studies.

Udo Hebel, “‘American’ Pictures and (Trans-)National Iconographies: Mapping Interpictureorial Clusters in American Studies”, *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015): 401.

16 Ibid., 414.

17 In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the south, rurality, and Southern migration were framed differently via music. For example, between the 1920s and WWII, the concept of old-time music was developed alongside race music to promote an allegedly authentic notion of southern farmers and workers in the South. See Manuel Bocquier, “Beyond the Rural South. Reconsidering Old-Time Radio Audiences in the 1930s”, in *Musikalische Regionen und Regionalismen in den USA. Musical Regions and Regionalisms in the USA*, Yearbook “Lied und Populäre Kultur. Song and Popular Culture” of the Center for Popular Culture and Music, Vol. 66, eds. Julius Greve and Knut Holtsträter (Münster and New York: Waxman, 2021), 33; Brian Ward and Patrick Huber, *A&R Pioneers: Architects of American Roots Music on Record* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018), 202; Richard A. Peterson. *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 29, and Robert M.W. Dixon and John Godrich, *Recording the Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), 42. It is through the act of performing and singing songs about spaces, places, and regions that are dear to us that we learn what we love and miss, as many songs about longing testify. The famous Lynyrd Skynyrd song “Sweet Home Alabama” is in the same tradition as Stephen Foster’s State minstrel songs such of Kentucky such as “My Old Kentucky Home,” James Bland’s State song of Virginia “Carry me back to old Virginny” or Kurt Weill’s musical theatre based on the ballad “Down in the Valley.”

18 John Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 1.

of American music,”¹⁹ and Kurt Weill, renowned as a transatlantic pioneer of American musical theatre. Both composers wielded significant influence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, shaping perspectives and imaginings of the South through their compositions.²⁰

Stephen Foster's Sonic South

Stephen Collins Foster (1826-64) stands as a pivotal figure in the realm of American popular music, having published over 200 songs during the 1840s to 1860s. Notable among his compositions are timeless tunes such as “Oh! Susanna,” “Old Folks at Home,” “Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair,” “Beautiful Dreamer,” and the widely acclaimed sheet song, “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night.” In a unique fashion, he combined consumer appeal and cultural idealism by evoking an ideal past which is confronted with an alienating present in the two popular genres of the mid-nineteenth century: minstrel songs and genteel parlour songs.²¹ Ken Emerson argues that there is a genealogy in current American popular music that goes back to the work of Stephen Foster.²² His sonic presence in films has continued to evoke a specific image of the South.²³ Raised on the western frontier near Pittsburgh as the son of German immigrants, Foster's early musical influences stemmed from the sentimental song tradition imported from England. Furthermore, he exhibited a diverse range of song styles reflective of mid-nineteenth-century America, drawing from ballads, Italian light opera, Irish and German songs, and minstrel songs.

Minstrel shows, the earliest form of American musical and theatrical entertainment, became a distinctive expression recognised by European audiences. These shows featured predominantly white performers who, through burnt cork, darkened their skin to parody African Americans via music, dance, dress, and dialect. Originating in the late 1820s with pioneers like George Washington Dixon and Thomas Dartmouth Rice, blackface minstrelsy gained immense popularity from the 1840s onward, emerging as the predominant genre of popular musical expression in the United

¹⁹ Bingham, *My Old Kentucky Home*, xvii.

²⁰ Both composers have never had a close-up experience with people of the South but produced media products that have hit an emotional note with audiences both within and outside the United States that have catapulted their works to stardom.

²¹ See e.g., Susan Key, “Sound and Sentimentality: Nostalgia in the Songs of Stephen Foster”, *American Music* 13, no. 2 (1995): 147.

²² Ken Emerson, “Stephen Foster and American Popular Culture”, *American Music* 30, no. 3 (2012): 398.

²³ See e.g., Kathryn Miller Haines, “Stephen Foster's Music in Motion Pictures and Television,” *American Music*, 30, no. 3 (2012): 373-88.

States. In alignment with the prevailing trends of his time, Stephen Foster also incorporated blackface minstrelsy into his musical repertoire.²⁴ Foster's most renowned and enduring composition was "Old Folks at Home," which saw extraordinary success, with approximately 100,000 copies of sheet music sold in 1851 alone, the year of its publication. This song seamlessly integrated into American oral traditions, captivating audiences across generations. Another notable bestseller was "My Old Kentucky Home," which garnered acclaim and was nominated as the state song of Kentucky in 1928. In the subsequent discussion, I begin by examining the song's lineage, exploring its lyrics and musical structure. Following this, I explore its impact on sheet music within the minstrel stage and broader popular culture, illuminating the role of what I call Foster's "sonic South" in shaping imaginings of "the South."

The Stephen Foster archive in Pittsburgh holds a rare sketch book by Foster in which he noted ideas for his songs. One of the songs was called "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night."²⁵ No doubt, Foster knew of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or Life among the Lowly*, which had come out in 1852. He later modified the original lyrics, creating a larger sonic screen for projecting the listener's hopes and emotions into "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night." Compared to the published version as "Foster's Plantation Melodies No. 20", the manuscript version (fig. 9.1) already hints at the blackface performance tradition of creating a stage dialect to mark the singer as an African American slave in a stereotypical fashion: "De time has come when de darkeys hab to part."²⁶ The song ends with clear references to the hard life of slaves on the cotton fields:

De head must bow and de back will hab to bend / Whereber de darkey may go / A few more days and de troubles all will end / In de field wha de cotton had grow / A few more days for to tote de weary load / No matter it soon will be light / A few more days for to totter on de road / Den poor uncle Tom good night."²⁷

24 For an overview, see Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music. From Minstrelsy to MP3* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26–28.

