In Tune with Innovation: The “West by Southwest” Music Panel at the 2009 Western History Association Conference

By Douglas Flamming and Daniel Cady

The South and the West in the Creation of America

By Douglas Flamming

From the nation’s beginnings, the American South and the American West have been involved in a complicated relationship—an unpredictable, ongoing dance across time and space. The result has been that each region—or section, as Americans used to say—has played a vital role in shaping the other. To fully understand either region, we must analyze how each has influenced the other.

This task is easier said than done. For one thing, interregional analysis isn’t exactly the surest path to professional security: There are no job advertisements for historians who specialize in regional studies or southern and western history. Both regions have successful historical associations that work largely in isolation: the Southern Historical Association (SHA), which was founded in 1934, and the Western History Association (WHA), founded in 1961. The Journal of Southern History and the Western Historical Quarterly naturally focus on historical dynamics within their regional scopes. Neither journal offers much information about the other region. In both southern and western historiography, regional comparisons are almost always to “America”—that is, to the North.

It would be easier to appreciate the South–West relationship if the North would fess up to being a region, a powerfully influential section of the United States that has changed dramatically over time. Alas, there is no Northern History Association. Despite some small historical societies that focus on northern subregions (New England, say), and despite scattered efforts to promote the Midwest as a candidate for regional analysis, historians of Detroit or Ohio or the mid-Atlantic states still claim to be writing “American” history. And so we are stuck with a national narrative that is out of joint; it includes two outlying regions whose separate pasts serve as foils for the story of the dominant region.

Nearly a century ago, Frederick Jackson Turner had a better idea: build a national narrative by focusing on the interrelationships among America’s three major regions. I know that does not sound like Frederick Jackson Turner, but that, in the end, is where his historical studies led him. Despite the fanfare and controversy surrounding his famous Frontier Thesis, presented in 1893, Turner spent most of his career working toward what he considered a more significant outlook on American history: his Sectional Thesis, published as an article in 1925 and later included in his largely forgotten posthumous book of essays on sectionalism. Turner’s Sectional Thesis concludes that “the significance of the section in American history is that it is the faint image of a European nation and that we need to reexamine our history in the light of this fact. Our politics and our society have been shaped by sectional complexity and interplay, not unlike what goes on between European nations.”
The U.S. frontier had moved across the continent from the Atlantic Coast to the Pacific, but this frontier process had given rise to three major sections of the country: North, South, and West. The West as frontier had been, Turner wrote, "a stage of society rather than a place." But that was not all. Once the frontier stage had passed, it left behind distinctive sections with distinctive political and economic interests and distinctive cultures and mores. Turner's primary example of regional interplay was the Civil War. The war had been a struggle between two former frontier regions—North and South—both of which sought to control the "New West" and use it to their own advantage within the national political system. Or, in Turner's words, "Such a struggle as the slavery contest can only be understood by bearing in mind that it was not merely a contest of North against South, but that its form and its causes were fundamentally shaped by the dynamic factor of expanding sections, of a West to be won." The North won, but the West did not become northern. The West took on its own identity—with geography, demography, history, and cultures all playing a part in making it a distinctive section.

Turner thought that the best model for understanding the postfrontier United States was Europe. The three regions of the United States were rough parallels to European nations; moreover, he added, the U.S. federal government functioned something like a League of Nations (remember, he was writing in 1925), adjudicating disputes between the North, South, and West. We could criticize Turner's work until the cows come home, for all sorts of reasons, but on the point of American regions and their significance he was right. Despite periodic pronouncements that the South is dead, or that the West no longer exists, American regionalism refuses to go away. Leaving aside Turner's comparison of American regions to the nations of Europe, and of the federal government to the League of Nations,

Iconic images of the West have played a role in building interrelationships among the nation's regions. This 1928 photograph appeared as the frontispiece of A Bronco Pegasus, a collection of poems by Charles Lummis published in the same year. As southerners migrated to the West, the interplay between the two regions, particularly in the field of music, brought new perspectives to California's historical landscape—a theme explored in the "West by Southwest" music panel at the 2009 Western History Association conference.

Braun Research Library, Autry National Center of the American West, Los Angeles; P.33775; photograph by F. R. Walker

The title page of Heather Cox Richardson's West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War is graced by a photograph of a cowboy struggling to stay atop a bucking bronco, an appropriate image of a nation and its regions—North, South, and West—fighting to ride out a powerful and unpredictable century. Not that the next century would offer a safer ride. A southern songwriter living in Bakersfield, California—Buck Owens—would give us a similar metaphor for American life in the late twentieth century: "I've Got a Tiger by the Tail." Whatever your interest in California or the West, whatever time period or topic draws your interest, try viewing western history with the South in mind. If you do, we venture that you will find yourself on an unpredictable intellectual ride. And like Buck Owens, once you've grabbed hold, you really can't let go.
Turner’s basic point was sound: The “interplay” among American sections has been a primary factor in shaping the nation’s history. Unfortunately, American historians seldom “reexamine our history in light of this fact.”

Some important recent work shows that the notion of interregional history is gaining traction and that the results can be creative and instructive. The title of Heather Cox Richardson’s recent book on the postbellum era, West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War, speaks to the point. Reconstruction was as much about the West as it was the South, but the questions raised by southern Reconstruction—who should be a citizen and on what terms—were the very questions the nation confronted out West. In a similar vein, Elliott West has published a series of creative and thought-provoking books and articles that develop the idea of America’s “Greater Reconstruction”—most fully articulated in his recent tour de force, The Last Indian War: The Nez Perce Story. In West’s view, Reconstruction meant more than the post–Civil War epoch of the North to restructure the South and restore it to the Union. Rather, the entire midcentury (from the annexation of Texas to the formal end of southern Reconstruction in 1877) involved an effort by all concerned to reconstruct the nation. Americans in all regions simultaneously sought to resolve the thorny issues confronting a nation that was literally coming apart—issues involving federal power, black slavery, the fate of Native American Indians, and sectional reconciliation.6

James Gregory’s brilliantly conceived The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners Transformed America is another example of what can be gained through interregional analysis. Gregory’s first book, American Exodus, traced the journey of Dust Bowl migrants—“Okies”—to California during the Dust Bowl era and followed the trajectory of their lives once they became ensconced in the Far West. His recent Southern Diaspora goes further, tracing the migration of millions of southerners—black and white—to both the North and the West (and also back to the South). In the process, southern migrants transformed the urban North and West, even as they were transformed by their arrival and survival in new environments. Among other transformations, black southerners who left the South helped to spur the civil rights victories of the mid-1960s; white southerners who left the South helped to spur the antiblack backlash that followed. All three regions were caught up in this national drama.7

In our Western History Association conference session, “West by Southwest: Southern Music in and about the American West,” we as presenters—myself, Daniel Cady, and Virginia Scharff—decided to focus only on the interplay between the South and the West, leaving the North out of the equation. Sufficient unto the session were the challenges thereof. Our essential claim was that we cannot understand the South without understanding its relationship to the West, and vice versa. The claim is hardly novel—this is partly my point in highlighting Turner’s Sectional Thesis above—and yet the claim remains unrealized. What we really need is a national narrative fully informed by the interplay among regions. We are far from having anything like that, but the fields are ripe for harvest.

Language of a Subculture Redux

By Daniel Cady

Last October I had the rare opportunity to play a few songs with Douglas Flaming and Virginia Scharff during our panel, “West by Southwest,” at the Western History Association’s annual conference in Denver, Colorado. I will not soon forget the few but rather intense hours we spent in the hotel room, first choosing acceptable keys in which to sing, then attempting to play the same song, and finally working out three-part harmonies. With more than a slight measure of trepidation, we convened the panel. After the brief multigenre performance–academic panel, our trio sat in the hotel lounge and attempted to explain the enthusiastic—nearly cathartic—response engendered by the less-than-orthodox format. At the time, it seemed attributable to our musical prowess, but upon further reflection, I now humbly realize that it was due to our unveiling of a shared professional secret: historians are intellectually and emotionally invested in song.

