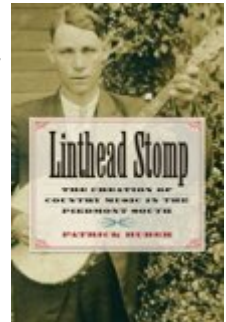


Patrick Huber. *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 440 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-3225-7.



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Published on H-Southern-Music (November, 2009)

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Since 1968, when country music historian Bill C. Malone published *Country Music U.S.A.* to an initially incredulous academic audience, historians have come to view the study of country music, and its predecessors and offshoots, as intrinsically valuable. College catalogues routinely offer courses that incorporate country music, while social, cultural, and labor historians often deploy country song lyrics as primary documents. Historians, though, are frequently the last of the academic ilk to sense a new trend of study. But Malone, with the guidance and “tolerance” of his dissertation advisor, saw the merit in viewing country music as cultural markers for the lives and experiences of poor white Americans, a population often ignored by the historic record.[1] Malone and the late folklorist Archie Green, who published his influential article on hillbilly music only three years prior to Malone’s *Country Music U.S.A.*, remain the earliest and most influential scholars of country and hillbilly music.[2]

In *Linthead Stomp*, it is fitting that Patrick Huber draws heavily from the disciplines of both

history and folklore to weave a compelling study of commercial hillbilly music and the Piedmont millhands who made up the majority of the musicians on record. In the process Huber makes important contributions to the interdisciplinary study of popular music. Using records as cultural artifacts, numerous oral histories, and public advertisements to point the way, Huber often sheds new light on the experiences of southern mill workers and the music that was ever-constant in their lives.

On the surface, *Linthead Stomp* is an assessment of hillbilly music recorded between 1922 and 1942 that “eventually evolved into modern country music and the regional genres of western swing, honky-tonk, and bluegrass” (p. xiii). Yet Huber’s focus throughout is as much on the Piedmont millhand musicians who recorded commercial hillbilly music as it is on the music itself. While much of the scholarship in recent decades focuses on notions of respectability and authenticity in hillbilly or early country music, Huber instead offers two major correctives to assumptions

about the geographical and temporal roots of commercial hillbilly music.

First, Huber posits that examining pre-World War II Piedmont textile mill villages and the commercial music they produced proves that “early country music is, in fact, as thoroughly modern in its origins and evolution as its quintessentially modern counterpart, jazz” (p. xiv). Additionally, analyzing the lyrics to hillbilly songs like “I Didn’t Hear Anybody Pray” and “How Can I Keep My Mind on Driving” reveals Piedmont millhand responses to a modernizing South. Huber treats 78 rpm records as historical artifacts that “offer historians a means of understanding how southern white workers experienced, negotiated, and responded to the far-reaching economic and social revolutions that had transformed the Piedmont from a region of small farms and market towns into the world’s greatest textile-manufacturing district in less than two generations” (p. xvi). Despite how contemporary listeners might hear hillbilly music today or how it was packaged at the time, as the sounds of a bygone rural South, Huber convincingly argues that musically, lyrically, and culturally, the music of Piedmont millhands was the product of a modern milieu.

The second corrective Huber tackles is the myth that hillbilly music emerged chiefly from the dark hollows of southern Appalachia and the rural South more broadly. The myth began as immediately as the music. Some early hillbilly recording artists misleadingly marketed themselves as residents of the mountain South while other mill town musicians outfitted themselves as rural hayseeds, playing up the hillbilly moniker in name and dress. Newspaper articles and record advertisements played no small role in perpetuating this image to the public. Over the years the myth grew stronger and crept into the popular mind. “Even to this day,” writes Huber, “historians and folklorists tend to view early country music as the product of the traditional rural South and have overlooked the importance of modern influ-

ences, especially urban and industrial ones, on this commercial music” (p. 6).

Much as the authors of *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (1987) (coauthored by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Rodgers Korstad, Mary Murphy, Lu Ann Jones, and Christopher B. Daly) took thorough stock of the southern mill world, Huber unravels the lives of Piedmont mill workers through their music. *Linthead Stomp* focuses on the lives and music of four white male Piedmont mill town musicians. Huber crafts mini-biographies of Fiddlin’ John Carson, Charlie Poole, Dave McCarn, and Dorsey Dixon to convey his points about modernity, the importance of the Piedmont to the development of commercial country music, and the mill worker as the antagonist who shepherded hillbilly music to the masses.