25 See Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music. University of Pittsburgh Library System.

26 "Sketchbook." Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music. University of Pittsburgh Library System. <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A20050812-foster-053>, accessed April 15, 2024.

27 "Sketchbook." Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music. University of Pittsburgh Library System. <https://digital.library.pitt.edu/islandora/object/pitt%3A20050812-foster-052>, accessed April 15, 2024.

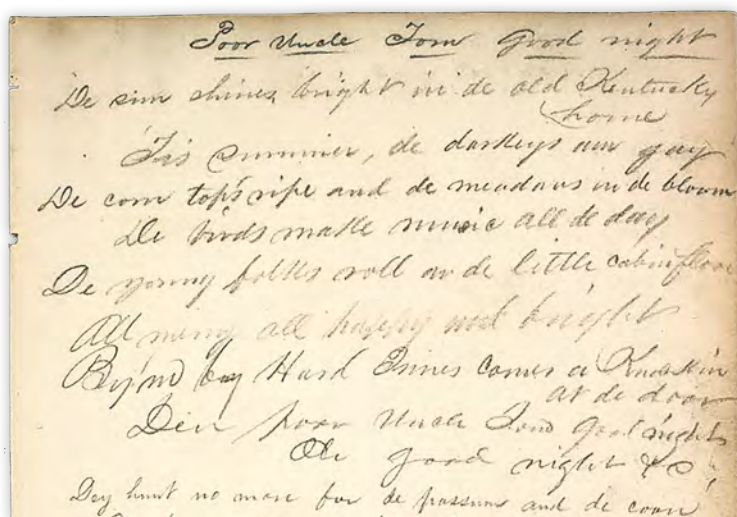


Fig. 9.1: First draft of "My Old Kentucky Home," then called "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night". Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music. University of Pittsburgh Library System.

2

MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME,
 GOOD-NIGHT!

Words and Music by

STEPHEN C. FOSTER.

VOCE AD VIO.

The sun shines bright in the
 old Kentucky home, 'Tis summer, the darkies are gay, The

Entered according to Act of Congress AD 1888 by Stephen C. Foster in that Clerk's Office of the District Court of the Southern District of New York.

1888

Fig. 9.2: Stephen Foster, words and music for "My Old Kentucky Home," 3.

The lyrics of “My Old Kentucky Home” are crafted to evoke a warm and positive perspective on the South, portraying the plantation as a place of happiness and belonging, symbolised by a former slave’s nostalgic reminiscence. Real-life hardships such as rape, assault, deprivation, and exploitation, commonly found in slave narratives, are notably omitted, fostering a romanticised portrayal.

Musically (fig. 9.2), the song follows a clear ABABAB structure, alternating between verses and choruses. The recurring hook “My Old Kentucky Home” is introduced early in the first verse and serves as a comforting refrain in the chorus, where the singer consoles the listener with the words “weep no more my angel,” culminating in the reassurance that the cherished home in Kentucky still exists to alleviate longing: “my old Kentucky home good night.”²⁸ This melodic pattern of repetition and variation, typical of Foster’s compositions, is both straightforward and easily comprehensible. The melody combines smooth, stepwise movements with dramatic leaps during the chorus, a characteristic feature of popular song forms since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These structural elements serve not only as templates for successful compositions but also as foundations for audience expectations and listening habits. Audiences anticipate and derive satisfaction from familiar patterns fulfilled by performers, creating room for variations such as tempo changes to enhance emotional intensity. However, as Starr and Watermann elucidate, these variations are meaningful only within the context of listeners’ learned expectations.²⁹

The (re)mediation of “My Old Kentucky Home” in American culture functions like a sonic “dark mirror” in the sense of Eric Lott. He suggests that American pop culture, tailored for white consumers, entices them to engage with black culture, inviting them to perceive themselves through a lens of racial contrast, yet simultaneously providing a false sense of security in their whiteness. The attractiveness of “blackness” is, in the words of Lott, “generated out of thousand media sources and ideological state apparatuses, the apparently fundamental precondition for the reproduction of national white selfhood if not dominance.”³⁰ Foster’s song shows how racial fantasy, structured through the mirroring of identification and appropri-

28 In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Tom reflects on the relatively benign plantation he left behind, where his family remained after he was sold “down river” to Simon Legree’s brutal plantation in Louisiana. His nostalgia is tied only to the better life he experienced as a slave in Kentucky, in contrast to the harsh conditions he now endures in Louisiana.