It might seem a bit presumptuous to suggest that academicians harbor such passions so often sequestered from their formal scholarly pursuits, but one needs only to gently prod a historian to discover his or her inner playlist. Though my evidence is purely anecdotal, I believe that within every historian there is an independent record store clerk wanting to get out. Sit with a colleague or graduate student beyond the boundaries of the campus and wait for a genre, artist, or lyrical reference to emerge naturally in conversation. When it does, consider what the speaker has truly divulged. John Ruskin followed his famous quote “Tell me what you like and I’ll tell you what you are” with the contention that an honest answer would reveal one’s “body and soul.”¹¹ I have found, quite unsurprisingly, that historians possess resoundingly eclectic souls.

My colleague Ethan Kytle, assistant professor of history at California State University, Fresno, tells me that I overreach, and that I simply goad others into conversations about music because of my pre-academic life. Perhaps this is true. I am, I must admit, a failed musician. Before entering graduate school I spent the better part of ten years playing in punk and rock bands and—my personal apex—an ironic southern rock ensemble from San Francisco. Once I entered graduate school, I packed away the instruments but never lost my fascination with the sounds of Americana. Maybe I do tend to shift conversation away from census data and toward torch songs or pedal steels, and certainly the circumstances of my former life inform my social interactions, but I can always find a willing partner in the hotel bars of academic conferences and even in the offices of skeptical colleagues. I would, however, like to see these dialogues migrate from the informal settings of bars and offices to the formality of the conference room. From there, we can adjourn to bars and offices.

I am by no means claiming that historians resoundingly neglect the role of music in their academic pursuits. The field of American history has been enriched by a number of authors who either focus specifically on music or incorporate music-related themes into their texts. Works by Michael Bertrand, Kristine M. McCusker, Shane White and Graham White, and Scott Gac signal both a healthy interest in the confluence of music, race, and gender and the willingness of publishers to invest in such topics.¹² The field of western history also has benefited from musically inclined scholarship. For example, Peter La Chapelle and Ken Marcus, in related but distinct books, examine the relationship between group identity, artist, and musical genre from the loftiest highbrow to the decidedly lowbrow.¹³ These smart, critical, and genuinely intriguing books prove that historians can wrest the subject out of the hands of Rolling Stone.
We should continue building on this solid scholarly foundation. In doing so, it would be instructive to remember the example of musical academia found in James Gregory’s *American Exodus*. Published twenty years ago, it illustrates the degree to which individuals and communities integrate music into their own personal and group identities. Gregory argues that by the 1960s, in California’s Central Valley, the sons and daughters of Okies fashioned a style of country music that reflected migrants’ early marginalization yet paved the way for Okie cultural hegemony; or, if you will, from “Mama’s Hungry Eyes” to “Fightin’ Side of Me.” The “Bakersfield Sound,” he argues, moved from the “language of a subculture” to the lingua franca of the San Joaquin.11 Having visited Bakersfield’s Weed Patch Camp (formerly of the Farm Security Administration) for the annual Dust Bowl Days celebration, I can attest to the predominance of Merle Haggard in the house band’s set list. Tucked away between Haggard songs, the band slipped in a little Bob Wills and an occasional Buck Owens. Noticeably absent, Woody Guthrie was not invited to the party—a testament to Gregory’s thesis. The loyalty to a handful of artists is still fierce, and the identification to a specific genre strong.

What impressed me about our session in Denver was the way in which historians related not just to music, but to songs themselves. It seemed that our panel and its audience shared a previously tacit subcultural language, and one not too dissimilar to the parlance of Gregory’s subjects. Granted, genres and musicians hardly anchored our identities, but we did establish kindred spirits and shared frames of reference. Furthermore, we spoke in smaller increments, but with greater breadth, in songs rather than popular personas and musical subheadings. In hindsight, I realize that the conversation began in earnest once the panel disbanded. Directly after the session, Jim Sandos, professor of history at the University of Redlands, reassessed the context of Gram Parson’s “Sin City” (page 20); in the elevator to the lobby, Jon Christensen, executive director of the Bill Lane Center for the American West at Stanford University, made the connection between “Mercury Blues,” originally “Mercury Boogie,” by Bob Geddins and K. C. Douglas (pages 15–16) and Bob Dylan’s quip about that “wild mercury sound.”12 Discussion of set-list choice, women and country music, and the art and ownership of cover songs continued well into the evening. Each point was tenuously but logically related to academic discourse, whether it was addressing historical marginalization, shifts in technology and business, or the appropriation of cultural expression across racial lines.

The dialogue in Denver reminded me of the power of song as document. Closer in character to diary entries than to police records or census enumerator’s pages, song presents a slippery but potentially potent opportunity for critical study. Unlike artists or genres, songs are things to be sung. Yes, they are popularized by the former and categorized in the latter, but a song’s distinction as a piece that can be performed as well as listened to is important for historians to consciously consider. Genres are often convenient categories increasingly manipulated by business interests. Artists are occasionally revolutionary (like Dylan), but mostly ephemeral (read: Gary Numan). Songs, on the other hand, are fickle friends that often disregard both artist and genre, or change meaning in new contexts. Is Hank Williams’ hillbilly “Cold, Cold, Heart” really the same song as performed by Tony Bennett? What of Little Richard and Pat Boone, or even NWA and Dynamite Hack? Who sings songs and when they sing them, as well as who listens to them, also hints at cultural shifts on a national level. Consider Creedence Clearwater Revival’s antiwar song, “Fortunate Son,” and its transformation into a nationalist anthem at the hands of Wrangler Jeans in post-9/11 America.
At the Shaffer Farm Security Administration (FSA) migrant camp, Charles L. Todd records the music of Dust Bowl refugees Mr. and Mrs. Frank Pipkin. Todd and his colleague Robert Sonkin visited FSA camps in California’s agricultural valleys during 1940 and 1941. Their ethnographic collection of songs and other narratives has preserved the everyday lives of FSA camp residents in central California.

Library of Congress; photograph by Robert Hemmig.

I recall an episode while a student at Claremont Graduate University. During a southern intellectual history course, my professor, Robert Dawidoff, suggested that much could be gleaned on the subject of the southern white diaspora by listening to Bobby Bare’s “Detroit City.” I added that Gram Parsons’ “Streets of Baltimore” might also be an appropriate example, and from there we exchanged lines from the song. Though we successfully reiterated the lyrics, concluding with “Now my baby walks the streets of Baltimore,” we hardly harmonized; he referenced Charles Pride and I cited Gram Parsons. We quickly moved past what on the surface seemed a simple matter of taste, and in so doing lost an opportunity to mine the song for greater meaning. Having since read Dawidoff’s writing on Sophie Tucker, Cole Porter, and Irving Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” I will admit to being a little more than slightly out-classed.13 Yet my preference for Parsons, a sixties proto-country rock star, over Pride, the greatest African American country star to don a Stetson, also signaled a different appreciation of the song’s significance and perhaps greater historical importance. Among the topics unaddressed that day were authenticity, audience, regional identity, white privilege, Jim Crow, and “passing.” But we also missed the chance to discern how an African American from Texas could marshal a greater sense of loyalty from a southern white working-class audience than could a white “country boy” from central Florida.

