

Thunder in the Heart

Following the Ache of Americana and Decoding the Queer Paul Clayton

I. THE WORK SONG

I stood with my dog at the curve of a trail, bathed in the wind washing up the mountainside, as I listened to a woeful male baritone sing a slow folk song about a lost lover named Johnny. The song's ache was clear and steady, sharpening when the guitar dropped to a lower chord. My heart curled with the song, its strum and moan a perfect expression of the aching sound that I sought. I added it to a playlist of thousands of others I'd collected from the genres of country, folk, blues, and Americana that together formed a complex network of intersecting caverns into which I'd stumbled two years prior, wild-eyed and shaking, when my life became a mad pursuit of the sound that kept me alive through my depression.

I first assumed the song "Johnny's Gone to Hilo" was the work of a queer, and therefore current, folksinger. In addition to its inclusion on an album of sailing songs, the singer's cry, "Now pull away, my bully boys, Johnny's gone to Hilo," implies a crew of men on a ship, making this the song of a gay sailor. But the album info revealed that it was released in 1957. I'd listened to enough traditional folk to know that male singer-historians freely sang the songs of women pining after men—their work was academic, a preservation of songs in their original forms as often as they were rewritten and personalized—but I had yet to encounter gay-themed traditional folk. As I walked down the mountain toward home, I was uplifted by the possibility that a song that seemed to be speaking to a form of queer yearning had either been overlooked or quietly preserved by a musician of the conservative 1950s.

A few weeks later I named the singer, Paul Clayton, to a colleague, himself a passionate expert on traditional folk. He replied that not only did Clayton make an immeasurable contribution to the preservation of American folk music, but he was also gay and bipolar, a disorder that led to his suicide in 1967. With the song's mark fresh on my heart, my colleague's words silenced the room around me. No matter how many times I listen to the old song, the pain Clayton sings still stings.

Most of the songs on Clayton's *Sailing and Whaling Songs from the Days of Moby Dick* are punchy sea shanties or slower dirges, performing enthusiastic recreations of classic sea-folk in the clean honest way of the 1950s folk academic. The sound of "Johnny's Gone to Hilo" stands out on the album. In place of the dancing strings of the other tracks, the lyrics

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are accompanied by a simple strum that drops to a lower chord when he comes to the chorus. He sings high and a little pinched, like his voice might break. Clayton's moan and strum sound like they are echoing in a cave, giving the song an affect that the rest of the tracks lack. It's a song he might play as the sun rises after a long night of deep conversation, while the other tracks on the album could be played on a stage for a crowd of eager fans.

Like any classic folk song, "Johnny's Gone to Hilo" has been recorded under many variations, originally sung by sailors during the difficult task of coiling heavy rope. It follows a sailor who, depending on the version, either defected from his post on ship or left a lover back home, abandoning either his crew or his jilted wife to wonder about his adventures in "Hilo" (likely based on the Port of Ilo in Peru).¹ Clayton's version blends the two to create something new and queer.

His rewrite is so elegant in its simplicity that it's sneaky. With the addition of just a couple of lines, he put the words of the lonely wife into the mouth of one of Johnny's fellow sailors, turning the shanty into a ballad of gay heartache. Halfway through the song, the speaker mourns and ponders, "My Johnny's gone, what shall I do? [. . .] I'll go too," just as the wife had, then issues an order to his crew, making him possibly the captain: "Now pull away, my bully boys [. . .] Oh pull away, and make some noise." Rather than follow the sailor who defected, the speaker will shove off without him. Clayton then uses a line in which Johnny's shipmates express envy of his freedom to pursue women, and turns it into an expression of a lover's envy when he fears that Johnny's off chasing "Spanish girls." Finally, just as in the lonely wife's version, "Hilo" is repeated as a refrain, alternately drawn out with "Hilo you" to sound like "I love you."

This story of a jilted queer lover calls to mind a nearly identical depiction of homoerotic desire in French author Jean Genet's novel *Querelle de Brest*, published in 1947, (ten years before Clayton's recording). Throughout the novel, naval officer Lieutenant Seblon secretly pines after his swarthy criminal underling, the titular Georges Querelle, who briefly submits to Seblon's desire, before he defects and leaves Seblon alone forever. Genet was one of several gay writers and artists of the mid-twentieth century who drew on the inherent queerness of modern masculine archetypes. Figures like the sailor, the convict, and the policemen operated in all-male communities under strict hierarchies and discipline, offering ample opportunities for sexual tension and fantasy. Clayton's queering of a traditional sailor's work song, a musical relic of an all-male community, is part of a time-honored gay tradition.