29 Starr and Watermann, *American Popular Music*, 27.

30 Eric Lott, *Black Mirror: The Cultural Contradictions of American Racism* (London and Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 6.

ation so visible in blackface performance, still thrives in American culture despite intervening decades of civil rights activism, multiculturalism, and the alleged post-racialism of the twenty-first century.³¹

One of the enduring visual interpretations of Foster's sonic portrayal of "the South" is captured in Eastman Johnson's 1859 painting, also entitled "Old Kentucky Home" (fig. 9.3). Despite lacking any direct connection to the American South and acquiring his understanding of plantation life through media, Johnson, trained in the Düsseldorf School of genre painting, demonstrated his artistic prowess. During his time in Germany, he played a role in the creation of Emmanuel Leutze's impressive "Washington Crossing the Delaware," learning the European rules for constructing a typical visual narrative for genre paintings.³² Having spent time in The Hague and a two-year stint in Düsseldorf between 1854 and 55 before returning to Washington, Johnson likely encountered Foster's popular song. Inspired by the emotions evoked in Foster's music and lyrics depicting a black person's yearning for life on a southern plantation, Johnson translated these sentiments into his art. A contemporary review from 1859 validated the authenticity of the scene, praising it as "[o]ne of the best pictures in respect to Art and the most popular, because presenting familiar aspects of life".³³ Clearly, Johnson used European traditions of genre paintings to evoke a specific feeling of authenticity. This feeling is not to be confused with reality. Rather, the painter is meeting the viewer's expectations of how regional authenticity is constructed in art. The reviewer further commended Johnson's depiction of African Americans and the portrayal of American architectural ruins, specifically the dilapidated house featuring vignettes of what was then termed "Negro life at the South." These vignettes included a banjo player, a group of "two dancing 'pickaninnies'," a mammy-like figure with a child, a young man courting a mulatto woman, and an upper-class white woman in an elaborate dress on the far-right corner being introduced into this romanticised scene of plantation life. The reviewer's mention of "familiarity" underscores how music and art can not only document and reflect cultural developments but also establish a palpable sense of reality.

Johnson masterfully translated the emotive power of music into a visual narrative, with the melancholic banjo player at the centre of the image and the primary focal point for the viewer. The reviewer astutely noted this

31 See Bingham, *My Old Kentucky Home*, 228.

32 Katharina und Gerhard Bott, eds., *ViceVersa. Deutsche Maler in Amerika, Amerikanische Maler in Deutschland, 1813-1913* (München: Hirmer, 1996), 352.

33 Ibid., 352.

arrangement, stating, “The melancholy banjo player arrests our attention first, and he is so completely absorbed, it is but natural to look for the effect of his music upon the parties who surround him. Immediately in front we see a knotty-limbed wench and one or two dancing ‘pickaninnies’”.³⁴ The review suggests that the image produces a mental image that allows the viewer to enjoy the scenery and a sense of joyful humanity. However, if high art aspires to bring forth “the most beautiful thoughts and emotions” the image fails. One can assume that the reason for this is the topic of African American socio-cultural lives rather than showing the world of white Western citizens. In 1867, another reviewer testified to the authenticity of life of African Americans in “the South,” but also adds a critical note that what is on display is the “unfortunate race”, describing it as an important memorial and art study of a specific time in American history.³⁵ In this sense, Foster’s song has been transformed from a sonic³⁶ into a visual monument. Its success with a strong affective impulse on the medium of music and art will evolve in the twentieth century into an intermedial phenomenon.



Fig. 9.3: Eastman Johnson, *Old Kentucky Home*. 92x113 cm, 1859. New York Historical Society.

34 Ibidem.

35 Henry Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists. American Artist Life* (New York: Putnam, 1867), 470. Reprinted in Katharina und Gerhard Bott, *ViceVersa*, 354.

36 Emily Bingham used the expression “sonic monument” in her work on *My Old Kentucky Home*, 201.

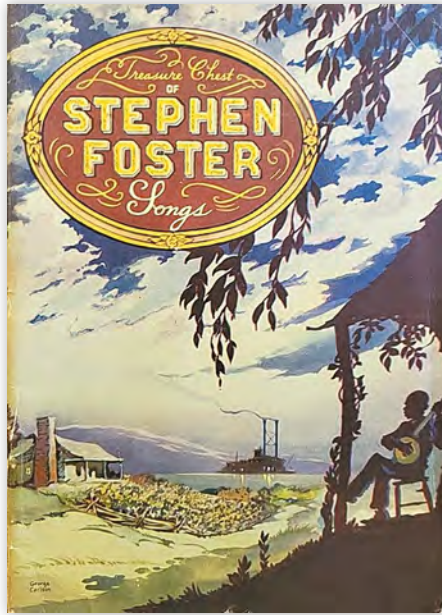


Fig. 9.4: Cover illustration for *The Treasure Chest of Stephen Foster Songs*, 1940.

