"King Harvest (has surely come)" : rural populist imagery in roots rock music, 1967-1973

Christopher Lee Witte

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ABSTRACT

“KING HARVEST (HAS SURELY COME)”: RURAL POPULIST IMAGERY IN ROOTS ROCK MUSIC, 1967-1973

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The American roots rock musical genre of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s too often has been overlooked in the historical discussion of popular culture of the period. This study, through an examination of the works of five popular musical groups - Bob Dylan, The Band, The Grateful Dead, The Byrds, and Creedence Clearwater Revival - focuses on how this music tied into a continued American mythology tradition of populism. Through an approach that corresponds with Richard Slotkin’s views on the creation of American myth, and a focus on the lyrical content of the songs and their presentation of nature, the open road, American heroes and anti-heroes, and death and destruction, this thesis examines how these songs utilized populist philosophies found in earlier American folk and blues music and adapted them as a means to explain and rationalize their place in the post-modern American society.
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Professor Robert C. Kenzer, Thesis Advisor

Professor Hugh A. West
"King Harvest (Has Surely Come)":
Rural Populist Imagery in Roots Rock Music, 1967-1973

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B.A., The College of New Jersey, 2004

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Christopher L. Witte

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Introduction: Rural Folk and Blues as Authentic Inspiration

“Gone are the days...” so began The Grateful Dead song “Brown-Eyed Woman,” a relatively obscure gem off their classic live album, Europe '72. This highly nostalgic song served to romanticize a mythical American past and nature, created a heroic portrait of its protagonist - a normal, rural bootlegger - and included themes of death and destruction, as it attempted to tell a mythic story of those days that have long since gone.

The type of mythic storytelling that the artists of this late 1960's and early 1970's country or roots rock bands explored, according to cultural historian Richard Slotkin, form part of an American historical process whereby “mythic story is increasingly conventional and abstracted” until it becomes a “deeply encoded... set of symbols.” These symbols combine together to create an effect of distilling complex historical events and phenomena into a “single image or phrase,” such as American understandings of “the Frontier,” or the “the Alamo.” It is Slotkin’s interpretation of the frontier in American society that I will apply to my discussion of this popular musical genre.¹

Much of the musical genus of this country or roots rock movement can be found in the rural roots of American culture and society. Whether they were derived from slave spirituals, southern segregation era blues, or the populist-socialist underpinnings of average Americans as they attempted to maintain and

glorify what Slotkin terms the “agrarian imagery of Jeffersonianism,” these musical patterns have deep historical roots among rural American existence.\(^2\)

The singers of this music, from the folk blues of Leadbelly (1888–1949) to the folk-cowboy ballads of Woody Guthrie (1912–1967), Slotkin asserts, were symbolic of this investment of meaning and significance attributed to these musical forms that were “hitherto reserved for the products of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley.” Over time the works and style of these famed singer-songwriters would be “imitated, elaborated and eventually re-commercialized by professional performers” both within the New Left socialist movement of the early twentieth century and by the rural-based romanticism of the folk, blues and rock-based performers of the second half.\(^3\)

The political agenda of this new “Left-Turnerism”, Slotkin claims, was to emphasize landscape, frontier, and the American West in general as “cultural sources... of an indigenous American radical tradition” that sought to romanticize events such as “the Whiskey Rebellion, Jeffersonian agrarianism, John Brown abolition,” and craft folk legends out of historically-nebulous characters such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James.\(^4\)

The music of this period, the music that so influenced Bob Dylan and the members of The Band, The Grateful Dead, The Byrds, and Creedence Clearwater Revival, focused its lyrical energies on advocating a “populist style” of democracy, praised the “political wisdom of the common people,” and possessed pointed hostility towards those in corruptible positions of power typified by “Big Business”

\(^3\) Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 281.
which Slotkin examines in his discussion of the mythology of the frontier in American history.\(^5\)