The song is also an illustration of the same queer longing José Esteban Muñoz articulates in his introduction to *Cruising Utopia*, as the singer imagines alternate queer realities. When the speaker calls for his crew to "pull away" and "make some noise," Clayton envisions a group of men sending up their gay brother's heartache as they would for any hetero shipmate longing for a girl. Clayton's biography paints a picture of a gay man in a mostly straight social circle that was alternately wary or accepting of his sexuality. When I was seventeen and newly out, I attempted and failed at the same form of solidarity with hetero friends

1. Paul Clayton. Band 10: Johnny's Gone to Hilo. Liner notes for *Sailing and Whaling Songs from the Days of Moby Dick*, by Paul Clayton. Tradition Records, 1956, vinyl.

from my all-male Catholic school when, as we passed around a bong in a van after swim practice, I described the way a pair of tiny black shorts stretched around the tree-trunk thighs of the guy I'd purchased the weed from, aping the way they talked about girls, hoping they'd hoot and whistle back, (they did not).

I prefer to imagine Johnny was the ship's heartthrob, and the speaker is calling to a crew of queer men to howl through their collective loss. I first sought out queer brotherhood at twenty-two, when I posted a poem to the Craigslist men's personals calling out for others whose homosexual experience was limited to anonymous sex and solitary trips to gay bars. "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of here and now," Muñoz writes, "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."²

The moment my colleague uttered the words "gay and bipolar," I realized that this musician, archiving and bravely queering old folksongs while combatting his deteriorating mental health, was part of another, much older tradition of queer art and struggle. A web search produced the image of a smiling chin-strapped man for whom I felt an immediate flood of affection and solidarity. I knew this ancestor's struggle, and he knew mine.

II. THE STORM

The period I refer to as my chemical depression did not start all at once. Symptoms came on gradually, appearing for spans of hours or days, alone or in pairs with increasing regularity until it seemed I could not go half a day without them. One doctor diagnosed my condition as bipolar depression for its ability to strike and disappear. Another refuted this, saying that I was not showing any signs of mania. To this day, I have not received a satisfying explanation for the three years I spent fighting for my life.

I was nearly thirty when it began. I had moved to Los Angeles for grad school five years prior, where I wrote semen-soaked poetry about gay male family, full of punk daddies and brothers barefoot in proto-queer ritual. I encountered my first queer friends, a crew of earthy women and trans folks in sleeveless shirts and bandanas tied around their wrists. After grad school I traded my queer women and trans family for the cis-gay world of electronic house music and disco thumping through warehouse parties till dawn. This was a different queer lineage than the one I'd imagined, a tradition of high performance and gender nonconformity blending subcultures and styles in explosive expressions of freedom. Photographer Kevin McCarty describes a doorway that divided a punk music venue from a gay bar in a strip mall in suburban Ohio which allowed him to move between both spaces: "My utopia existed at the doorway on the threshold—neither space at one time and in both simultaneously."³ Like McCarty, I was able to move freely between the realms of my hypermasculine ritual-gay fantasy and dance-all-night disco. I counted myself blessed to have finally joined a thriving queer community, so I accepted its tenets and found plenty

2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

3. Kevin McCarty, "Autobiographical Artist Statement," *GLO: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2005): 427–28 quoted in José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 104.

of joy there. I got a challenging but rewarding job teaching English at two community colleges and shared custody of a sweet sad-eyed dog with an ex-boyfriend I loved dearly.

Then one day a grainy black oil was spread thin over everything in my mind's eye. A shift in my senses of taste and smell came and went, eventually becoming the regular herald of sourceless panic attacks. The attacks themselves left me on my back unable to see straight, as if I were drunk, and made my muscles ache for a day afterward, as if I'd survived a car crash.

I did not understand these symptoms were connected until the visions came, sensory hallucinations that played on loops that could last hours or days, flashing as I lectured to my students or walked the dog. I saw a knotted rope pulled tight beneath my jaw, a cinder block tied to my ankle and dropped from the side of a boat. Talking on the phone, I felt my body go rigid and swing backward as if strung from a tree. The visions brought with them an alternative logic, in which the map in my head that once marked paths to different outcomes had been redrawn so that all paths led to the same outcome. In those moments, there was no question of why I needed to prepare to end my life; it was an inevitability, as simple as saving money for retirement. When the visions passed, the plans I'd made under their influence terrified me. But they always returned, and with them that simple frightening logic.