Carson is a well-known name to lovers of early country music, yet his life, due in no small part to Carson’s own efforts, remains steeped in myth. In numerous interviews, Carson weaves fantastical tales of his upbringing and, thus, the origins of his music. Many of Carson’s contemporary fans believed that he was a musical mountaineer who played songs from a time and place that no longer existed in the South. What’s more, Huber asserts that scholars have not deconstructed the myths, ignoring Carson’s thoroughly modern influences. A resident of rural Cobb County, Georgia, in his younger years who migrated with his wife and children to Atlanta in 1900, Carson bridged the nineteenth-century sound of the rural South to the commercial and modern sounds of the twentieth century. Huber convincingly argues that Atlanta’s cosmopolitan accouterments in entertainment and leisure activities influenced Carson’s repertoire. He often included Broadway, vaudeville, and Tin Pan Alley songs in his performances. Carson also played songs popular among African Americans, and Huber indicates that his fiddling technique might also be indebted to African American fiddlers. These attributes, coupled with

his membership in the Ku Klux Klan, made Carson “typical of southern white workers” who borrowed and exchanged cultural practices from blacks but maintained racist attitudes (p. 85). Unfortunately, Carson is the only subject in *Linthead Stomp* whose racial attitudes receive thorough treatment. Race relations, and tensions, among southern workers were a key component of the emerging New South, and Huber’s work in subsequent chapters could have benefited from the same analysis.

Huber demonstrates how Carson and his contemporaries were willing participants in the emerging commercial and material aspects of the urban South. Driving cars, attending popular music performances, and purchasing radio sets were common activities among people like Carson and made them members of the mass culture of the day. Ignoring these facts, asserts Huber, has allowed Carson and, by extension, millhands in the early twentieth century, to seem “culturally isolated and even backward” (p. 100). In *Music and the Making of a New South* (2004), Gavin James Campbell makes similar assertions about the metropolitan atmosphere of Atlanta. Taken together, Campbell’s and Huber’s work uncover how Atlantans eschewed the Old South in favor of the modern amenities and cultural markers of the New South.

As beloved among hillbilly music aficionados as the fiddling Carson, is banjo picker Poole. Alcoholic, troubadour, mill worker, and prolific musician, Poole gained a mythic status in some circles similar to that of bluesman Robert Johnson. Huber, however, does an excellent job of separating the man from the myth while recounting Poole’s life in detail. Throughout the chapter, though, Huber’s attention to detail often obscures the larger picture. Huber explains the nuances of Poole’s life, death, and music without extrapolating Poole’s experiences for a broader view of the cotton mill world of the 1920s and early 1930s in north central North Carolina and south central

Virginia. For example, in a later chapter, Huber argues that Gastonia’s working class embraced the Jazz Age in their fashion and entertainment choices as well as their loosening of sexual mores. The reader is left wondering if residents of mill towns in Rockingham County, Poole’s home, embraced the Jazz Age like those of Gaston County. If not, why?

Huber ends the chapter by convincing his readers that Poole’s influence on modern music is long lasting and easily traceable. As irrefutable as that argument is, Poole’s experiences, save his commercial recording career, were not so different from other struggling residents of the Piedmont South who drank to excess, enjoyed listening to the latest phonographs, suffered marital problems, and hated their jobs all while navigating the emerging modern era. Huber misses an opportunity to put Poole’s life in greater context. In sum, the chapter on Poole lacks the depth that the other chapters possess in abundance. Despite this, those looking for a succinct and excellent overview of Poole’s life, musical career, and his many influences and colorful cohorts will find the chapter immensely useful.

What the chapter on Poole lacks, however, the biography of McCarn makes up for in rich detail. Huber skillfully explains Gastonia’s dramatic entrance into the modern world of consumerism and industrialism in the chapter on McCarn. The mill towns in Gaston County, North Carolina, of the 1920s and 1930s come vividly alive as Huber adeptly recounts their modern trappings and violent growing pains. Huber similarly treats McCarn with stirring nuance. He focuses on McCarn’s “novelty songs” instead of his well-known and oft-trumpeted mill life protest songs in order to underscore what the former represented to mill workers like McCarn. The “joyous hedonism of casual sex, bootleg alcohol, and footloose rambling,” argues Huber, represented “escape routes” for McCarn and countless other Piedmont millhands (p. 167).