Yet songs are more than mere barometers of vast social change; they are best employed as autobiographical soundtracks of those who would otherwise neglect writing such things. On one level, consider the role of popular song in life rituals. Weddings, funerals, Quinceañeras, and Bar/Bat Mitzvahs all feature songs of significance, tailored to the identities of the participants. I recently attended a wedding in the Central Valley (Harris Ranch, specifically) where the young couple presented a musical slide show during the traditional first dance. Beginning with Tony Bennett’s “The Best Is Yet to Come,” which alluded to marital stability and economic prosperity, the presentation then shifted gears to Kenny Chesney’s “She Thinks My Tractor’s Sexy.” The photos likewise moved from the sentimental to the vocational and recreational. People eschew sacred music and routinely employ popular song ritually, portentously, and reflectively; “our song,” they call it. Peruse a list of popular wedding songs and characterize the differences between favorites from Glenn Miller, Cole Porter, Wilco,
Norah Jones, and Kenny Chesney. Those who choose the songs are attempting to tell us what they want to be and what they are.

Even in more informal settings, people feel an intense sense of ownership regarding songs, further claiming dominion over songs by performing them in casual settings. The rise of karaoke reaffirms this marriage between individual identity and musical expression. Across the United States, amateur singers take to the stage with renditions of their favorites. Serial performers, it is said, sing the same song over and over again. While some dismiss the personal connection to song as trivial, consider the case of Frank Sinatra and the Philippines. Recently, the New York Times published an article detailing the rash of karaoke killings in the Philippines over contested versions of “My Way.” The song itself is so profoundly autobiographical (and a bit arrogant) that a botched rendition is potentially insulting to the song’s other owners.

Undoubtedly, songs enrich the study of the past across the historiographical spectrum. Those studying women’s rights can fortify their studies with the songbooks of suffrage, and labor historians might pay more heed to union songs. Like disaster songs and war songs, these were written as epical and inspirational. Yet we should also look beyond the intent of songwriters as marketers and take note of how people refashioned songs to fit their own purposes. People sang while driving across the West, they hummed to their children, and shouted at the top of their lungs when the spirit said shout. We should further consider the historical soundtrack in our present and future work; it reveals much, so let us keep listening.

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“West by Southwest: Southern Music in and about the American West”

Presented by Douglas Flamming, Daniel Cady, and Virginia Scharff

Let’s begin. I’m Doug Flamming, professor of history at Georgia Tech, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to this session, “West by Southwest: Southern Music in and about the American West.” Joining me on the program today, first of all, is Dan Cady of Cal State Fresno. Dan is professor in the history department there and also the director of the Central Valley Institute for Regional and Historical Studies. Joining Dan and me is the one and only Virginia Scharff. As you well know, Gingy is professor of history at the University of New Mexico and the most recent past president of the WHA.

Since Dan is holding a dobro, and I am holding a guitar, and Gingy is listed in the program as the “lead singer,” let me confirm what you already suspect, which is that this particular session will be a little different than most. As a group, we are going to perform seven songs that reflect the theme of the session: South meets West. We will be going unplugged—acoustic guitars and Dan’s dobro. The theme of this year’s conference—the Wired West—calls to mind barbed-wire fences and telegraphs, among an array of other interesting wires. Acoustic guitar strings are also, quite literally, wires—thin metal strings that helped invent and define the American West. Dan and I will be using these wires to make music, and we will also use our voices to add harmonies where we think we can get away with it. But Gingy will be fronting the band—and here I am moved to add “Thank God!” for Gingy, whose voice made this session possible.
To answer two immediate questions: No, we’ve never played in public before. And yes, I, for one, intend to keep my day job.

Anyway, in this session, you can expect singing and playing from three historians. Songs, after all, are historical documents—documents that come alive each time they are played. May they come alive for you today. Feel free to sing along if you feel the urge.

There will be more than singing in this session, however. Dan and I will preface each selection with some introductory remarks—biographical information about the various artists, a little historical context, and some remarks on how each selection suggests something important about the ways in which southerners encountered the West and how they expressed their experiences through their music.

One of our goals was to put on a program that would appeal to the WHA’s professional scholars as well as to its public constituency. We hope to present a session that is both intellectually stimulating and just downright enjoyable. One aim, then, and a very important one it is, is to help build bridges within the WHA and, hopefully, to inspire other folks in the organization to try similar experiments—singing or not. And, while I’m at it, thanks very much to last year’s program committee for taking the risk of putting us on the program.

All three of us have focused a good deal of our research and writing on people in motion—especially on people who move West. We are not musicologists or specialists in the history of music. We have, however, come to understand the importance of region and culture, and we have all gained a particular appreciation of the South to West migration and what it can tell us: about the South, about the West, about America, about us. My work has focused on African American migration from the South to Los Angeles and, more broadly, the West. Dan’s work has focused on white southerners who moved to L.A. and, more broadly, the West. And Gingy has looked primarily at women migrants, including both blacks and whites who left the South for the West. Somehow over the past few years, the three of us came to see that music offered a unique way to hear regionalism in a whole new way. So this session, beyond being a tad unorthodox, also gave us the opportunity to look more deeply and systematically at this promising topic.
Listening to the Music

We did not, alas, record our session. To our knowledge, no one else did either. We cannot recreate the moment or the music we played in that moment. But it might be helpful, in reading the comments below, to listen to the songs we played—as they were performed by the original artists. There are two ways to do this on the Internet. One way is to purchase the songs on iTunes; at the cost of 99 cents per song, our seven songs would cost you, well, you get the idea. Another way is to find the recordings on YouTube. All of the songs we played, as recorded by the original artists, are available for listening on YouTube. This costs you nothing—except the time and inevitable aggravation that accompanies YouTube and the possible frustration of finding that the video accompanying your sound track is a worthless botch job. When using the YouTube search engine, you will get a much cleaner search by typing in both the artist’s name and the name of the song. Either way, happy listening.

A word about how we made our musical selections. If you’ve ever wondered how much music southerners actually made in and about the West, the answer is: a lot. So we had to set some limits, some parameters. One parameter was chronology: our seven songs cover roughly half a century, roughly 1920 to 1970, what you might think of as the Radio and Record era of American music. So we’ll begin with Jimmie Rodgers singing the blues and end with Janis Joplin’s “Me and Bobby McGee.”

A second parameter was demography: almost exclusively, we’ll be performing music of white and black southerners—people who were born and raised in the South, who viewed themselves as southerners, and who viewed their move West as a move toward a better life, a more prosperous life, a life of greater equality. During this period of time, people who lived in the South almost always had been born and raised there—they and their parents and grandparents and great-grandparents before them. Few outsiders lived in the South. The explosion of immigration that transformed the North and West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries basically bypassed the South. (Heavily Latino South Texas, if you consider it part of the South, would be an exception, but we won’t be playing any ethnic Mexican music, such as conjunto. Today, of course, Latinos live in large numbers all throughout the South, but they did not during our chronological period.) My point is, southerners—black and white—were a people set apart in a region set apart. They strongly identified with their section.

Nonetheless, blacks and whites were leaving the South in droves. The South, through most of the twentieth century, was a place to be from: it had a poor and underdeveloped economy; it had a rigid, strictly enforced racial caste system—Jim Crow in its full fury; it had the least democratic political system in the nation. Southerners identified with the South, but many wanted out. And the West looked so good, a land of singular promise.

But was it a land of promise? Did southerners find what they were looking for? Our selections today reflect southern roots, western dreams, and the realities that southerners ultimately confronted out West.

A final limitation on our selections was simply this: We are three historians. So all that great stuff that happened to jazz in the West ain’t gonna happen today. Conjunto-style accordion, one of my own distant dreams? Not on the program. Oakland postwar gospel, knock your socks off, “come-to-Jesus” gospel? We can’t pull it off. Sly and the Family Stone? We thought seriously about it, but in the end, no. Hendrix of Seattle? Dan could play it. Giny could sing it, but I couldn’t handle the rest. The better part of valor is to let it go.
So our songs reflect these limits: our time period, our demographic focus, and our chosen profession. But, I'll tell you, even with these limitations, we found it difficult to trim our playlist to seven. Many a good song was left on the cutting-room floor. So each song on our list is intended to reflect a larger theme, intended to stand for other songs that were delivering the same message.