The most prominent symptom was a thunder that rolled quietly into my pericardium, building up from a low rumble until it was booming with the weight of huge ceaseless waves pummeling the shore. Like the other symptoms, this storm came and went. So physical was the sensation, I am certain that had I undergone an MRI it would have been observable. The storm gave me a perverse sort of peace, for it was physical proof that I was not losing my mind, something I could check for when I became suspicious of my thoughts. The storm was strongest when I was idle, leading me to rely on house chores and long walks up the local trail with my dog to soften its pummel.

One day, crying for no reason I could think of as I packed for a much-needed trip to the Midwest to see old college friends, I found myself exhausted by the Broadway musical soundtracks I'd been listening to all morning. Belting alongside *The Color Purple*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Rent* had been a reliable coping mechanism from the time I was a gay pre-teen, when, like many young queers, I was drawn to musical theatre for its themes of overcoming adversity and manifesting one's inner power. But these albums could not address the onslaught of inner noise that had come for me.

I was gulping down sobs when I remembered a song I'd heard a few years earlier on a road trip to an artist residency on an animal sanctuary in Driggs, Idaho, a small town in the western valley below the Grand Tetons. I had been accepted as part of a group with two friends, a couple named K. and Molly, during one of our summers off from school. The two women held hands up front as we drove through Nevada and Utah, playing the music of powerful female artists both new and familiar to me. I remembered watching the high red-striped walls of Zion National Park's canyons pass all around us, listening to the wail of a singer whose voice was both tired and proud, seasoned with years of fighting through bottomless pain—perhaps not winning but certainly triumphant.

"Maria," by Lucinda Williams, was the first song to draw me into the caverns of country, folk, and Americana. In it Williams counsels her troubled friend to flee the city for the

country before she loses her mind.⁴ But I did not hear the lyrics when I played it that day, packing and crying, for a miracle had occurred: the thunder in my heart fell in sync with her music. I could feel the ache of the song in my nerve endings. The crashing in my chest and Lucinda's song folded together as if the two had been waiting for each other, like a deluge of rainwater finally meeting a canyon floor and coursing raucously through it. This physical sensation was as powerful as any painkiller or mood stabilizer I'd tried while I played the rest of *Happy Woman Blues*, an album tailor-made for sourceless heartache.

Hungry for more, I searched my memory for other powerful women with a similar sound. I thought of Bonnie Raitt, whom my mother played for my sisters and me in my childhood, and Emmylou Harris, whose music I'd never heard, but who I always thought looked real tough. The effect of their music was the same, even doubled and tripled on certain tracks of their early albums. Together the three of them pounded through the walls of my apartment as I cried and danced and smiled wildly. Their music reminded me of an important queer lesson I first learned when I came out as a teenager in a Catholic family: that pain could not only be survived, it could light the way to some place new. The ability of their music to transform my pain into power is described in one of José Muñoz's many definitions of queerness, "a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present."⁵ While their music did not turn back the thunder in my heart, it did show me that I could move through it without being destroyed, and even enjoy the feel of its electricity. The storm had left me feeling my way through the dark, but their music gave me a flashlight, and its beam revealed that I wasn't alone there.

III. THE ACHE

Once Lucinda, Bonnie, and Emmylou called me in, the hunt for the sound I'd heard in their music became the single energizing force of my life. While visiting friends I'd be privately planning what I'd play as soon as I returned to my truck like a smoker counting the minutes to his next cigarette. The disco, pop, and house music of the gay bars now drained me, as did any music I did not deem "country." I spent hours walking the trails with my dog, marking songs and artists for later investigation. The music was a protein that stitched me up as I was being torn apart. No amount was enough. When symptoms came, the music allowed me to outlast them, to help me make it to the next moment, and the next, and the next, carried by the sound that gave me the closest thing I had to peace.

I heard it in vocals that were straining or bright, in the coursing fiddle, the crispy slide guitar, or some quick finger picking. Most often it was born of a combination of elements that together expressed a deep central ache. Some songs had more of it than others, and most had none at all. I could only hear it in the family of music that I erroneously called country, a web that included folk, traditional folk, blues, bluegrass, outlaw country, bro country, alt country, roots rock, and other genres all tied up together. But it was the artists who took the queer approach to country that spoke clearest to me, those who existed

4. Lucinda Williams, "Maria", recorded 1980, track 3 on *Happy Woman Blues*, Smithsonian Folkway Recordings, [spotify:track:oliUEISXlOMVvjHAZT95Be](https://open.spotify.com/track/oliUEISXlOMVvjHAZT95Be)

5. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1

between these genres, using relics and debris from the places they came from and whatever else they liked, stretching musical laws to make it their own. I followed the ache from one sound to the next, studying the tunnels that stretched between them. I could hear their differences— like the home-brewed vocals and simple instrumentation of folk, or the firing strings that sets the adrenaline rushing in bluegrass, or country’s plain-spoken storytelling with a punchy tempo—but I chased what they shared. Country, an uncomplicated music made by complicated people situated between blues and folk, seemed the appropriate name for the broad range of sounds that simplified and gave voice to what occurred within me. I did not differentiate because stomping to Whitey Morgan, crumbling to Gillian Welch, and howling with the Indigo Girls was for me all part of the same impulse.