For Huber, however, McCarn was not simply a womanizing roustabout. Through excellent lyric interpretations of “Poor Man, Rich Man (Cotton Mill Colic No. 2)” and “Serves ‘Em Fine (Cotton Mill Colic No. 3),” as well as a useful gender analysis comparing Ella May Wiggins’s “The Mill Mother’s Song” and McCarn’s “Cotton Mill Colic,” Huber credits McCarn with being an astute observer of mill life and southern industrialism on the whole. In McCarn, Huber finds a textile worker and hillbilly musician whose music and experiences captured much of the major themes of the 1920s and 1930s industrial South, namely, increased mechanization, clashes between old and new moral standards, the emerging Jazz Age, and mill workers struggling to make life a little more bearable in the cotton mills.

Huber’s last subject, Carolina Piedmont native Dixon, carved out a meager living working in the mills, recording music, and writing songs that included a few of the most beloved numbers in the hillbilly catalogue. Like Carson, Dixon spent his early years in the preindustrial rural South before his sharecropping family moved into the mill village workforce. Dixon migrated first to Darlington, South Carolina, and, later, to East Rockingham, North Carolina, where modern amenities “reflected the musical diversity found in small textile towns all across the Carolina Piedmont” (p. 224). Dixon’s exposure, emphasizes Huber, “to sensational newspaper journalism, radio broadcasts, phonograph records, Hollywood films, and a diverse array of musical influences fostered serious engagement with contemporary national events and pressing religious issues” (p. 220). In Dixon’s numerous tragic songs, Huber finds “spiritual and social commentaries that address the transformations of the modern South, especially the erosion of family bonds and religious values, but his songs should not be mistakenly interpreted as primitive or unsophisticated merely because of the conservative spiritual messages that many of them convey” (p. 220). This point is absolutely

essential to understanding all Huber’s subjects in *Linthead Stomp*.

Dixon made a name for himself in East Rockingham as the author of tragic poems and songs. Often published in the local newspaper, Dixon penned mournful verses when members of the community, especially the young, died in accidents often related to the mill or the automobile. Huber attests that these tragic poems and songs reveal Dixon’s “deepest personal concerns, which, in turn, shed light on many of the under-examined social and cultural tensions endemic in Piedmont textile mill villages during this same period” (p. 220). What’s more, Huber’s treatment of Dixon accentuates the centrality of religion in the lives of many millworkers. Dixon, a Pentecostal, regularly ended each song with a plea for his neighbors in the Piedmont South to follow the teachings of Jesus and live a morally upright life before their days came to an end. Often dismayed by secularism and materialism, Dixon hoped that fundamentalist Christianity could reverse what he saw as eroding moral values and the creep of modernity. But, as Huber explains, modernity itself was not the source of sin. In other words, modern amenities were not inherently sinful, but could be corrupted by people. For instance, “a good Christian could own a car without risk to his soul, Dixon might say, if he used that car to drive to church and to work but not to roadhouses, dance halls, brothels, or other dens of iniquity” (p. 235). In Dixon’s most famous song, “Wreck on the Highway,” he gruesomely relates how carousing, drinking, and automobiles led to tragic endings. What’s worse for Dixon, however, is that no one stopped to pray for the dead, signifying the erosion of Christian values in the face of modern tragedies. Dixon’s life underscores the fact that not all millhands or even hillbilly musicians were womanizing, rambling drunkards. Compared to McCarn’s younger days and Poole’s all too brief life, Dixon was downright pious.

The chapter on Dixon treats the subject with a sense of gentle empathy. This approach adds critical human textures to the lives of southern Piedmont millhands. For example, Huber describes in detail how legal battles over “Wreck on the Highway” caused Dixon bouts of anxiety and depression. Like so many other mill workers, a lifelong inability to establish substantial financial assets took its toll on Dixon. Yet Dixon comes across not as a victim but as a gifted human being who experienced more than his fair share of hard luck. “Like his fellow country songwriter Hank Williams,” Huber eulogizes, “Dixon possessed a rare gift for expressing complicated spiritual and social messages in an ordinary, plainspoken language that is all the more poignant for its simplicity” (p. 273).