That's it. That's our introduction. On with the show! Our first tune will be introduced by Dan Cady, and we'll just keep going from there.

Looking West: Jimmie Rodgers, "Blue Yodel No. 4 (California Blues)"

Comments by Daniel Cady

The first song on the slate today we've placed in the category of Looking West. "Blue Yodel no. 4" or "California Blues" was written and recorded by Jimmie Rodgers, the "father of country music," in 1928 in Atlanta, Georgia.16

Rodgers, like most of the people whose songs we will abuse today, was a regional product. Born in Mississippi, discovered in Tennessee, and marketed to southern audiences, his music reflects the complex mix of cultural influences that made the South, according to country music scholar Bill Malone, the birthplace of "American music." For Rodgers, the West was mythic and hopeful. The first verse of "California Blues" thematically pulls from Gold Rush-era myths of leisure and escape. Instead of plucking nuggets from the earth without breaking a sweat, as pictured in many nineteenth-century dispatches from the West, in Rodgers' California one can simply leave the daily grind of the laborer and "sleep out every night." Where one might be inclined to interpret those lyrics as analogous to the sleeping outside Hank Williams is subject to in "Move It on Over" (the dog house), the song really has more in common with Haywire Mac's "Big Rock Candy Mountain" (recorded the very same year as "California Blues"). Sleeping out in California, like "cigarette trees" and "bull dogs with rubber teeth," resonated with a class of laborers dreaming of comfort and refuge. For a highly mobile people increasingly looking outside of the South for opportunity, the only blue element of "California Blues" resided in the American South itself. When Rodgers sings, "I'm leaving you mama, 'cause you don't know how to treat me right," he's not just addressing his home, but his home state as well.
From his vantage point in Meridian, Mississippi, Rodgers could survey the cultural restlessness of southerners at the apex of the Great Migration's first wave. Meridian was a railroad town and Rodgers a railroad hand. His world was marked by movement and populated by transients. In the era that "California Blues" was written, some two million migrants left the South. Before stardom, Rodgers himself rode the rails west, though only making it as far as Arizona.

The West in general and California in particular held a special promise for white southerners such as Rodgers. Perhaps this is why, despite its distance, a city such as Los Angeles could become the third most popular destination for white southern migrants in the 1920s. Boosterism, employment leaflets, the motion picture industry, and of course climatology all played a role in the creation of the West in the southern imagination. Rodgers, as a "populist" entertainer, simply articulated what the people in his world tacitly recognized. As we will discuss—and demonstrate—the special relationship of the West to the South matures and morphs, but in the songs of southerners, it never loses its intensity.

We start with Rodgers because of his reach. Scores of southern musical icons acknowledge his vast influence. Gene Autry, Johnny Cash, and George Jones all recognized Rodgers' significance; likewise, B.B. King. Bluesman Howling Wolf even admitted to co-opting Rodgers' vocal style. "I couldn't do no yodelin'," he said, "so I turned to howlin'." 7

**Left of Eden:**

**Woody Guthrie, "Do Re Mi"**

**Comments by Daniel Cady**

Jimmie Rodgers launched a thousand singing cowboys. Deemed "yodelmania" by one contemporary critic, by the 1930s the entertainment industry had fully embraced hillbilly music as the soundtrack for the West. The era's singing cowboys and cowgirls melded South and West through drawl and yodel, and often on horseback. Ruby Blevins of Arkansas became Patsy Montana, Leonard Franklin Sly reinvented himself as Roy Rogers, and urbane southerner-turned-New Yorker Johnny Mercer imagined himself as "an old cow hand from the Rio Grande" (a cowboy, as the song goes, who never saw a cow). But there were significant detractors as well. Strumming the same six-string guitars and targeting a similar audience, these left-leaning voices of protest warned of a West not of "land open land" but of hostility and exploitation. The brightest star among these was Woody Guthrie.

One might speculate that at a panel on region and music at the WHA many in the room are a little more than familiar with Guthrie's biography. I'll keep it short: Oklahoma-born, Woodrow Wilson Guthrie made his way to and his name in California in the mid-1930s. Starting his career in earnest as a radio host for Los Angeles' KFVD, Guthrie developed from a folksy radio personality offering home-style ballads to a musical leftist reporting on the plight of the Okie migrants and California's "factories in the field" (borrowing Carey McWilliams' phrase8) through song.

Songs such as "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "Tom Joad" lamented the deplorable conditions faced by migrants. Guthrie subsequently challenged the politicians, businesspeople, and apologists responsible for such conditions. He identified a number of villains—principally growers, police, and "polli-TISH-uns"—but, oddly enough, laid much of the blame at the feet of Jimmie Rodgers. He felt that Rodgers has sold folks a bad bill of goods by advertising a leisurely world where one could "sleep out every night"; a big rock candy mountain that working people could locate on a map of the West.9

In his "Dust Pneumonia Blues," a tale of an environmental lung disease that borrows much
from Rodgers’ Blue Yodels, Guthrie quips, “there ought to be some yodelin’ in this song / But I can’t yodel for the rattlin’ in my lung.”

In a 1940 session with folklorists Alan and Bess Lomax, Guthrie recorded his own updated version of “California Blues.” On tape, he described how Rodgers had “misled” people with his “pretty song.” To the point, Guthrie said: “Notice how this song hits all of those southern states and welcomes them all to come to California… That was an old song that Jimmie Rodgers sang…and I seen hundreds and hundreds of people gang up around an electric phonograph and listen to Jimmie Rodgers sing that song… and they’d punch each other in the elbow and say ‘Boy, there’s the place to go.’”

In “Do Re Mi” (1937), Guthrie begins where the punch in the elbow ends, with hopeful but hopelessly naïve southerners and southwesterners. In a cautionary tale, he warns: “Lots of folks back East they say, leaving home every day, Beating the hot old dusty way to the California line…”

In this tale, Guthrie’s folks collide with the good officers of the Los Angeles Police Department who, in turn, turn them back to “beautiful Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Georgia, Tennessee.”

This, of course, was based on the all-too-true story of 1936 “bum blockade.” Implemented by Texas-grown Los Angeles Police Chief Ed Davis, the LAPD overstepped its constitutional boundaries by denying American citizens free passage between states in the name of public safety and vagrant control. Applauded by the editors of the Los Angeles Times, who called migrants “imported criminals, radicals, and troublemakers,” the blockade employed the talents of 136 police officers at sixteen different points along the California border.

As a side note, the schism between the distinct Wests of Rodgers and Guthrie would be partially reconciled sixty-five years after the writing of “Do Re Mi.” In 2005, an even less likely pair, Bob Dylan and Merle Haggard, played together on a shared bill in Oakland, California. When asked how the “Okie from Muskogee” and the author of “Masters of War” could possibly find common ground, Haggard replied, “I think our connection is clear; Jimmie Rodgers and Woody Guthrie influenced both of us—I took it in one direction, he took it in another. Now we’ve come full circle.”

**LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL:**
**BOB GEDDINS AND K. C. DOUGLAS, “MERCURY BOOGIE”**

**Comments by Douglas Flamming**

Our next tune will be a bit of Oakland blues, a song originally called “Mercury Boogie” (later “Mercury Blues”), which has been very popular since it was recorded and released in the late 1940s. Most recently, “Mercury Blues” went platinum for country star Alan Jackson. But it was written by two African Americans who had left the South to work in Bay Area defense plants during World War II: Bob Geddins and K. C. Douglas.

If you look for the song on iTunes, you see that dozens and dozens of performers have covered it, and you’ll see the original under the name of K. C. Douglas. But Bob Geddins was the driving force of the song and probably wrote it.