My development as a country fan mirrored my entry into queer community: I found my sisters before I encountered my brothers. I drew power from the world-weary strength of women such as Iris DeMint and Gillian Welch, the harmony of the girl groups such as the Dixie Chicks, and the wild confidence of women such as Gretchen Wilson and Tanya Tucker. From their honky tonk sound, I arrived at Outlaw Country like my first visit to a crowded leather bar: I saw that these men were my people, turning their pain into a fucked-up sort of fun. Men like Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, and Whitey Morgan laughed loud and moaned through their lyrics, warning anyone who got too close that they were possibly dangerous, though they were just as likely to cry as they were to fight. They were drunken stray dogs, born to die alone, rambling from one disappointing place to the next, cry-baby tough guys embodying soft-butch realness. I quickly adopted their pose.

It was here that I finally understood that country’s power lies in its perfect marriage of joy and sorrow. It is a music of pain that reflexively trades the typical aesthetics of pain for a quick tempo and a swagger. Lefty Frizzell’s “Sick, Sober, and Sorry” and Reba McEntyre’s “Fancy” are stories of misfortune becoming good fortune, tragic until a final reveal, yet fun all the way through. One is a foot-stomping diddy with a punchline, and the other is a power ballad still favored by drunken karaoke singers, both more celebration than pity party. This aesthetic dissonance is so baked into country music as to be one of its defining features, where lies the queer form of hope Jose Muñoz describes in *Cruising Utopia*. For him, aesthetic “contains blueprints and schemata” for that hope, “a map” to a better future.⁶ The aesthetic of country music, gay as musical theatre for its combination of earnestness, pagantry, and attitude, offers a vehicle out of hopelessness into hope.

My romance with country continued to imitate my queer development when my pursuit of the ache, first coded by gender, became a call from a sacred lineage pulling me further backward in time. I had burned with reverence and longing when I first read about the daddy-boy relationships that shaped ancient Greek and Chinese empires, for I saw that a central part of my desire was eternal and intrinsic to the identity of my people. I felt the same sense of discovery when I came upon the artists Townes Van Zandt and Colter Wall. Separated from each other by as many years as I am from Paul Clayton, they are to me connected as bookends to country and folk, revealing the invisible force, the ur-text, the great

6. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

vibration from which all country and folk musicians sing. Rising country star Colter Wall, a twenty-four-year-old from rural Saskatchewan with a voice stone-deep and mountain-thick, sings about life on the plains and the struggle to live simply in a complicated world. I first heard the late Townes Van Zandt's name from Wall during a performance I attended alone in a tiny Hollywood bar. Townes's dirty-glass voice and haunting lyrics have been revered by outlaw country boys, such as Steve Earle and Kris Kristofferson, since his emergence in the mid-sixties: "I covered my lovers with flowers and wounds, My laughter the devil would frighten . . . time was like water but I was the sea, I'd have never noticed it passin'".⁷ Both heavily influenced by blues and early country, both poets of the broken human spirit and rural America, their voices and words seemed gifted from gods. Their music set the crashing in my chest to a vibration fine as a tuning fork.

As I followed the ache into early country, folk, and bluegrass, where sang the aunts—Hazel Dickens and Alice Gerrard, Kate and Anna McGarrigle, and the uncles—Earl Scruggs, Earnest Tubbs, and Hank Williams, I realized the music was not just stitching me back together, it was building me into something new. My identification with country music, now solid and certain, had sealed my alienation from the gay spaces I had called home. At the same time, I knew that, as a gay city boy, the culture of country rarely spoke for me directly. I'd missed the heyday of projects like the 1973 fairy album *Lavender Country*, an album featuring gems like "Cryin' These Cocksucking Tears," and the queer wisdom of the Indigo Girls, a lesbian folk phenomenon of the nineties. But mine were the artists who did not exactly fit into country either, whose approach to music was itself queer, sampling sounds and influences from across the nation and decades just as house and disco cultures had. They were both apart of and outside of this lineage, creating new ones, blurry and undefined.