Huber’s assertion that hillbilly music represented, reacted to, and commented on the emerging modern South is possibly his greatest achievement in *Linthead Stomp*. Huber weds the creation of the textile mill world with the creation of hillbilly music, both extremely modern innovations. He is at his rhetorical best when asserting that despite the nostalgic “hillbilly” tag, “the far-reaching effects of modernity profoundly touched their lives and music. Indeed,” continues Huber, “millhand musicians were undoubtedly children of the modern age” because of their contact with “automobiles, movies, radios, phonograph recordings, and mass-circulation newspapers and magazines” (pp. 37-38). This assertion is an extremely important remedy for how hillbilly music is often portrayed. More broadly, Huber’s work places southern mill towns in a historically accurate environment rather than portraying them as backwaters. “Within Piedmont textile villages in the decades prior to World War II,” sums up Huber, “hillbilly music was urban, modern, and, in its way, tremendously sophisticated” (276).

In his endeavor to offer a corrective to previous geographical understandings of hillbilly music, however, Huber frequently dismisses the

southern Appalachian region and its contributions to this development in American music. Of course, this is precisely because Huber’s point is that the southern Piedmont is usually the ignored region in a conversation about hillbilly music; and he is right about this last item. It is unfortunate, however, that the conversation takes on the trappings of a zero-sum contest between regions. Huber situates the Piedmont as the “wellspring of commercial hillbilly music” (p. 27). This is the same trap that many scholars before Huber have fallen into when arguing over which enclaves in southern Appalachia cultivate the most influential string band musicians. The problem with these arguments is that none of these regions, communities, or musicians existed in isolation. Drawing a rigid, dichotomous line between the Piedmont and the mountains ignores the vibrant cultural exchange linking the regions. Migration facilitated by the lumber, coal, and especially the cotton mill industries exposed southern Appalachian musicians to Piedmont pickers and vice versa. The evidence seems to indicate that commercial hillbilly sprang from the intermingling of both southern mountaineers and southern Piedmont millhands. Huber even confirms some of this when writing about a bevy of Piedmont musicians who traveled fluidly from western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, and southwestern Virginia into Piedmont mills. Musicians like Poole, as Huber points out, traveled throughout the northern Piedmont region of North Carolina and the southern hills of Virginia, searching for both mill work and venues to play his music. There is no doubt that Piedmont locations offered easier access for northern recording studios and record companies than did most Appalachian locales, as Huber attests, but recording location does not always indicate the home region of the musician. After all, McCarn was first recorded in Memphis, Tennessee, not in his hometown near Gastonia, North Carolina. The dismissal of southern Appalachia may also play into Huber’s decision to ignore contributions from women to commercial country

music. The number of women who recorded hillbilly music may be underwhelming compared to men, but Huber misses an opportunity to treat southern Appalachian commercial musicians like Samantha Bumgarner or Sara and Maybelle Carter with the same thoroughness and compassion as he treats McCarn or Dixon. More thorough attention to the importance of migration patterns and willingness to treat region as a dynamic concept might have allowed Huber some flexibility in his conclusions while still highlighting the remarkable and essential contributions of the southern Piedmont millhand in the development of commercial country music.

The values of *Linthead Stomp*, however, far outweigh the few shortcomings. That hillbilly music is a premodern, distinctly mountain, or rural creation are, in fact, myths that persist in the popular mind. Huber dispels these myths with ease. Additionally, Huber recovers a mill world that has nearly vanished from the Piedmont South. After World War II, as mill villages disappeared from the southern landscape, so too did hillbilly music as it was played by people like Carson or McCarn. The communities of hillbilly musicians that thrived in the 1920s and 1930s, by the mid-1940s became increasingly scarce. Huber does an excellent job of portraying vanished life in the prewar, urban-industrial, and cotton mill Piedmont. The pages teem with descriptions of Brunswick stews, church revivals, Saturday night dances, and other mill town events. For its many merits and because of its accessibility and biographical structure, instructors could assign any chapter from Huber's book to a survey or graduate level course on southern music, the New South, or American popular music much to the benefit of their students. *Linthead Stomp* will likewise appeal to a wide audience interested in the development of commercial country music and the vibrant, if hardscrabble lives of southern millworkers.

Notes

[1]. Bill C. Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 2nd. ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), x.

[2]. Archie Green, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* 78, no. 309 (July-September 1965): 204-228.

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Citation: Robert H. Ferguson. Review of Huber, Patrick. *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*. H-Southern-Music, H-Net Reviews. November, 2009.

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