The perceived purity and authenticity of such music had powerful effects on the musical maturity of these aspiring musicians. In the late 1950’s and early ‘60’s before *The Beatles* and other bands revolutionized what popular music could be, David Hajdu believes that popular rock and roll “had not merely stagnated, but regressed” to the point where the lived in old folk and blues songs the likes of Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, and the songs found on Harry Smith’s Anthology of American Folk Music were seen as remarkable celebrations of “the rural and the natural, the untrained, the unspoiled – the pure.”\(^6\) When a young Bob Dylan heard Leadbelly for the first time, his immediate reaction was “This is the thing, this is the thing.”\(^7\) The authenticity, both real and perceived, of these musical forms was very attractive to aspiring musicians, and heavily influenced their cultural and musical understandings and frames of reference.

This renewed emphasis on what W. J. Rorabaugh terms “distinctly retrogressive” folk music and the subsequent folk communities that arose in many late 1950’s/early 1960’s college towns and cities, especially in New York, emphasized the experience of hearing and teaching these songs over the commercialized aspects of the current popular music scene.\(^8\) The songs that these artist encountered while immersing themselves in these folk communities would

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prove formative as the songs would serve as inspiration to their development. In turn these artists would cover their favorite traditional folk and blues songs and "assimilate and combine" elements of such songs together in order to create their own distinct musical sounds rather than "simply reproduce" these folk experiences. This process in turn created new powerful musical and communal experiences.9

Heading back to the song "Brown-Eyed Woman," on we see what days are gone in the eyes of the band, as the days "when the ox fall down" and "when the ladies say please" formed part of their nostalgic past as presented through the life of Jack Jones. With connections to America's past from Prohibition to the Stock Market crash and Great Depression, the song's focus was on such bygone days as when Jack and his father "made whiskey.... [that] burned like hell" and "cut hick'ry to fire the still." At the song's conclusion his mother "Delilah Jones went to meet her God" and his father, "the old man's getting on." There was a sense that the world presented in this song, the one Jack Jones grew up in, was on its way out, and these highly-nostalgic days would soon be gone forever.10

This song, beautiful in its own right, is important to this thesis' discussion as it contained all the key elements found in the so-called country or "roots rock" genre that arose in the late 1960's and continued on into the 1970's. This musical genre can be classified by its focus on Americana issues, employing nostalgic and romantic language, and its usage of blues and folk elements, often in acoustic arrangements that added a timeless quality to their works. Five key artists of this

9 Hajdu, Positively Fourth Street, 119.
time period, *Creedence Clearwater Revival*, Bob Dylan, *The Byrds*, *The Grateful Dead*, and *The Band*, all fall comfortably in this group and incorporated the key elements of romanticizing nature and the open road of American landscape, crafting distinctive heroes, and exploring the themes of death and destruction in the music they recorded and released during this period.

The roots of this country or roots rock music came from old folk and blues elements from the early twentieth century. Artists such as Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Skip James, Robert Johnson, and the timeless region-tinged selections off Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music* all can and should be seen as direct precursors to this musical movement that sought to create both a mood and song textures that evoked the timeless and spiritual quality of these original works. These artists’ quests for the authenticity of the music they heard from these sources in their own music was, according to folklore theorist Regina Bendix, a “peculiar long, at once modern and anti-modern.” Much of the music created by these bands as they sought this authenticity can be described, as Barry Shank points out, as being both “modern and anti-modern” as it was defined and shaped by historical, personal, and social experience, but not confined by them.¹¹ In fact, much of American popular music, as a cultural artifact, should be seen as a “history of illusions and masks” where artists conjure up images and feelings of places that may never have existed, and where racial identity is blurred, as many white artists,

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including those discussed here, find beauty and truth in black culture and consciously play and sing like black artists.  