Woody Guthrie and other white southerners had cautioned against the western myth—and they had done so from the point of view of the white working class. African Americans who moved west held a rather different point of view. Yes, economic conditions were important to them. But for Afro-southerners, racial conditions were the heart of the matter. And racial conditions in the West were better than they were in the South. True, there were real problems for African Americans in the West; many historians, including me, have highlighted those problems. But
from the vantage point of the South of the 1940s, life out West was better—socially, economically, and politically. For black southerners, the West was freer, at least at the time. "Mercury Blues," recorded in Oakland just after the war, was the sound of greater freedom—and some money in the pocket.

World War II defense production ended the Great Depression and brought hundreds of thousands, ultimately millions, of southerners to the West Coast defense plants. Blacks and whites alike poured into West Coast production centers from Seattle to southern California. They built ships and airplanes, mainly—heavy-industry, high-wage jobs. Overnight, migrant boomtowns sprang up—shanties, government-supplied trailers, makeshift housing of all kinds. One area of especially explosive growth was the East Bay, Oakland and Richmond, which housed the massive Kaiser shipyards. As migrants settled in and paychecks kept coming, they wanted music—southern style. For whites, little honky-tongs popped up; for blacks, little blues clubs.23

One migrant from Texas was Bob Geddins, destined to become the godfather of Oakland blues. At war’s end, he settled into Oakland, put together a little recording studio, and bought his own record-pressing machine. He became the impresario of Oakland blues: he scouted talent (there was plenty); he trained up promising singers; he wrote songs, recorded them, pressed them (on dozens of labels, all of them his), and sold them from the trunk of his car.

But he wasn’t just peddling southern blues. He helped change the blues, experimenting with rhythm, writing more innovative lyrics, and creating a livelier feel—adding some boogie. Simply put, Oakland blues were more fun.

The same thing happened with gospel music in postwar Oakland. It became livelier and more creative. The Andrews Sisters of Oakland were a good example. An all-female group of some six to eight members (depending on the time), they created lyrical riffs and harmonies that were just "outta sight"—unique. If you go to iTunes and buy up some Andrews Sisters songs, you may hear, as I did, a kind of prequel to the early Jackson 5. Sly and the Family Stone later used similar harmonies and shout-outs in their music—and not surprisingly, because the Stone Family gospel singers were a group in Oakland before Sly grew up and took that funky road, with plenty of Stone family members in the band.24

It’s odd for me to think of Oakland as a uniquely upbeat place. I instinctively think of it as the archetypal example of the postwar ghetto and fiercely enforced white racism. I think of it as the home of the Black Panthers. And it was a harsh ghetto, and it was the Black Panthers.25 But at the same time that the Panthers were at their height, the Oakland Community Gospel Choir recorded a little fund-raising record that miraculously went big nationwide. That record included the song "Oh, Happy Day!"—the first gospel tune to top the Billboard 100 charts.

It’s hard to square the Panthers with “Oh, Happy Day!"—but it’s worth thinking about. In any event, for southerners who moved west, it wasn’t all gloom and doom.

The Elusive West: Merle Haggard, “Big City”

Comments by Douglas Flamming

Our next song will be “Big City,” by Merle Haggard. The essential theme of this song is that the West remains always out of reach. Somewhat chronologically out of order, “Big City” (1981) is nonetheless a nice thematic follow up to “Mercury Blues.”
A farmer and his sons in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, walk toward shelter as a dust storm approaches in April 1936. The devastating and dramatic storms in the southern plains of the 1930s gave the Dust Bowl migrants their name, but it was the people from the cities, towns, and rural areas of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri who headed for California’s agricultural valleys and urban areas during the Depression.

Library of Congress; photograph by Arthur Rothstein

When his career began in the early 1960s, Haggard was a complex fellow—and he still is. Many of his early songs were effectively pro-labor, pro-New Deal songs—songs that, like Woody Guthrie’s, gave the working man (almost always a man) a special place in American life. Then, in the late 1960s, he wrote “Okie from Muskogee” and “Fightin’ Side of Me” and was tagged, not without reason, as the white knight of the right. But he kept doing his own thing and thinking his own thoughts. To get a sense of his self-proclaimed independence, listen to his song “I Wear My Own Kind of Hat.” In recent years, he has been a big fan of the Clintons and was vocal in his support for Hillary in the 2008 presidential primary, even as he penned an anti-Bush, anti-Iraq song.

Haggard is so closely associated with Oklahoma and Okies that it often surprises people to learn that he was actually born in California—Bakersfield, in 1937. But the connection was real enough. His parents were, in fact, Okies of the Great Depression, and they did land in hardscrabble Bakersfield with a bunch of other Okies. His dad died shortly after World War II, when Merle was nine, and the young boy spiraled downward into petty crime and then not-so-petty crime, eventually landing a three-year stay in San Quentin penitentiary in 1957. While he was there, Johnny Cash came to perform; by the time Merle was released in 1960, he was thinking of giving music a try.

Library of Congress; photograph by Russell Lee

Migrants took their music with them. At his homestead near Muskogee, Oklahoma, a boy removes his guitar prior to leaving for California in July 1939. Among Dust Bowl refugees—industrial and white-collar workers as well as farmers—Oklahomans contributed significantly to the introduction of country music to the state.

Library of Congress; photograph by Russell Lee
He found his place in country music via another southerner gone west, Buck Owens, who created what came to be known as the Bakersfield sound—edgy, hard-hitting country that included its share of poor white humor. Owens had become a huge star with his own TV show, so Haggard felt he himself had a chance. He made the most of it.

Haggard had a knack for sad songs—songs that begin with hope and end with broken dreams—and he often couched these songs in the Dust Bowl. But he also penned a good share of songs that reflected not sadness, but disgust—a southerner’s righteous indignation at a world gone wrong—and these songs were often couched in modern urban life. “Big City” is one of those songs.

The wartime defense boom had lifted most poor whites out of the California cotton fields and into big industry. After the war, they moved to blue-collar suburbs. By any Dust Bowl standard, they had made it. They had good, steady, high-wage factory jobs, with union representation and a New Deal safety net to boot.

But “Big City” suggests that for some southerners, this kind of steady economic security was not enough. They wanted the West, by God, and the West had to be something more than this. Somehow, the West seemed always out of reach. Perhaps it still is.

Well, hold on there, Bob Geddins. Our next song was written by an African American in the Bay Area, and it’s a song about missing the South, about being homesick for Georgia. Our next song is Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay,” which was recorded in late 1967, just before his death, and became a number one hit when it was released, posthumously, in early 1968.

Redding was born in rural Georgia in 1941 and, before dying in a plane crash at age twenty-six, became known internationally as the King of Soul. Redding’s family moved to Macon—then a small city in the middle of Georgia—when he was five. He grew up singing in church, winning all the talent shows, and idolizing another Macon native, Little Richard. In 1960, he was hired on as a singer for an R&B group called the Pinetoppers. Georgia pines! They make me feel claustrophobic—there’s no horizon, for heaven’s sake! But those pines made many Georgians happy, and one of those people was Otis Redding, who loved the southern countryside.