Not surprisingly, when moving pictures during the silent era visualised the scenes and life in the American South, Foster's songs were often used by live piano players to create a specific emotional response. For example, the collection of song excerpts for the musical accompaniment at movie houses entitled *Motion Picture Moods* from 1924 suggested the following songs to the pianist: "Old Folks at Home" and "My Old Kentucky Home."³⁷ The song collection *Treasure Chest of Stephen Foster Songs* from 1940 leaves no doubt about the sentimentality and nostalgia that the listener is supposed to feel when hearing Foster's songs about gentle slaves who sing a heartfelt melody about an idealised Southern life. The cover (fig. 9.4) features a silhouette caricature of an African American banjo player on a porch, with the dark hues of the cabin and the player carrying layers of meaning, particularly in relation to Foster's references to cheerful "darkies" in "My Old Kentucky Home." The setting sun casts a romantic glow on the distant plantation owner's home, symbolising an unattainable ideal for both the foreground player and the viewer of the cover. However, the music itself serves as an emotional con-

37 Erno Rapée, *Motion Picture Moods* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1924), 8. Other suggestions involved the French composer and conductor Irénée Bergé, the minstrel song composer Daniel Decatur Emmett, and American composer and conductor Arthur Farwell. All of the suggestions were either plantation songs such as "Dixie-Land" or "Plantation Melody" or, in the case of Bergé, "Southwestern Idyl."

duit, drawing the audience closer to the idealised depiction of plantation life. Consequently, the song found widespread use in American popular entertainment, appearing in various productions such as the 1927 film *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, scenes featuring tap-dancing Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in *The Little Colonel*, *Gone with the Wind*, the Looney Tunes short *Southern Fried Rabbit*, and numerous other productions.³⁸

"My Old Kentucky Home" ultimately received the honour of becoming the State Song of Kentucky in 1928. It is played regularly at the famous Kentucky Derby every year since 1930, where the audience is encouraged to sing along. Bingham criticised that this performance at a public space is "led and controlled by white Americans" as an "act of white supremacy".³⁹ This harsh criticism is based on the genealogy of the song as a minstrel song and its cultural imagination of a white composer from Pittsburgh who is not so much evoking his personal memory but constructing an imagined memory to offer a pleasing fantasy of "the South" for a white audience in minstrel theatre shows. The song, as it is played today, has different lyrics that whitewash the references to plantations, slavery, and submissive gay African American slaves or freed slaves to celebrate a continuous Southern image that can be marketed as a patriotic success story. Instead of the "darbies", the "people are gay" in summer, as the second verse explains. Furthermore, the racially charged elements of a fictional "dialect" once prevalent in minstrel performances have been discarded. Today, audiences can imbue positive sentiments into the lyrical framework that navigates between the personal and collective ("my", "we"), the familiar and exotic ("home," "old Kentucky"), and the nostalgic and reassuring elements ("old", "good-night"). Additionally, the universal appeal inherent in the act of singing ("we will sing one song") intertwines seamlessly with the mix of a melancholic yet easy-to-learn melody, fostering a universalist longing for a home within one's memories. This convergence transforms the song into an ideal consumer commodity capable of transcending national and geographical boundaries.⁴⁰

38 Emily Bingham has traced the song's popularity in different media in *My Old Kentucky Home*, see particularly chapter five for references to films in the first half of the twentieth century.

39 Bingham, *My Old Kentucky Home*, 338.

40 This development is in line with current tendencies in museums to construct a specific unified image of the South. For example, the National Blues Museum in St. Louis does not shy away from introducing the audience to the harsh reality of slavery, chain gangs, and racial segregation in the South. The panels on "backwater blues" trace the roots of the blues in the African American experience of being poor, disenfranchised, and struggling for freedom. The blues, the panel claims, "sheds light on America's racial strife." This approach is different from the museum narratives in the Delta Blues Museum and the B.B. King Museum in Mississippi.

Kurt Weill's Remediation of "Down in the Valley" for Theatre and Radio

I now turn to another musical genre in which "the South" played a crucial role: musical theatre. In this field, the German-American composer Kurt Weill represents one of the most influential and controversial composers in musical theatre with a transatlantic background.⁴¹ He has been considered a "representative figure reifying key issues" regarding opposites such as "modernism versus counter- or postmodernism, elitism versus populism, autonomy versus accessibility, originality versus comprehensibility, or atonality versus tonality".⁴² With a grain of chauvinism, European critics such as Theodor W. Adorno held that Weill created great art while composing for the opera stage in Germany and sold out to commercialism by composing for Broadway.⁴³ The complicated reception history and the creative forces behind the folk opera *Down in the Valley* open a fascinating perspective on the cultural imaginary of rural America, transatlantic transfer, and intercultural confrontations. *Down in the Valley* can enhance our understanding regarding the cultural imaginary of "the South" through folk music by turning to Weill as an intercultural mediator in the sense of Stephen Greenblatt.⁴⁴ I offer an analysis of *Down in the Valley* (1945-48) by tracing forms

Like other blues museums, the multimedia displays in the National Blues Museum create an image of the South as a unified space connecting land, music, and people. See Wilfried Raussert, "Culture Heritage and Politics of Reconciliation: Reinventing the Blues in the Narratives of The Delta Blues Museum and the B.B. King Museum", *Forum for Inter-American research (FIAR)* 13, no. 1 (2020): 27.

41 Richard Taruskin labelled Weill the 20th century's "most problematical major musician". See Richard Taruskin, "To the Editor," *Kurt Weill Newsletter* 6, no. 10 (1988): 3.

42 Kim Kowalke, "The Two Weills' and the Music of *Street Scene*," in *Street Scene: A Sourcebook*, ed. Joanna Lee, Edward Harsh, and Kim Kowalke (New York, NY: Kurt Weill Foundation, 1994), 66.