The search for this authenticity harkened back to the folk movement of the 1960s of which Bob Dylan was a key player. These songs and performers acted, according to Barry Shank, as “conduit[s] between a tradition and an audience” as they were focused on performing songs that were supposedly not created, but were sung as key artifacts of a true America and American culture. Woody Guthrie, one of Bob Dylan’s foremost folk heroes, went against that grain by writing hundreds of his own tunes that would have a powerful effect on Dylan as he grew into his own as a songwriter. When Dylan himself began writing and recording his own work – playing these folk songs with (as he admitted) a “rock and roll attitude” - his popularity and influence over both the youth and musical community grew exponentially. 

The sense of importance of authenticity in folk music perhaps explains why Bob Dylan’s entrance in electric rock ‘n’ roll in 1965 was received so poorly by many of his fans, as this transformation was seen as moving away from the timeless aspect of heartless folk and protest music to the more disposable form of popular music as represented by rock ‘n’ roll. A piece in Melody Maker from 1966 shows how this transformation hurt some long-time fans, some who would even shout at him during concerts that “Woody Guthrie would have turned in his grave.” Of course, the fact that Woody Guthrie was not yet dead serves to further this point, as

12 Shank, “That Wild Mercury Sound,” 98.
to the mind of the folk fan Dylan was a touchstone to a music that was both historical and timeless. In this fan’s mind Woody Guthrie simply could not have been alive because Bob Dylan was his touchstone to a younger generation.

The rise of this country or roots rock comes after Dylan’s electric, existentialist phase and his endless touring to audiences who often booed him. Backed by musicians who would later form *The Band* and serving as a musical inspiration for *The Byrds* who rode to fame on electric versions of Dylan’s earlier acoustic-driven songs, this new rock star Dylan faded out after a few years and retreated to Woodstock, New York. There he ran through songs that served as an inspiration for *The Band’s* debut album and later surfaced on *The Basement Tapes*, and acted as a precursor to his 1967 album, *John Wesley Harding*. That same year *The Grateful Dead* recorded their debut album of electrified versions of old blues and folk songs, while *Creedence Clearwater Revival*, led by singer/songwriter John Fogerty, continued to hone their bayou-based rootsy blues-rock that would appear on their 1968 debut album and gain them enormous popularity.

It is these five popular music artists on which this thesis focuses its attention. Slotkin’s sense of the frontier mythology and the effect that populist thinking had on myth-making, narrative, and ways of defining American-ness can clearly be seen in his study of the western and populist motifs of popular fiction and film. This thesis seeks to utilize his ideological framework and apply it to popular music of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s.

Much of the literature that exists concerning the musical landscape of this time period is too lightweight historically to be considered as satisfactorily
covering the historical implications of the music. Even the best work on the music of this genre, Greil Marcus’ *The Old, Weird Republic*, has its shortcomings. First off, Marcus focuses almost exclusively on Bob Dylan and the music he created with *The Band* in his famed 1967 *Basement Tapes*. Not only does this exclusivity hamper its overall effectiveness, but Marcus’ schizophrenic writing style, which jumps haphazardly from thought to thought, hampers its overall effectiveness. Of course, as a rock critic and not an historian, Marcus should not be blamed for creating a work of original thought and scholarship that might possess some shortcomings as a historical narrative. Other works more historical in nature, such as Richie Unterberger’s *Eight Miles High* casts too wide a net to analyze the historical and cultural implications of popular American roots rock music.

Works that focus on the 1960’s and popular culture tend to underplay and understudy the works of these artists. Even David Farber and Beth Bailey’s *The Columbia Guide to America in the 1960s*, only touches on the surface of this rich musical genre. They only devote one short paragraph to the “richly imagined vignettes of American myth, history and people” that characterized these groups’ musical work, and even though these albums have “held up better than… psychedelia,” they continue to garner less attention and praise.¹⁵ In the popular consciousness of contemporary America, much of the music created by these bands has slipped from consciousness or relegated to one or two songs that are repeated on classic rock radio stations. Even the 2005 Martin Scorsese-directed PBS

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documentary, *No Direction Home*, focusing on Bob Dylan, only covered his life until 1966, as if his contribution to American music ended that year.