No sooner had he experienced some success as a solo artist with his song “These Arms of Mine” (1962), what did he do? Did he head for Motown? No. Did he move to L.A.? No. Did he take New York by storm? No. He bought a 300-acre cattle ranch twenty-five miles outside of Macon. There, with his wife and children, he raised cattle and some horses and rode around the ranch in a horse and buggy. He hunted for deer, fished in a small lake. And, yes, this is Otis Redding we’re talking about here: the Big O, the King of Soul.26

In 1966, he had a smash tour in England, which led to a more extended European tour in early 1967. Everywhere, he was a huge star. Then he returned to the States, where he took the stage at the Monterey Pop music festival in California, one of the legendary pre-Woodstock events. He killed ’em. A smash performance. Only weeks later, he was back in California to play a series of shows in San Francisco. Between performances,

HOMESICK FOR THE SOUTH:
OTIS REDDING, “(SITTIN’ ON) THE DOCK OF THE BAY”

COMMENTS BY DOUGLAS FLAMMING

In the song “Mercury Blues,” the message was that African Americans had found some good fortune out West. Get a car. Cruise the town. Let the good times roll.
he was housed in a high-end houseboat in a high-rent marina in the very wealthy zip code of Sausalito. There, having reached the pinnacle of success in his business, he experienced an existential crisis (a fancy phrase for it); he became desperately homesick for Georgia (a better phrase for it).

In “Dock of the Bay” he bemoans his fate: “I’ve got nothing to live for / And look like nothing’s gonna come my way.” What?! Everything was coming his way! He had everything to live for. But his success was rooted in Georgia, and his success had taken him far from his roots, from his family, from himself. In the West, it hit him like a brick: He was lost. And the result was “The Dock of the Bay.”

For me, not being from the Deep South, and having studied too much of the South’s bitter past to feel a connection with the region, I am always amazed that so many southern songwriters, having left the South, long to be back there. In their South, there was a personal, face-to-face, family-centered quality that they found lacking West, where everyone seemed a stranger in a strange landscape. The West could be liberating, but it could also seem empty—empty of soul.

In recent decades, a fascinating phenomenon has occurred. Beginning in the 1980s and with increasing speed ever since, African Americans have been moving back to the South. The civil rights revolution eventually worked magic in that haunted region—racially and economically. In recent years, millions of blacks from the North and West have returned—the children and grandchildren of the Great Migration going home. It is a massive return migration—no, more than that, it is a redemption migration.

And an interesting thing: Blacks who never left the South have been welcoming them with open arms. When black southerners welcome the newcomers they often ask this question: “Who’s your people?”—meaning, who are your relatives, your kin, your family? Where is your family’s “home house”—the place your people were from before they left the South, the place where you are, at heart, still from? “Who’s your people?”

I want to ask you to do a little imagining for a moment. Imagine that the American West falls into such a severe crisis that westerners leave in droves for the North and the South—a one-hundred-year migration out of the West. Then imagine a resurgence in the West, and the children and grandchildren of those who left the West decide to return. Can you imagine anyone in the West waiting to welcome them with open arms, anyone to ask them: “Who’s your people?” Maybe, sitting in his houseboat in Sausalito, Otis Redding knew the answer.
**Western Apocalypse:**
Gram Parsons and Chris Hillman,  
“Sin City”

**Comments by Daniel Cady**

Our next theme is Western Apocalypse, and our chosen artist, Gram Parsons, embodies that theme perhaps better than any other artist. Born Cecil Ingram Connor III in 1946 in Florida, Parsons is considered by many the founder of country rock and the godfather of alternative country. After dropping out of Harvard, Parsons found his way west to seek fame but not necessarily fortune; or as he said, he headed “West to grow up with the country.” In the West, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Gram Parsons became the “beautiful dreamer who sang Southern church songs to L.A. sinners.”28

As the story goes, however, in the West, Parsons figuratively crashed and literally burned. The account of his 1973 overdose at Joshua Tree, the theft of his corpse and makeshift cremation, is now legendary. Since then, many have booked a night at the Joshua Tree Inn and requested the Gram Parsons room (Room 8).

As a southerner looking west, Parsons held much in common with our other subjects but cared little for their findings. Like Guthrie, he knew that the West was not the Garden of Eden, and embraced the region’s reputation for troubling excess. As he wrote in his ode to Las Vegas, “Ooh Las Vegas,” “every time I hit your crystal city / you know you’re gonna make a wreck out of me.”

In song, Parsons seems to empathize with Otis Redding and the R&B singer’s longing for home. While finding more common ground with the Carter Family’s “My Clinch Mountain Home,” there is—by my reckoning—no better song of longing by a displaced southerner than Parsons’ “Hickory Wind.” But outside of music, Parsons shared none of Redding’s real-world south-
ern connections. Parsons’ people were from Los Angeles.

Los Angeles serves as the site for one of Parsons’ finest songs. Creatively, “Sin City” (1969) is the product of a South-meets-West collaboration. Cowritten by San Diego–born Chris Hillman and recorded by the Parsons-Hillman-fronted Flying Burrito Brothers, “Sin City” sounds like Mike Davis’ *Ecology of Fear* reads: a narrative preoccupied with apocalypse. Real or imagined, the city perpetually seemed on the verge of destruction. For Parsons, Los Angeles may swallow people whole, but God gets the last laugh, washes the corrupt people and earthquake-prone city away with a dose of burning rain.

Coauthor Hillman, who survived Parsons’ self-destructive indulgences, claims that in retrospect, the song offered a cautionary tale of the West akin to those penned by Woody Guthrie; “People like Gene Clark from the Byrds, who came here from Kansas with all that talent and all bright-eyed and talented and idealistic, and the whole thing just swallowed him up.”29 Advice unheeded by his writing partner. In the end, the West swallowed the talented but incautious Cecil Ingram Connor III.30

**The Price of Freedom:**
Janis Joplin, “Me and Bobby McGee”

**Presented by Virginia Scharff; Comments by Daniel Cady and Douglas Flamming**

“Me and Bobby McGee” was written in the late 1960s by Kris Kristofferson, who, like Janis Joplin, was a Texan. Both were poets and free spirits, but whereas gender norms sped Kristofferson on his way, they created a kind of prison for Joplin. Looking beyond the Lone Star State for new horizons, white men with brains and talent saw many
an open door. But as the sixties dawned, the women’s movement had yet to gain traction nationwide, much less in Port Arthur, Texas, where Janis’ thoughtful, unconventional mind-set made her an exile in her own hometown. She went against the grain and paid the price. She ran, came back, struggled to find a place, and found a bit of a niche as a coffeehouse singer in Austin, where she attended the University of Texas.

But, as Gingy has written, “when campus wits voted her ‘Ugliest Man on Campus,’ she split.” Hitchhiking to San Francisco, she soon became an iconic figure in the Haight-Ashbury as the lead singer for Big Brother and the Holding Company. The male-dominated world of rock n’ roll had never seen anything like her. As the singular goddess of psychedelic rock—with its full complement of sex and drugs and its cultural bazooka aimed at all traditional mores—Janis became the literal embodiment of women’s liberation in the late 1960s. By bolting Texas, she had discovered free spaces. Then, by pushing the limits of rock n’ roll (even California’s limits), she found herself on the far borders of individual freedom. The result was that Joplin “enjoyed a power to speak to, and move, a national and even international audience.”

The end came quickly, in sadness and excess, as it did for so many other trailblazers in that era of rock. The West saved Janis Joplin; it freed her. Then it killed her, but not before she lived. And not before she herself had dramatically expanded the boundaries of what a western woman, an American woman, could be—or at least imagine herself to be.

For this she paid the ultimate price. To be truly free as an individual, Janis opened herself to the crushing social scrutiny that often accompanies famous rebels and to the private loneliness that has often accompanied female rebels in particular. Growing up in a very southern hometown, she was often alone. Erasing traditional gender boundaries in a very western Haight-Ashbury, because it was a radical act of individualism, resulted in a different (perhaps lethal) kind of isolation. That was the price of the ticket, and she proved willing to pay it.

Whatever Kris Kristofferson meant to say in “Me and Bobby McGee,” Janis made the song what it was. Freedom was “feeling good” and that was “good enough.” But ultimate freedom meant inevitable loss. In seeking to be free, as individuals, we all lose something we love—or someone we love—along the way. Who, in the end, hasn’t let something slip away “up near Salinas” and then longed to have it back, just for a day?