43 For Adorno, Weill had died as a composer in America, long before his actual death in 1950. The critical construct of the "two Weills" has been summarised and institutionalised by David Drew in his entry on "Kurt Weill" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Recent studies have jettisoned the idea of a "split personality." My critical approach to Kurt Weill is positioned in this context of revisionist efforts to emphasise creative continuity while acknowledging the different socio-cultural and political environment on both sides of the Atlantic. In the case of Kurt Weill, this redirection has already contributed to a broader understanding of the gaps and continuities in his work on both sides of the Atlantic. A landmark publication in this process is Hermann Danuser's and Hermann Gottschewski's edited volume *Amerikanismus—Americanism—Weill: Die Suche nach kultureller Identität in der Moderne* (Schliengen: Argus, 2003).

44 I share Greenblatt's concern that established analytical tools are geared towards an understanding of cultures as stable, fixed, or "at least have assumed that in their original or natural state, before they are disrupted or contaminated, cultures are properly rooted in the rich soil of blood and land and that they are virtually motionless." Greenblatt, Stephen with Ines G. Županow, Reinhard Meyer-Kalkus, Heike Paul, Pál Nyíri, and Friederike Pannewick, *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 3.

of remediation in the sense of J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin⁴⁵ of the American ballad “Down in the Valley” to the theatrical stage and marketing via scores and radio. In *Down in the Valley*, the remediation undergoes different developmental stages from transcriptions of folk lyrics, folk melodies, audio recordings, and visual information to new complex scoring techniques for musical theatre, set designs, and marketing strategies. The interplay of different media in different cultural contexts lends itself to a better understanding of the process of cultural transfer and mobility in *Down in the Valley*.⁴⁶

The song “Down in the Valley” draws from a ballad set in Birmingham prison, which inherently involves themes of crime. Murder ballads, a genre that originated and gained popularity in the American South, offer a compelling avenue to explore how music can reinterpret, convey, and reflect upon experiences of death, crime, and murder across different cultural and musical landscapes. However, there remains a gap in interdisciplinary studies regarding the use and significance of murder ballads in popular music, presenting an opportunity to deepen our understanding of human nature. Murder ballads, broadly speaking, are narratives—whether based on real events or fictional—that vividly recount acts of crime. They often portray the perspective of the perpetrator, providing chilling details of the deed in a poetic manner. Originating in seventeenth-century Europe, murder ballads have become ingrained in American folk traditions, notably within hillbilly, Appalachian, and blues music. Cultural anthropologists John and Alan Lomax played a pivotal role in documenting and mapping these ballads, ensuring their preservation for future generations. Many scholars argue that the genre is closely tied to femicide.⁴⁷ My analysis of murder ballads in American music, however, complicates this approach. I argue that the murder ballads with their inherently “intermedial powers”⁴⁸ penetrate both public and political

45 In general, media help to transfer experience from one person to another. Bolter and Grusin argue that the goal of new media is to “get beyond mediation”. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1999), 4. The study of the arrangement of texts, graphics, sounds, and moving images traces a development that sees the creation of immediacy superseded by the creation of hypermediacy. *Ibid.*, 11. In the process of remediation from painting to photography to film, television, and the digital arena we can observe that “all media are at one level a ‘play of signs’”. *Ibid.*, 19.

46 The following part is a modified version of my article “*Down in the Valley*: German Remediations of Rural America in the Musical Theatre of Kurt Weill”, in *Rural America*, ed. Antje Kley and Heike Paul. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2015), 373–400.

47 See Diane Russell and Roberta Harmes, eds., *Femicide in Global Perspective* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2001), xi

48 See Mehring and Redling, “Introduction”.

spheres,⁴⁹ offering creative and self-reflexive responses to social realities.⁵⁰ In the US, murder ballads developed from an inherently oral tradition of the hinterland into an integral part of twentieth-century music. It is closely tied to the recording industry, particularly in the realm of folk and early blues.⁵¹

Kurt Weill teamed up with the lyricist and playwright Arnold Sundgaard (1909-2006) to build a story around the folk ballad “Down in the Valley” for a theatre and radio production. The story builds on the themes of love, crime, and imprisonment suggested in the ballad by lines such as “Know I love you, know I love you / God and his angels know I love you” and “Go write me a letter, send it by mail; / Bake it and stamp it to the Birmingham jail.”⁵² The ballad “Down in the Valley” has been transcribed in different forms. The version that Weill and Sundgaard chose for the libretto differs slightly from the version which Carl Sandberg printed in his landmark folk collection *The American Songbag* (1927).⁵³ Weill might have preferred the explicit reference to the Birmingham jail since it lends itself particularly well to extensive dramatisation:

Down in the valley, valley so low / Hang your head over, hear the train blow / Hear the train blow, love, hear the train blow; / Late in the evening, hear the train blow. / Build me a castle, build it so high, / So I can see my true love go by, / See her go by, love, see her go by, / So I can see my true love go by. / Write me a letter, send it by mail; / Bake it and stamp it to the Birmingham jail.⁵⁴

49 See Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics, and Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 11.

50 See Olaf Kaltmeier and Wilfried Raussert, eds., “Introduction. Sonic Politics: Music and the Narration of the Social in the Americas from the 1960s to the Present”, in *Sonic Politics: Music and Social Movements in the Americas* (London: Routledge, 2019), 7.