Through a detailed focus on these five groups and their music, with an added emphasis on their lyrics, this thesis attempts to create a meaningful tie between Slotkin’s study of American myth-making and story creation with a key area of popular culture – music - that he did not focus on. The thesis itself is separated into three key chapters - the first reveals how nature and landscape are presented in these songs and how they viewed modern twentieth century America with idealized notions of a rural past. The second discusses their presentations of heroes and anti-heroes as musical expressions of populist sentiment. The third demonstrates how these songs incorporated images of death and destruction to tie into a folk and blues tradition and reinforce a populist connection. Finally, a short conclusion wraps up the importance of these artists and their songs and presents how this musical tradition is still being utilized to express populist sentiment today.
CHAPTER 1:

"King Harvest (Has Surely Come)":

Nature and Rural Landscapes as Idyllic America

American popular culture and mythology form a key link to the nature and landscape of America, particularly to its southern and western regions. Fields of grain, idyllic rivers, open desert vistas and snow-capped mountains hold a special place in the minds and hearts of many Americans. And these feelings towards nature have been explored in American popular music from the rise of blues and folk music. Its appearance in the songs of the so-called country or roots rock movement of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s represents just another link in this long chain of American populist sentiment. This populist sentiment, according to Richard Slotkin, served to mythologize nature and landscape as symbolic indicators of the true American spirit whether through a focus on “western folklore” or “Jeffersonian agrarianism,” and the creation and reinterpretation of the rural idyllic nature of the “myth of the South.”16 The racial connotations of this romanticization of the rural South deserve mention, but should not be over exaggerated - none of these artists were offering the position that the actual rural South of the past, characterized by slavery, encompassed a more ideal life. These songs served more to tie these contemporary white artists with past forms of social resistance. If African Americans of the late 1960’s were becoming more militant in their desire for “Black Power” and nationalism, and intercity rioting protested the shortcomings and failures of American society and Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society,” these

songs sought to find solace in quieter forms of life and protest. In the minds of such artists, if the city had got you down, you simply had to go to the country where there was a greater sense of community and an obviously greater connection to all things natural. Of course one could make the claim that these artists idealized the past and rural existence while oversimplifying and ignoring much of the racial intolerance and tension that was present in these areas. Therefore, in a very real sense the musicians offered a view of an America rural past that seemed much more pure and tolerant than current society. As youthful listeners took these songs to heart, this oversimplification of rural America began to take on a life of its own so that the myth of past American rural utopia was created. Thus, the sense of the commune as an ideal way of life was born.

Some of the key symbols presented in this representation (or simplification) of nature and landscape were the freedom that open spaces offered and the romanticized notion of going back to nature as a purer existence that was common in the counterculture youth movements of that era. By the end of the ‘60s this youth movement and mentality had coalesced around rock ‘n’ roll musical forms as symbolic of what cultural historian George Lipsitz terms a “group of values inimical to the traditional concerns of the middle class.”

Many of the images found in these songs were in the same vein as films and novels of the western genre which, according to historian Jane Tompkins, sought to “fulfill a longing for a different kind of existence” both separate and distinct from

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modern America. These songs shared much in common with these western works studied by Tompkins, as they were often “antimodem, antiurban, and antitechnological” in nature and seemed to recall a nineteenth century existence in which man was more fully tied to the natural world. This sense of a simpler existence permeates throughout many of the songs of this roots rock music scene.

For John Fogerty, the principle songwriter of the band *Creedence Clearwater Revival*, this sense of nature as a redeemer from the trappings of modern life is apparent in the content of his lyrics. His main lyrical preoccupations were with the freedom of the open road, along with both a fascination and tendency to romanticize the nature of the American South. These pursuits formed the bedrock of *Creedence Clearwater Revival*’s music.

A discussion of such songs such as “Born on the Bayou,” “Green River,” “Proud Mary,” and their cover of Leadbelly’s “Cotton Fields” help illustrate the point. In these songs Fogerty reconceptualized himself as a Southerner longing to get back to his roots. In actuality, the entire band was from California, and the South served as a romantic touchstone as both the place that gave birth to the R’n’B and blues music they emulated, and as an adventurous landscape brought to life by both cinematic and literary representations as a life of bayous and riverboats.