Southerners who moved west in the Radio and Record era were self-consciously southern. And for many, black and white alike, being southern meant something important. It could mean Port Arthur or poverty or racial violence. But it could also mean family and friends, a sweetheart left behind; it could mean a recognizable place, an understandable past. Many southerners were eager to get out of Dixie, to get free. Many did get out and did find greater freedom. Few pushed the limits of personal freedom as far as Janis Joplin—or Gram Parsons, for that matter—and few paid that high a price. But in ways large and small, there was always a price to pay.

Afterword: One Magic Afternoon in Denver

By Douglas Flamming

I once said in print, in a publication that mattered to me, that the Western History Association was “an organization that is unusually sane, slightly loopy, and invariably redeeming.” I meant it as a compliment, and I meant it from the heart. Where else could you attend a history conference and see, in the same hallway, such a mix of people interested in the past? I clearly
With the slogan “This machine kills fascists” affixed to his guitar, Woody Guthrie underscored the role music could play in interpreting political and historical issues. In 1943, when this photograph was made, Guthrie was continuing the legacy he began as the “Dust Bowl Troubadour” during the Depression. The “West by Southwest” music panel was a chance for WHA conference attendees—and the panel’s performers—to personally experience the power of music in a historical framework.

Library of Congress; photograph by Al Almuller

recall the first time I attended the Western’s annual convention. I was walking down the hallway to a session; I was late. Suddenly I saw, striding down the hallway and wearing a conference name tag, a fellow dressed in full cowboy gear, right down to the spurs a-jingling. Having been fully accustomed to the tweed-bound Southern Historical Association, I was not expecting this. If I recall correctly, I felt the urge to stop and talk to this fellow but decided to keep on going. I smiled to myself and said out loud to no one, “Well, damn!”—and I meant that as a compliment, too.

Over the years, I became aware of the myriad voices—often engaged in intense debate—that could be heard at the annual conferences: lay historians interested in traditional western history topics (General Custer, outlaws, pioneers, scoundrels, and heroes) and academic historians, some of whom shared the traditional interests and others who were bringing newer versions of social and cultural history into the organization. The WHA, and western history in general, was suffering from an identity crisis, and while I understood why so many people felt so strongly about the direction of the field, I liked the eclectic nature of the WHA and its membership. It made me feel blue that folks in the organization were locked in conflicts. As a relative newcomer to western history, I remained outside the debates and focused my efforts on my own research and writing. It was not until 2005, following publication of my book Bound for Freedom, that I became aware that the intensity of the debate had dimmed a little and that many people in the organization were working hard to blend the various interests of the membership.

I began to notice that the WHA’s annual Call for Papers included repeated requests for innovative panels. I took these requests to mean that members of the organization should create some sessions that would appeal to multiple constituencies—namely, panels that would attract all manner of lay historians and academic types. I thought, “That’s a good idea. Someone should do that.” After a few years of saying this to myself, a voice from deep inside spoke back: “Well, you’re
not doing anything to help." No, I had to admit, I wasn't. So I resolved to propose an innovative panel. Someday. Maybe.

Meantime, I was getting to know Dan Cady and his work. Our research overlapped in many ways, and we shared many common interests in trying to understand the complicated relationship between the West and the South—particularly regarding race. Eventually our discussions turned to regional culture and music and the ways in which black and white southerners, however separated by the mountain of Jim Crow racism, were nonetheless listening to each other's music. Then came the personal realization that we both played guitar. And from there, by hook and by crook, the idea for this session evolved.

From my own private point of view, the session involved several related aspects. First, it reflected my academic interests in region and race. Second, it provided a way in which Dan and I could explore this topic in a novel, perhaps enjoyable, way. Finally, to get rather personal about it, the music panel was a way to make good on my private pledge to help build bridges within, and try to help, the WHA.

Just prior to the program committee deadline, we hit a snag: I thought Dan was going to be the lead singer, and I would add some harmonies; he thought I was going to be the lead singer, and he would add some harmonies. We needed a singer. We knew whom we needed, but would she want to sing for us? Was she already committed to another panel? Was she too swamped writing about Jefferson's women? Would she want a year off after serving as president of the WHA? There was only one way to find out. I sent Virginia Scharff an e-mail with the subject line: Wanna Sing? Gingy's response included what is now one of my favorite sentences of all time: Well, sure. The program committee put us on the program.

Flash forward to Denver. Our session was slated for Saturday afternoon. Gingy, Dan, and I got together for our first rehearsal late Thursday night. The next few days were intense with rehearsals. It was pressure packed; it was fun.

To the very last moment, we were not sure anyone would come to the session. For one thing, our Saturday time slot was packed with interesting sessions, panels we ourselves would want to attend. For another, the WHA program did not give any indication of what was going to happen at our session, no indication that we would be performing a set of songs. It merely listed our session title, then Virginia Scharff as lead singer, and finally, Dan and me as presenters. We worried that our panel might not pull in ten people.

We needn't have. The session room, which held fifty chairs, filled up early and quickly. More chairs were brought in; people stood in the doorway.

More than sheer numbers, what excited me most was that the room was filling up with the kind of mixed audience we really wanted to draw—a diverse cross section of WHA folks. There were men and women sporting cowboy hats and fringe vests. There were well-known scholars. There were people wearing bolo ties, straight ties, bow ties, and no ties. Some people wore suits and some wore western attire. There were a bunch of people in attendance I didn't know, and I liked that. The crowd tilted toward the senior side of the age scale (I include myself), but some young folks were there as well.

As one who has devoted a couple of decades to studying the black West, I was especially pleased to note that there were approximately half a dozen African Americans in the audience, more, in fact, than had attended a WHA panel devoted to "The State of Black Western History," which I had been on the previous year.
As people entered, I felt oddly calm. I say “oddly” because I had been scared half to death about the whole affair for quite some time. In fact, the first words I had said to Dan on Saturday morning, before even so much as “Good morning,” were “I’m nervous.” And that was an understatement. In our proposal to the program committee, I had mentioned that we had all played music professionally. That was true. But I had failed to mention that my last professional performance was in 1980. I had not played or sung in public in thirty years! Somehow, though, the crowd strolling into the room, and the good-natured chatter they brought with them, had the effect of calming me down.

The audience carried the session, start to finish. For three historians who had never played together prior to the first night of the conference, we laid down some pretty good music. Gingy’s singing voice was flat-out righteous, and Dan’s dobro was a voice in its own right. But the audience brought the magic. When I began the introduction, I sensed almost immediately that the crowd was right with me, above and beyond an ordinary audience. For example, near the end of the introduction, I mentioned that one important parameter to our song selection was that we were historians. My plan was to deadpan the line, in hopes of getting a little chuckle. I hit the line okay, but I didn’t get a little chuckle. I got a big laugh. I knew then that this thing might fly after all. Dan introduced the first song, and the audience was right with him, too.

Then there was nothing for it: We had to play. As Dan settled the dobro in his lap, Gingy explained that she could not do a Jimmie Rodgers–like yodel, so we were going to substitute a dobro yodel. That, too, brought some chuckles of goodwill. Then I remember a hush and my brain telling me that I had no choice but to strike the first chord on my guitar. I nearly missed the strings, I think, but things picked up when Dan’s dobro kicked in, and when Gingy’s voice broke over the room I saw everyone’s eyes light up. When the song was over, the thunderclap of applause and cheering was shocking. I was completely taken aback.