I found the innermost cavern full of ghosts, where oral history becomes written history through the work of archivists who gathered music that had never been recorded. They sang the ballads of the American working class that had been passed down through the generations orally, singing the ache of hard work, lost love, and old age. Artists like Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family coalesced the sounds of rural America to birth a new genre. Musicians of every decade have kept this form alive, from 1950s dulcimer maker Jean Ritchie to the MacArthur Fellowship-winning Rhiannon Giddens. It was in this chamber that I found Paul Clayton, a queer folk archivist and musician whose work paved the way for much of the music that had brought me here. I see him waving at me from the bottom of this hole, where country and folk split off into different sounds, an ancestor where I least expected to find one, who suffered and died in his struggle against the very storm that brought me to him.

IV. THE QUEER PAUL CLAYTON

Born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1931, Paul Clayton grew up listening to his fisherman grandfather sing folk songs from the sea.⁸ Handsome, out, and boisterous, he presented

7. Townes Van Zandt, "Rake," recorded 1970, track 9 on *Delta Momma Blues*, Poppy, spotify:track:1lg5mjajvXMkV85BoVIwJU

8. Bob Coltman, *Paul Clayton and the Folksong Revival*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 11.

as a folk-dandy: he had a walking stick collection, wore strange hats, such as fezzes and pith helmets, and usually went adorned in vests and patched-up pants, evoking both Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman.⁹ His queer fashion choices, part costume, part pose, part genuine folk article, made him a spectacle wherever he went. He was either the center of the room, telling stories and providing drugs, or withdrawn and snappy,¹⁰ a dichotomy played out further in the places he made home: Greenwich Village, New York, well established as an enclave for artists and queers by the time of his arrival in the late 1950s, and Brown's Cove, Virginia, where he rented an isolated cabin in the mountains.

He travelled the country by thumb and car, transcribing and recording lyrics that had never been written down from musicians who had never seen a tape recorder, rewriting songs as often as he preserved them. He shared his findings with other musicians, such as Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, Odetta, and Dave Von Ronk.¹¹ With his use of both mountain dulcimer and guitar, he straddled styles and genres. With twenty-two albums and an immeasurable contribution to the traditional folk music archive, he left behind a legacy any archivist and musician would be proud of.¹²

Today he is remembered as much for his downfall as he is for his body of work. Though he is cited as a driving force of the folk revival of the 1960s that gave us Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, he remained obscure outside of his industry, unable to make a mainstream name or a consistent living.¹³ He suffered bipolar disorder in a time when treatment for it was limited, leaving him to self-medicate with drugs.¹⁴ His important friendship with Bob Dylan was eventually dissolved by a copyright dispute and Dylan's rocket to fame.¹⁵ While those in the orbit of the two musicians characterize their relationship as a platonic mutual crush of creative inspiration, many today refer to Clayton as the man who *fell in love* with Bob Dylan.¹⁶ At 36 years old, penniless and suffering severe paranoia and hallucinations, Clayton ended his life by putting an exposed wire to his chest in the bathtub.¹⁷

Like most complicated artists, Clayton is so much more than his tragedy or his relationship to a better-known heterosexual. He is lauded for his work as an archivist, but the gay aspect of his art has, until now, gone unnoticed. Beyond my own analysis, I am unable to find any notice of the queer ghosts I see lurking behind his discography, as in his version of "Johnny's Gone to Hilo." His biographer Bob Coltman insists Clayton "never brought gay self-expression into his music."¹⁸ As with so much of our history, queer content is often buried in whatever an artist could get away with. But queers are uniquely trained to decode

9. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 105–06.

10. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 81.

11. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 1, 111–12.

12. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 2–3.

13. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 173.

14. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 185, 187.

15. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 146–52, 173–75.

16. Elizabeth Alfhors, "A CurtainUp Review Search: Paul Clayton, the Man Who Loved Bob Dylan." Accessed 1 June 2019 <http://www.curtainup.com/paulclayton15.html>

17. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 199.

18. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 3.

the secrets of our people. What is obvious to me may not be obvious to others who have studied his work.

It is well-known that Clayton freely reworked the lyrics to classics as most folk archivist-singers of the time did. This was a divisive practice in the traditional folk music industry of the late 1950s. Coltman explains, “[T]his was a live issue to many devotees of unadulterated tradition. (Never mind that tradition is, by definition adulterated countless times over.) About 1958 or 1959, a number of singers reliant on traditional songs began to embroider them, and so did Paul. ‘Rewriting tradition’ was still questionable, a shady sort of playing around with an elder culture’s songs.”¹⁹ As Coltman points out, reworking the lyrics was, in part, keeping with tradition. No song is fixed when you can find three different versions of it in three different regions. Coltman’s invocation of the “shady” aspect of this mutability highlights that traditional folk music is a natural site for queer art-making, denoting a darkness and a boldness queers have long armed themselves with to reshape many artifacts of tradition, to pull the queer out of the mundane, to reassert ourselves into a history from which we’ve been erased.