In “Born on the Bayou” Fogerty longed to be “back on the bayou/ Rolling with some Cajun Queen,” a place where he could run through the “backwood, bare” on the most American of holidays, the Fourth of July. Fogerty created the

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impression that wherever he headed throughout his life, the bayou still called him back as he could “still hear my old hound dog barking,” to the point that he wished he were a “fast freight train” heading South. Similarly, “Green River” romanticized childhood attachments to both place and nature. Once again there was a sense throughout the song of a longing to get back to “where cool water flows.” This return to nature was offered up as almost a form of spiritual healing as it opened up Fogerty to “Let me remember things I love.” The song brought to mind idyllic natural images of walking along riverbeds, “barefoot girls dancing in the moonlight,” and fishing on a lazy day. Once again, Fogerty used animal imagery to describe the pull of this region on his heart, as this time whenever he thought of the Green River, he could “hear the bullfrog calling me.”

The song “Proud Mary,” released as a single in 1968 and included on their 1969 Bayou Country album, garnered both critical and public acclaim as even an artist as esteemed as Bob Dylan declared it his “favorite record of the year.” The popular single continued on in Creedence’s love affair with Southern life and landscape, in this case life on the river. The song’s narrator sang of the joys of “rolling on the river” while not losing “one minute of sleeping” worrying about the nine to five modern existence that he had left behind in the city. Not only is the natural life on the river presented as idyllic, but also, according to Fogerty, so were

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the people who inhabited this region. If you were in need of anything on the river, there was no need to worry because “People on the river are happy to give.”

Even the band’s version of Leadbelly’s folk blues classic “Cotton Fields” reinforced a positive image of the South and Southern nature, even if the lyrics and tone of the original belied such a romantic portrait. Their take on the song was that of a joyful romp, completely bereft of any melancholy or unease concerning life amongst the cotton fields. The song’s joyous tone even contradicted Leadbelly’s lyrics, which contained a sense of unease and a tenuous existence for those poor souls who were tied to the land and relied on cotton for survival. Creedence’s take on the lines “When them cotton balls get rotten/ You can’t pick very much cotton/ In them old cotton fields back home” was conveyed in such a manner as to be consistent with their other self-penned portraits of Southern life. Their version presented this lifestyle in a positive light, whereas Leadbelly’s portrait was more poignant and realistic in terms of the African American experience. Southern African Americans like Leadbelly, who were born in the segregated South and subject to racism, inequality, and the lingering presence of slavery as typified by the “Jim Crow” laws, would not be able to revel in the experience of “Cotton Fields” the same way as the four, young, white musicians from California. Whereas Leadbelly sang about actual experience, Creedence seemed to be singing about a place in their minds. As previously mentioned, herein lies the problem of authenticity, as a group of white musicians can cover songs of black Southern blues and folk musicians, and often times achieve much greater popularity, but some

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sense of the true nature of the inspiration of the music is lost. In Creedence’s literal whitewash of the song, the pain, trials, and tribulations of the black voice and experience were replaced by the idyllic longings of white musicians.26

This case of white musicians covering and recontextualizing the cultural works of African Americans was, of course, nothing new. Dating back to the mid nineteenth century, white musicians have incorporated aspects of black culture through musical forms, language used, and even, via blackface minstrelsy, race. This incorporation of black culture into white society via musical entertainment, while distanced from the overt racial aspects of black face performances, can be seen in the way white rock ‘n’ roll, blues, and folk singers perform. Therefore, every time one hears Creedence’s version of “Cotton Fields,” The Band’s version of the sugar plantation lament “Ain’t No More Cane,” or Bob Dylan singing the lines “no more driver’s lash for me,” as if he himself were once a slave, or other white musicians aping the language, diction, and pain of the black experience, Eric Lott believes one can see the “presence of blackface’s unconscious return.”27 Of course since the roots of blackface are based on “racial contacts and tensions endemic to the North and the frontier,” and tended to detail romantic “fantasies about the Old South,” examples of this long-time tradition must be viewed with a skeptical eye. Therefore, Creedence’s version of Leadbelly, done to tie in with the perceived authenticity of the original and its lyrics, was stripped of that authenticity as the song fell back into the trap of crafting more fantasies about the Old South.