51 From there, it evolved into the protest culture of the 1950s, particularly the genre of rock. Today, we find murder ballads in all musical genres ranging from pop to rap. Therefore, the sonic politics of murder ballads deserve more attention within and beyond the realm of music history. See Frank Mehring, “Murder on Record: Ballads about Love, Death, and the Deep South,” in *Musikalische Regionen und Regionalismen in den USA / Musical Regions and Regionalisms in the USA. Yearbook “Lied und Populäre Kultur. Song and Popular Culture” of the Center for Popular Culture and Music*, Vol. 66, ed. Julius Greve and Knut Holtsträter (Münster and New York: Waxmann, 2021), 108.

52 See G. L. Kittredge, “Ballads and Songs.”

53 Sandberg suggested in the preface that the material collected in his *American Songbag* represents the product of thousands of American interpreters arguing that they “changed old songs, they carried songs from place to place, they resurrected and kept alive dying and forgotten songs”. Carl Sandberg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927) viii. Sundgaard and Weill might have taken this open approach as an invitation to alter the material slightly to make for a more dramatic impact of the folk opera.

54 Sandberg, *The American Songbag*, 148.

The folk opera opens with a chorus which introduces the audience to the plot, explaining that the protagonist Brack Weaver “died for the love of sweet Jennie Parsons / He died for the slaying of Thomas Bouché.”

Through a series of flashbacks, the audience is then introduced to the story. The first scene takes place in Birmingham jail the night before the execution. Brack hears a mail train go by and manages to escape so that he can see Jennie one more time before he dies. They find each other, embrace, and confess their love. Brack learns that her father had forbidden Jennie to send any letter to him to jail. Another flashback takes Brack and Jennie to their first romantic encounter. When Brack brings her home, his rival Thomas Bouché sits on the porch with Jennie’s father. Jennie refuses to be taken to a country-dance by the much older Bouché. When the three meet at a dance, Brack and Bouché get into a fight in which the latter is killed. The flashback ends with the imprisonment of Brack while Jennie says she will always love him. The opera ends with the chorus reprising the last lines from the “Down in the Valley” ballad. To a certain degree, Weill takes the American “songbag” and reworks various songs into a rhapsodic folk opera. In contrast to most of his other works, *Down in the Valley* was designed to activate new groups of actors/singers: Weill intended the folk opera to be performed not so much on the professional stage. Rather, he had composed the piece for school orchestras and lay performers.⁵⁵

Cecil Smith reviewed the Lemonade Opera production in 1949 pointing to the alleged loss of complexity that accompanies Weill’s musical development from the German to the American cultural scene: “If *Down in the Valley* represents the ultimate Americanisation of Mr. Weill, the news is bad, for he has thrown away his fine-grained sandpaper and reached for a trowel”⁵⁶. This transatlantic dichotomy continues to be evoked in scholarship and the public. The marketing campaign represents an important element of *Down in the Valley* that helps us to better understand the approach to folk in music and the visual arts between Roosevelt’s New Deal and the propaganda of the World War II era. As a matter of fact, the visual dimension of marketing *Down in the Valley* by RCA Victor recording and the Schirmer score sheet might have (unwillingly) contributed to and misguided the critical recep-

55 After its premiere at the University of Indiana in Bloomington on July 15, 1948, the opera received 80 performances in schools and universities all over the United States within only one year. In the first nine years, *Down in the Valley* saw a remarkable 6000 performances. Shortly after the premiere, the opera was broadcast on radio; in 1950, *Down in the Valley* was televised. Critics, however, were less impressed.

56 Cecil Smith quoted in Stephen Hinton, *Weill’s Musical Theater: Stages of Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 395.

tion of musicologists to qualify *Down in the Valley* as an example of almost unbearable naiveté (see for example John Rockwell's article in *The New York Times* from 1984).⁵⁷ Both publications of *Down in the Valley* feature a nostalgic work of American folklore showing a picturesque rural scene with rivers, valleys, villages, and a farmer ploughing the field with two horses. This is a nostalgic pre-industrialisation fantasy of a two-dimensional world.

The visual framing of *Down in the Valley* for the marketing of the score by the Schirmer publishing company needs to be seen in the political context of the 1940s. The cover painting of *Down in the Valley*'s score (fig. 9.5) is by Anna Mary Robertson Moses, better known as "Grandma Moses." In his account on American primitive painters of the twentieth century, editor Sidney Janis identifies her as "Mother Moses," implying she became a maternal figure for all Americans, evoking the essence of rural America central to the American dream. Following World War II, decorators and businessmen capitalised on Grandma Moses's artwork to offer prepackaged versions of

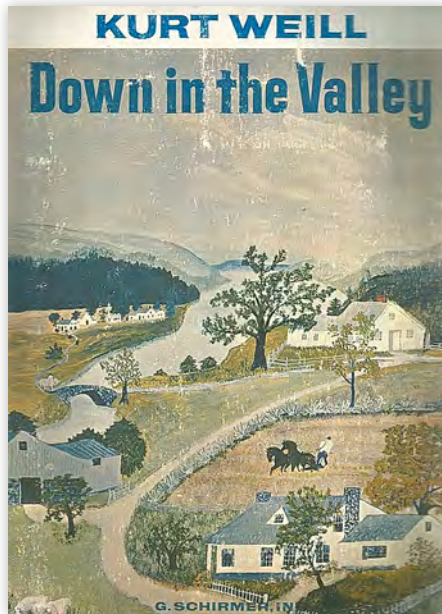


Fig. 9.5: Cover of Score for *Down in the Valley* (Schirmer, 1948) and RCA Victor record (1950).