It is also well known that Clayton was loudly and proudly gay. Long-time friend Stephen Wilson and others describe Clayton preaching the virtues of homosexuality as a form of mental liberation. “Paul took the view that if you weren’t gay, you were sort of restricted, compromised, unliberated. Did you smoke grass, or didn’t you? Were you a hippie or not? Were you gay? All of these were simply the destruction of conventionalities and moronic value assumptions. Everybody could become anything.”²⁰ This ideology extended to his stage persona, where he often told gay jokes on stage between songs, filthy enough to get him kicked out of a venue (none of which are relayed by anyone Bob Coltman interviewed for the biography, a tragic absence).²¹ This was no small thing. Being out was dangerous—the lives of American homosexuals of the late 50s and early 60s were marked by anti-sodomy laws, political defamation, police raids on gay bars, and the rise of activist groups to oppose these forces, such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. While many LGBT people of the time lived in fear, keeping their sexual identities private, Clayton lived in the open. The idea that such a man would refrain from working this important aspect of his identity and ideology into his art, or that it wouldn’t at least leave some unconscious mark, is suspect and begs re-examination.

Timing and key parallels between Clayton’s work and the work of other gay artists of the era suggest that he was influenced by the likes of Jean Genet, beefcake photographer Bob Mizer, and erotic illustrator Tom of Finland. Clayton released five albums between 1956 and 1959 that featured the music of male archetypes that have been used to explore queer male sexuality for decades. Albums such as *Wanted for Murder: Songs of Outlaws and Desperados*, *Whaling and Sailing Songs from the Days of Moby Dick*, and *Timber-r-r! Lumberjack Folk Songs and Ballads* featured the folk music of cowboys, criminals, sailors, and lumberjacks, the very same figures Genet, Mizer, and Tom permanently imprinted into the

19. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 107.

20. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 160.

21. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 161.

gay consciousness of the era through their widely distributed publications. With his beef-cake magazine *Physique Pictorial*, then the closest thing to gay pornography most men could get, Bob Mizer was the first to publish Tom of Finland's illustrations: a spread of shirtless lumberjacks at work and riding logs downriver in the spring issue of 1957, just one year before Clayton released *Lumberjack Folk Songs*.²²

It's easy to imagine Clayton romanticizing and identifying with these figures. Between his Virginia mountain cabin and his life on the road, his nightly liaisons with locals and fellow travelers, he lived much as they did.²³ Perhaps Clayton recognized that he was uniquely placed to breathe life into Tom's lumberjacks, Mizer's cowboys, and Genet's sailors through the music he'd been studying all his life, for his own pleasure or that of any queer folk fans who might be digging through the record bins.

The message of gay liberation he preached to his friends wasn't just aimed at heterosexuals. "Bachelor's Hall" is another song with many versions, most of them about how the bachelor's life is preferable to the prison of marriage. Clayton's is the queer rewrite, a joyous rundown of the virtues of single life, in which "a maid when she's single can live her ease, get up when she likes and sit down when she please, (. . .) sit down on her throne, and eat her own cake be it raw or be done." It's the song's last line, wholly original, that points the finger directly at the gays, as he explains "when a man's married his troubles begin" for it "makes the gay spirit grow weary and small."²⁴ At the time, the word "gay" still held its multiple meanings, but by then it had become common enough to describe homosexuals, including by homosexuals themselves. Its inclusion in what appears to be an old folk song could have gone unnoticed. As I am unable to find the word or the line in any other version of "Bachelor's Hall," Clayton's use raises a flag. Marriage offered countless homosexuals of the late fifties a safe place to hide. Clayton's song warns his ilk that living such a lie is damaging to "the gay spirit."

It's on *Merry Muses of Caledonia* that we see the gleeful foulmouth Bob Coltman describes as "razz(ing) audiences with gay propaganda from the stage," behavior that eventually got Clayton banned from his regular venue, the Gaslite.²⁵ In this erotica album based on the poetry of Robert Burns, Clayton was given a trove that allowed him to sing songs such as "How Can I Keep My Maidenhead (Among So Many Men)." The speaker, never specified to be female, ponders "the stretching of it, the striving of it, the pouring of it, the riving of it, Oh, the double driving of it, the further you go in!" The speaker in "A Hole to Hide It In" offers a man a "hole to hold it all and more (. . .) to keep it soft and warm."²⁶ Imagine the smiling Paul Clayton on stage, dropping gay innuendo between songs, then launching into "Tommie Makes My Tail Tottle" or "Nine Inch Will Please a Lady." If half the audience was scandalized, any resident queers would have felt a rare moment of joyful representation.