26 Huddie Ledbetter, “Cotton Fields,” Tro-Folkways Music Publ.-BMI. This version is found on Willy and The Poor Boys, 1969 & 2001 Fantasy, Inc.
that in time would coalesce in the mind of listeners as truthful representations of past rural existence.

Bob Dylan's lyrical focus on nature and landscape was similar to many *Creedence* songs, but remained, characteristically, harder to interpret. While Fogerty wore his emotions and feelings on his sleeve, Bob Dylan always seemed to play much closer to his vest. He surely had some attachment to an idealized vision of nature, whether it be out West or down South, but his lyrics never really rose to the levels of outright romanticism of a locale on par with *Creedence Clearwater Revival*. His work seemed to offer paradoxes to the listener, whether it be using a location as a setting for a love affair, showing the feelings of being tied to the land and, of course, the threat of nature and God to one's life and livelihood while out amongst the trees and fields.

Dylan's "Down Along the Cove," released in 1967 on his *John Wesley Harding* album, used landscape as a symbol of a love relationship. While walking along this particular cove, the song's voice sees his girl "comin' my way" and immediately feels happy and refreshed. Likewise, on covers from his notorious 1970 *Self Portrait* album, Dylan utilized pop songs that use natural imagery to convey feelings of human emotions concerning relationships. 28 While these songs, "Blue Moon" and "Copper Kettle (The Pale Moonlight)" were lightweight tunes compared to most of his catalog, they nevertheless helped demonstrate an important point - the way one feels about their life and love affects how they feel

28 Obviously displeased with the quality of this album upon its release, rock critic Greil Marcus famously opened up his *Rolling Stone* review with the question, "What is this shit?" This review in its entirety can be found in Benjamin Hedin, ed., *Studio A: The Bob Dylan Reader* (New York: W W Norton & Company, 2004), 79.
and view their positions in nature. Therefore, songs about finding love, walking along the cove, or "lay[ing] there by the junipers," were portrayed as idyllic and romantic, while the lonesome singer of "Blue Moon" found no joy in his surroundings, and, in fact, saw the moon as sad as he was.²⁹

Other times, however, Dylan used nature in a much different context. The nature presented in such songs as "All Along the Watchtower" and "Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood)" was one of foreboding and unease, which will be discussed in further detail later in this thesis. On songs such as "You Ain’t Going Nowhere" Dylan portrayed a human tie with nature that was not a happy and symbiotic relationship by any means. The song also tied in with the larger American population shift away from rural farms to more urban communities as by 1900, the "center of American life shift[ed] from farm to city."³⁰ Sounding very much like a lonely person stuck on an isolated farm eager to get away but forced to stay and handle his responsibilities, Dylan sang "Clouds so swift/ Rain won’t lift/ Gate won’t close/ Railings froze/ Get your mind off wintertime/ You ain’t going nowhere." Facing this desire to leave with being compelled to stay, Dylan advised the lonesome farmer, "Strap yourself with a tree with roots/ You ain’t going nowhere." The song was not without its optimism, however; as it shifted into the chorus, Dylan sings "Ooh-wee, ride me high/ Tomorrow’s the day my bride’s gonna come/ Ooh-wee we gonna ride/ Down in the easy chair." There was a

definite sense presented by the singer that once his bride comes, and the loneliness subsides, life on the farm will be much more palatable and perhaps even idyllic.\(^{31}\)