⁵⁷ John Rockwell, "Weill's Opera *Down in the Valley*," *The New York Times* April 16, 1984, Section C, 20.

“Americana” for suburban American homes.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, this commercialisation may have inadvertently cast a negative light on Weill’s *Down in the Valley*, depicting it as a simplistic commodity devoid of artistic merit.⁵⁹ At the time the folk opera was conceived, the cultural imaginary associated with rural America and “the South” could be exploited for both patriotic purposes as well as Weill’s personal ambition to create a truly American form of musical expression. As an immigrant who had arrived about ten years before on the shores of New York, he had to rely on material which he believed could express the ideal of “the South.” From his perspective, he wrote in his letter to businessman Charles McArthur in 1946, the American folk song “overshadows the folk song of all other countries [...] not only in quantity but also in the quality of its texture, in the depth of its emotion, in the exuberance of its humor, in the beauty of its melody, and in the strength of its rhythm.”⁶⁰

Much like his admiration for American jazz, modern media tools like radio, gramophones, photographs, newspapers, paintings, and sheet music served as conduits for intercultural exchange, fuelling his imagination to create music for and about a democratic nation that existed in Weill’s mind and awaited proper musical articulation. Weill viewed American folk songs as fundamental for dramatisation. For instance, the song “Down in the Valley” served as inspiration for a dramatic narrative, enabling the incorporation of various short sequences rooted in a plethora of folk songs. There are different versions of the song, which have been collected and published.⁶¹ The version that Weill found most striking includes references to the power

58 Following World War II, the so-called “Sunday painters” or “primitive painters” garnered significant attention. In a quest to capture portrayals of American vitality, abundant creative reservoirs, and commercially viable cultural products that embody the American ideals of the “common man” and rustic individualism, American primitive art emerged as a means to define the essence of the American democratic landscape. A notable example illustrating this is the book *They Taught Themselves: American Primitive Painters of the 20th Century*, published shortly after the United States entered World War II. Edited by Sidney Janis, the book underscored the absence of formal academic training among primitive painters. It demonstrates how this perceived disadvantage could be effectively transformed into an advantage, showcasing depictions of rural America as genuine expressions of familiarity and authenticity.

59 For a discussion of different branding processes surrounding the work of Grandma Moses, see Karal Ann Marling, *Designs on the Heart: The Homemade Art of Grandma Moses* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), 103–105.

60 Reprinted in David Farnet, Elmar Juchem, and Dave Stein, eds., *Kurt Weill: Ein Leben in Bildern und Dokumenten* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2000), 300.

61 As Stephen Hinton points out, not only do published versions of the song vary, but also the lyrics used in Weill’s folk opera float freely between different versions. See *Weill’s Musical Theater*, 393.

of enduring love and the experience of separation through imprisonment. The dramatisation of the plot and the scoring techniques borrow from Hollywood film aesthetics. The scoring techniques of national songs and their function as an authentic representation of American folk material are in line with Weill's understanding of *Down in the Valley* as an expression of a genuine American democratic spirit.⁶² The complexity and seriousness behind his re-interpretations escaped many critics.⁶³ However, Weill was interested in liberating the material from familiar functions to stir (superficial) emotional responses in order to open up a door to access a hidden beauty in the words and melodies of national songs. Similar techniques and processes of remediation can be found in the ballad opera. The memorable melody of "Down in the Valley" functions like a leitmotif interwoven in different dramatic scenes.

The attractiveness of the material for Weill lies in its oral tradition and its function as social glue between citizens who collaboratively engage in singing folk ballads. In his 1941 radio interview, Weill explained: "To me the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' is the most exciting, stirring hymn I've ever known, and 'The Star-Spangled Banner' is a dignified, proud melody. The music as well as the words are far superior to those martial hymns of hate that are coming out of Europe lately."⁶⁴ What Weill said about national songs such as the "Star Spangled Banner" or the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" also holds true for the folk material with which he set out to express a particular democratic spirit in the United States: "It seems to me when people sing a song together they are sharing a common emotion and songs that express devotion to our great ideals of liberty and justice would certainly help to unite Americans of all races and occupations in a strong determination to defend these ideals."⁶⁵

In *Down in the Valley*, the simplicity of the songs was both emphasised and contrasted through the artistry in the complex, partly symphonic underscoring. In the spirit of Aaron Copland's *Fanfare to the Common Man* (1942), the folk opera opens with a short fanfare motive (Fig. 9.6) that is repeated

⁶² See Mehring, *The Democratic Gap*, 229.

⁶³ For example, in 1942, the music critic Ross Parmenter from *The New York Times* described Weill's compositions condescendingly as "news-reel music". Parmenter also considered these compositions inappropriate for Helen Hayes's vocal capabilities and ineffective as patriotic statements. Ross Parmenter, "Records: Patriotism in Verse, Music," *The New York Times*, Aug. 9, 1942, 2.

⁶⁴ Kurt Weill, "I'm an American." Script no. 43, NBC, broadcast 8 March 1941.