22. Jan Löfström, "Scandinavian homosexualities: essays on gay and lesbian studies," *Journal of homosexuality*, 1998, Routledge, 35 (3-4), 189.

23. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 36-7, 76.

24. Paul Clayton, "Bachelor's Hall", recorded 1955, track 13 on *Bay State Ballads*, Smithsonian Folkways, spotify: track:3ZX9FORrN2K9oqpk94P4u

25. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 3.

26. Paul Clayton, *Bobby Burns' Merry Muses of Caledonia*, Elektra, 1958, spotify:album:6Bj3ViP18I6Hw3o3lyxC

I came to country and folk believing I had no place there; I know well the joy they would have felt in discovering an artist who reappropriated the form for their cause.

My mind sticks on those queers in his audience; I do not know if Clayton had anything like gay community. His biographer conducted thorough interviews with many of his friends and family members but only appears to have interviewed one homosexual (and he wished to remain anonymous).²⁷ Of gays in Clayton's life, only two others are mentioned. "John" was Clayton's last boyfriend, and one of two people who found his body after his suicide.²⁸ His last name is not given. The other was a Spanish speaker in Spain or Paris, described as "one of the closest gay relationships of his life," though we are offered no more information on him than this.²⁹ Written in 2008, this is a glaring absence in Coltman's biography of Clayton. But the peers Coltman interviewed came from a different time; they may not have wanted to out themselves or others. It's also likely that Clayton kept his gay and straight circles separate. What was he like among his own people? What stories do they have to tell of him? Clayton lived in Greenwich Village and regularly visited Provincetown (already a gay mecca by the late 1950s), two places where he likely had some form of community.³⁰ Even the Gaslight in Charlottesville, his regular haunt from which he was eventually banned, was friendly to "mixed crowds"; the owner himself was rumored to be gay.³¹ But no such community is mentioned. This familiar not-knowing, both sad and enticing, is the nature of so much of what has been passed down to us from our queer ancestors through the filters of fear, discrimination, death, and anonymity. Still, I wonder if there's some trace of the queer Paul Clayton left in any of these places.

Clayton's final album was a last grab at commercial success at the end of a niche career long surpassed by his more famous friends. *Paul Clayton, Folk Singer!* sounds more modern, bright, and bluesy than anything else he recorded, though its content is at odds with its sound. Six of the twelve tracks are about death or departure. His final track is an existential rewrite titled "Life is a Toil," describing an old woman, "the picture of gloom," counting life's injustices through her endless housework: "Life is a toil and love is a trouble, beauty will fade and riches will flee, pleasures they dwindle and prices they double, and nothing is what we could wish it to be." She then grows exhausted and dies. The song ends with a question that Clayton, toiling in obscurity until he too grew exhausted and died, might have asked of himself: "Was it just that she who so long had wielded the duster should herself in the end be turned into dust?"³² His remaining years were marked by untreated bipolar disorder aggravated by decades of drug use that left him much as I was when I found him: unmoored from reality by hallucinations and certain of his coming death.³³

27. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 36, 246.

28. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 198.

29. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 34.

30. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 35.

31. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 161.

32. Paul Clayton, "Life is a Toil," recorded 1965, track 12 on *Paul Clayton, Folk Singer!*, Monument, spotify: track:oSA8XhUOc7clv9MsPZv2ZW

33. Coltman, *Paul Clayton*, 193.

VI. THE MAP

In the summer of 2018 I drove from Los Angeles to Virginia in search of Paul's cabin to mark the passage of my depression. I'd read about a journalist who'd spent the night in the then-abandoned structure sometime in the seventies, and I had to do the same.³⁴ It had been eight months since I felt the thunder in my chest losing its strength, returning quieter each time. The other symptoms followed suit, as when the hallucinations, once fully immersive sensory experiences, became two-dimensional and easy to ignore. The symptoms had arrived without a reason and left the same way—I had outlasted them. The end took months, but each day was easier than the one before it, the knowledge that I was coming to the end giving me strength. I simply had to get to the next moment, and the next, and the next. I had been doing it for more than two years, and could do it some more. When the symptoms returned in sharp bursts, I went on Bupropion to wait out the last of the storm.