The magic continued. As Dan introduced the next song, he said some fascinating things about Woody Guthrie’s critical views of the Jimmie Rodgers song we had just finished. When Dan read Guthrie’s quote, I heard people in the audience say, out loud, “Hmm,” and I was struck yet again by how sharply engaged the audience was in this session—words and music alike. We had decided to begin Guthrie’s “Do Re Mi” with a slow, a cappella rendering of the chorus, the first line of which is “If you ain’t got the Do Re Mi, boys.” Before we began, Gingy told the audience, “Okay, we’re going to church now.” The three of us gathered close. Gingy slowly sang the first two words: “If you.” Dan and I came in on the next two: “ain’t got.” When we hit the word “got,” the acoustics of the room turned golden and the three-part harmony resonated in a way that was just not historically possible. In that moment, which I can still recall precisely and which I can still hear precisely, I felt something like pure joy.

After that, the session ran itself. The distance between the audience and the three of us narrowed to almost nothing. Almost the entire audience whistled the ending bars of Otis Redding’s “The Dock of the Bay.” By the time we got to “Me and Bobby McGee,” which Gingy introduced on the fly, there wasn’t much that needed saying. She said a few words, we plunged into it, and plenty of WHA members sang along.

Then came the loudest ovation I have ever received for anything. Everything else remains, in my mind, a rapid blur of images. Someone shouted out “Great session!” which seemed to be the signal for the crowd to rise and disperse, talking loudly and laughing. I remember the distinguished Elliott West, professor of history at the
University of Arkansas and my first mentor in the profession, coming up and saying “Wonderfull,” getting a hug from his wife, Suzanne, and meeting his son, Garth. That they had come to the session meant the world to me. I recall trying to tell them that, but somehow I was unable to get basic words out of my mouth in the normal way. Then people were crowding around—they were happy, they were shaking my hand and slapping my back and squeezing my arm and saying nice things on their way out the door. When the room finally emptied, California History editor Janet Fireman was there to solicit our panel for the journal and to escort us to the bar, where folks kept stopping by our table to buy drinks and talk music.

I still find myself wondering if it really happened. Yes, it did happen, and it was honestly one of the most meaningful things I have done in this profession—because it was so far out of my comfort zone and because it actually accomplished what I hoped it would.

Indeed, the session worked so well that we ought to dwell a bit on that success. It was innovative, to be sure, and we three musicians performed tolerably well, but that does not explain it. Without doubt, the large, diverse, and enthusiastic audience made the session. Without really knowing what we were doing, Gingy, Dan, and I tapped into something in Denver. And all of us—the readers of California History and the membership of the WHA—need to keep trying to find that something. As we seek, some efforts won’t pan out; others will. In these singularly difficult and stress-filled times for historians throughout the United States, we would do well to pay close attention to what works—and then to think hard about why it worked.

Before closing, I wish to say a word on behalf of the traditional conference session—two or three formal papers followed by a formal comment and audience Q&A. These sessions have been the norm for so long precisely because they work. Indeed, they have been a vitally important and enjoyable part of my career. As a graduate student, I learned invaluable lessons about the profession in these sessions. As a senior historian, I continue to learn much from traditional panels, and I particularly enjoy learning from the new generation of graduate students and young historians who are on the way up. Through the years, I have met invaluable colleagues and made good friends in conference rooms large and small. Conventional panels will remain the bread and butter of our annual meetings throughout the country, as well they should.

But the session in Denver underscored the importance of taking some risks and trying new approaches, especially if we want to build bridges between the history-reading public and the academy. And we should want to build those bridges. Shortly after the conference, Dan sent me an e-mail that ended with the line, “Something was unearthed in Denver during those forty-five minutes, and I’d hate to see it head back underground.” I second that.

Other Songs on Our Themes

Looking West: Robert Johnson, “Sweet Home Chicago”
Left of Eden: Haywire Mac, “Big Rock Candy Mountain”
Let the Good Times Roll: Sly and the Family Stone, “Dance to the Music”
The Elusive West: Iris DeMent, “Easy’s Gettin’ Harder Every Day”
Homesick for the South: Gladys Knight and the Pips, “Midnight Train to Georgia”
Western Apocalypse: The Eagles, “Hotel California”
The Price of Freedom: Patsy Montana, “Little Sweetheart of the Ozarks”
IN TUNE WITH INNOVATION: THE "WEST BY SOUTHWEST" MUSIC PANEL AT THE 2009 WESTERN HISTORY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE, BY DOUGLAS FLAMMING AND DANIEL CADY, PP 4–25

The authors wish to thank Virginia Scharff for her contribution to this project and Janet Fireman and Shelly Kale for bringing it to publication.


2 Ibid., 115.

3 Ibid., 94.

4 Ibid., 102.


11 Gregory, American Exodus.

12 "The closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the Blonde on Blonde album. . . . It's that thin, that wild mercury sound. It's metallic and bright gold, with whatever that conjures up. That's my particular sound," Dylan said in 1978; http://www.rollingstone.com/news/story/6595658/9_blonde_on_blonde.


16 At the behest of Ralph Peer, Rodgers' first popular song, "T for Texas," was renamed "Blue Yodel" due to the singer's distinctive vocal style. Because of the song's success, nearly a dozen more of the artist's subsequent recordings bear the same title, but are numbered sequentially.


18 Carey McWilliams, Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); originally published in 1939.


20 Ibid.

NOTES

22 Mazor, Meeting Jimmy Rodgers, 279.


26 On Redding, see Peter Guralnick, Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1999), esp. chaps. 4 and 10. From Sept. 2007 to Apr. 2009, the Georgia Music Hall of Fame, located in Macon, held a special exhibit titled, "Otis Redding: I've Got Dreams to Remember." The lead quote in the exhibit program reads, "Otis Redding was soul, but Otis Redding was country, too. That was a point on which he always insisted, and that was the way others saw him. His strength was his simplicity, even if the simplicity was hard-won. ... He was according to [Atlantic Records producer] Jerry Wexler, 'a pure man,' a natural man, not only in his music but in his life, clear on what he wanted as much as anything because he never tried to lose his rural roots." [For this quotation, the program cites Peter Guralnick, Georgia Music Magazine (Summer 2007). The magazine, including back issues, is available for sale through the Georgia Music Hall of Fame website: www.georgiamusic.org.] For photographs of Redding on his ranch, see the Gallery section of the official Redding website, established by his wife, Zelma Redding, who still lives at the "Big O" Ranch: http://www.otisredding.com. At this site, see "CNN Exclusive: The Legacy of Otis Redding," which reprints a 2009 CNN article about Redding's "country" side and provides CNN's video interview with Zelma Redding, accessible via the site's homepage as of Apr. 9, 2010.

27 On this point, I am indebted to the public historian and minister, Velma Maia Thomas, a native of Detroit who moved to Atlanta in the 1990s. In an autobiographical presentation at Georgia Tech in March 2000, she emphasized the "Who's Your People?" phenomenon.


29 Ibid.

30 Los Angeles swallowed Gram Parsons because he tried to swallow it. Parsons' appetite for drugs and alcohol surpassed other rock luminaries of the era. With money to burn from a buoyant trust fund and well-connected friends (including Peter Fonda and Keith Richards), Parsons found a West of fatal abundance.

31 Virginia Scharff provided the introduction to this song during our performance. In tune with the mood of the audience as our session was winding down, she ad-libbed her remarks. Gingy has written about Janis in several works, and we have drawn from those writings here to suggest the importance of Joplin and the larger theme of the song.

32 Scharff, "Lighting Out for the Territory," 299.

33 Scharff, Twenty Thousand Roads, 161.

34 Flaming, Bound for Freedom, xiv.

"THIS IS OUR FAIR AND OUR STATE": AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE PANAMA-PACIFIC INTERNATIONAL EXPOSITION, BY LYNN M. HUDSON, PP 26–45


2 The terms "race man" and "race woman" describe members of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "The Talented Tenth," the elite 10 percent of the African American population who fashioned themselves leaders and reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century. For more information, see Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).


5 Ibid., 4.

6 Ibid., 209.