<https://www.kwf.org/kurt-weill/recommended/im-an-american/>, accessed April 12, 2024.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

in a higher register before we hear the title song, first interpreted by a solo tenor and then followed by the choir (Fig. 9.7). A chromatically descending movement in the woodwinds creates a contrast to the upbeat intonation of the folk song. The naïve, joyful melody is further undercut by short, repetitive chromatic motifs hummed by the choir. The flattened sixth, which Weill calls for in this motif, resembles muted sighs. The alternation with the F major mode adds a remarkable musical tension to the folk melody.



Fig. 9.6: Kurt Weill, *Down in the Valley* (1948), opening fanfare.

Fig. 9.7: Kurt Weill, *Down in the Valley* (1948), beginning with tenor and choir.

As in nineteenth-century opera and later in the influential film scoring of Max Steiner, Eric Wolfgang Korngold, or Franz Waxman, the “Down in the Valley” folk song becomes a leitmotif with which Weill identifies Brack Weaver, the hero of his work, when he, for example, whistles the melody after his escape from prison to rush to his beloved (and on a musical level to another folk song). Later, the scene then shifts to the lively barn dance number “Hoe-Down” ready with call and response singing, wild clapping, and dance instructions. The lyrics are based on the traditional folk song “Sourwood Mountain” closely associated with the Appalachian mountain region (“I got a girl in the head o’ th’ hollow / Hey-ho, diddle-um day”). Here, the dramatic climax overlaps with the folk opera’s most lively musical part, followed by the underscoring of the fight between Brack Weaver and his rival Thomas Bouché until the latter’s death. Echoing the musical erup-

tions of violence of Stravinsky's revolutionary avant-garde ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913), Weill scores the fight with irregular dissonant strikes in the orchestra – a technique which had also been successfully implemented by European immigrant composers in Hollywood film scoring. The scene ends with Brack in jail. Now, however, he feels convinced that Jennie will always love him. Thus, the concluding fanfare offers a sense of affirmation of love despite the bleak setting in the Birmingham jail cell.

The folk material of *Down in the Valley* is used effectively to convey a “love conquers all” attitude supported by the simple charms and authentic life captured in American folk songs. The quasi-religious affirmation of love-conquers-all at the end of *Down in the Valley* is rooted in a rustic folk tradition. In contrast to the initial fanfare, we revert to a fortissimo setting (Fig. 9.8), albeit this time in a livelier triple meter rather than the previous four-quarter meter. The affirmative impact is amplified by an expanded tonal structure, marked accents on the fanfare harmonies featuring the characteristic basic fanfare rhythm of three short bursts followed by an extended chord in C major. Thus, Weill successfully remediates the genre of folk music associated with “the South” via musical theatre and radio transmissions for a twentieth-century audience in which the specifics of a region become universalised with an uplifting ending. In the musical mind of the immigrant Kurt Weill, the folk material is reworked to express his democratic vision that music can be used to “unite Americans of all races and occupations.”⁶⁶



Fig. 9.8: Kurt Weill, *Down in the Valley* (1948), final fanfare.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

The intersection between rural America and the idealised notion of a utopian “America” in the musical works of Stephen Foster and Kurt Weill is characterised by mediation, remediation, and transnationalisation. As John Street suggests, music possesses the ability to sway hearts and minds, disrupting social and political norms⁶⁷ not through shock and fear, but through its affective power when combined with other mediums, particularly text and imagery. Throughout the twentieth century, there is a notable trend in the utilisation of music associated with the rural South, which transforms a contentious legacy into a triumph of American musical and cultural heritage. Despite differing national backgrounds and working in separate time periods, Stephen Foster and Kurt Weill share a strikingly similar approach to evoking the essence of “the South:” neither sought solace in the heartland nor composed for the people from whom they drew inspiration. Instead, they reimagined elements from European ballads and American song collections to fabricate a fantasy of “the South,” crafting an immersive experience for listeners and theatre audiences, often in predominantly urban settings.

This form of remediation is rooted less in authentic experience and more in a cultural ideal of a “rural America,” free from the taint of slavery, racism, lynching, and segregation. What emerges from experiencing compositions by Foster and Weill is a transnational narrative of triumph that resonates with a global audience.⁶⁸ Once associated with the struggle against slavery and racial oppression, the genre now symbolises a tale of human uplift. However, it is imperative not to overlook the origins of these transnational constructs, designed to appeal both nationally and globally. As we distance ourselves from the original socio-cultural and political contexts in which music framed specific regions, we risk overlooking the more troubling aspects of history—those entwined with slavery, racism, and the fight for freedom for those excluded from America’s democratic experiment. By mapping the musical and intermedial imaginaries of regional spaces, we can begin to unravel the growing disparity between national history and fantasy, where music assumes a pivotal role in “sounding the South.”

⁶⁷ See Street, *Politics and Music*, 22.

⁶⁸ This trend prefigures the emerging trends of universalising the success story of the blues from “the South” to the international world of popular music which can be seen in American blues museums. See in this context Frank Mehring, “Gonna be a ‘Rollin’ Stone’: Reinventing the (Trans)National Blues Narrative with the Rolling Stones,” in *Americana: Aesthetics, Authenticity, and Performance in US Popular Music*, ed. Knut Holtsträter and Sascha Pöhlmann (Münster: Waxman, 2023), 177–194.

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