I emerged unscathed but not without casualty: when I returned to the music after my last symptoms burned away, I realized I'd lost a friend: the sound of the ache was gone. For a long time afterward I could remember what it sounded and felt like, but now that memory is gone too. When I played Townes Van Zandt's "Columbine" for a date over dinner, the voice that had once choked me with its intensity now sounded very simple. His beauty and genius remained, but I could no longer feel it in my nerves. That marriage of music and thunder in my heart saved my life, but I could not have kept on living if it had stayed.

But the ache did not depart without legacy. The map I've made of the caverns of country music continues to grow, revealing branches of queer lineage old and new in artists such as Shane McAnnally, Sarah Shook, Jerron Paxton, and The Topp Twins. Be they queer folkies or straight country bros such as Cody Jinks and Chris Stapleton, in them I have found a people who know where I've been, as if as if they and Lucinda and everyone else who walked with me through that cave are surviving together. Even when country is about losing, the very presence of the music makes us triumphant over our pain.

Paul Clayton survived on music for as long as he could, just as I did, and he gathered it just as obsessively. He is a punk figure of the best variety: the nerd-punk of a niche branch of academia using old folk for substrate to loose secret queer music upon the world, embroidering a new sacred lineage into the old one, creating vehicles out of the difficult present to offer a glimpse of a better queer future for those capable of decoding it, the ones who need it most. Perhaps only one person who knew him truly saw the power he had, a man he once called a friend, Bob Dylan: "(Folk music) goes deeper than just myself singing it, it goes into legends and bibles, it goes into curse and myths, it goes into plagues, it goes into all kinds of weird things that I don't know about. The only guy I know that can really do it is a guy named Paul Clayton; he's the only guy I've even heard or seen who can sing songs like this, because he's a medium."³⁵

Paul did not have the tools or the community that I have today. He died two years before Stonewall, which happened just blocks from the apartment in which he took his life.

34. Anne Margaret Daniel, "Paul Clayton", *HuffPost*, March 3, 2014 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/paul-clayton_b_4886915

35. Bob Dylan, "Gargoyle Interviews Bob Dylan," *Gargoyle* (February 1964)

He shared the struggle of countless queers who face mental health challenges, whether they stem from an unfortunate brain chemistry or from being forced to split our personalities, test the boundaries of our identities, and live the resulting trauma. He predates the music, the medication, and the community that held me up in my life and my suffering. Imagine what he could have accomplished if he could have made it to the next moment.

I drove to Virginia in silence as often as I drove with music pouring out my car. I watched blue lightning flash in the night sky over the I-55 to Memphis for an hour before passing through its storm, the rain so heavy I shouted prayers for my gods to preserve me as it hammered my truck. I arrived in Nashville during its Pride weekend by coincidence and found myself talking to the owner of the first gay bar I stepped into. When I asked him which of the gay bars played country music, he curtly replied that no gay bars in Nashville played country. Driving through the Smoky Mountains, my shuffled songs magically played Ronnie Milsap's "Smokey Mountain Rain," and I cried, shouting the words into the drizzle and fog blowing through my open windows.

I arrived in the town of Crozet, Virginia, on a Sunday morning. The records office was closed, and I had not thought to call ahead to ask if anyone knew which cabin in Brown's Cove had belonged to a folk singer fifty years ago. I followed Crozet's only road as far into the area as I was able to go, where fences lined private properties and the road ended. I stopped beside a rushing creek, hoping that he had crossed it or tasted its waters. I lit a heavy candle I had purchased in a New Orleans magic shop that had been blessed for communication with ancestors. I meditated with creek mud rubbed into my palms. I did not stay long, fearful some local wouldn't like the sight of an alien queer on their land. On my way out of the Blue Ridge Mountains, I stopped at an overlook to see the hills he must have travelled on foot a hundred times and buried the candle there.

The following autumn I participated in a group show of artists honoring their queer heroes with vests, to draw them out of the past into an imagined queer motorcycle gang called "Joney's Pack."³⁶ I cut the sleeves off a denim jacket and covered it with his gayest song titles, such as "The Little Pig," "Soldier's Joy," and "No Hair On It"; patches for each of Clayton's favorite gay archetypes, the outlaw, the sailor, and the lumberjack; and images of his smile, his dulcimer, and his Virginia mountain range printed onto swatches of fabric. I walked the runway that night imagining a future where his gay life has been unearthed and he is embraced as an honored ancestor. Today when I hear the chord drop on Clayton's guitar and the moan of his voice in "Johnny's Gone to Hilo," a wind stirs in my chest, and I hear an echo of the ache. ■

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