*The Byrds* covered Dylan’s “You Ain’t Going Nowhere” as the first song on their 1968 album *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, their first sustained foray into country rock. Like most *Byrds’* versions of Dylan songs, it was a much more polished sounding piece that possessed a more country sound as it rode along on a foundation of beautiful harmonies and pedal steel guitar playing. The selection and placement of this song, as well as another Dylan composition, “Nothing Was Delivered,” which ended the album, served to bookend an album steeped in old time country and Americana with modern compositions that would ensure a hip legitimacy. While releasing a country-inflected album in 1968 that had Woody Guthrie and Merle Haggard songs would not have immediately sparked the interest of their target audience, including on the album two covers of unheard of (at that point) Dylan songs would do the trick. The Dylan tunes were a way to tie the present to the past and vice versa, as *The Byrds* tried to bring their fans along with them into country rock territory. In this case, Dylan was their bridge to both the past and the future.

In terms of using nature as a key symbol in their music, *The Byrds* followed much the same path as the other groups discussed in this genre, namely that of romanticism and nostalgic longing. “Hickory Wind,” also found on *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, fit firmly in this mold. A song of nostalgia for singer Gram Parsons’ Southern homeland, “Hickory Wind” was very much an escapist fantasy where he

could retreat to when life becomes too "lonesome." Much like Fogerty’s "Green River" and "Born on the Bayou" there were attachments that literally called him back to this locale, in this case, the "tall pines" of South Carolina kept "calling me home." An interesting aspect of this song, however, was Parsons’ admission that he liked to "pretend/ that I’m getting the fell of Hickory Wind" as opposed to actually traveling back to South Carolina. This leads to the question as whether this place still existed outside of the singer’s own mind.32

Another interesting southern-themed composition was that of "Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man" off their 1969 Dr. Byrds & Mr. Hyde LP. This song is noteworthy as it simultaneously praised the music from the South while criticizing some of the conservative and racist attitudes found in the region. The named target of their attack was Southern disc jockey Ralph Emery who had continually criticized the band on his show on Radio WSM. In Byrds’ historian Johnny Rogan’s view, the song as a whole worked as a “brilliant satire on Nashville’s conservative attitude towards rock musicians.” Lines describing the disc jockey served to display a disconnect between the rock bands who played and enjoyed music from this region, and those from the South who were involved with the music scene and “sure don’t like the young folks” and were “the head of the Ku Klux Klan.” This song, placed the onus on those in the South, like the Deejay, who “sure does think different from the records he plays,” and as the songwriters were ardent fans of the music forms of the region and listen to such radio shows, “why

he don’t like me I can’t understand.” This very same sentiment could be found in
the band’s cover of the song “Tulsa County” where they lamented the fact that “My
nights have been lonely/ Since I’ve been in Tulsa County.” So while the band used
nature as a source of inspiration and romanticized locations in much of their music,
there was still the sense that such locations, whether in the South or the Midwest,
were very lonesome places for ‘hippy’ musicians like themselves, as they were
hated by people like their “Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man” for reasons beyond their
control. 34

From the very beginning of their recording career, The Grateful Dead
utilized past songs and musical forms as a springboard to new American musical
heights. Even on their eponymous debut released in 1967, a year often over
simplified as “The Summer of Love,” they included new and exciting takes on old
folk, blues and jug band songs to create a sound that was decidedly of the times,
but simultaneously steeped in the past. Therefore, when they released country rock
albums a few years later, it was not surprising that their music had the resonance of
being timeless. Combine this tie to the past with the inclusion of a full-time lyricist
that was equally influenced by the likes of Bob Dylan and all things Americana,
and The Grateful Dead created songs that spoke to an imaged, mythical, American
past and proved to be exceedingly popular.

Workingman's Dead, released in June of 1970 and hitting number twenty-
seven on the album charts while garnering the Rolling Stone reader’s choice for
album of the year, was full of songs that romanticized America and its landscape

34 Roger McGuinn and Gram Parsons, “Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man,” Dr. Byrds & Mr.
through stripped down acoustic songs. The arrangements of these songs presented them as almost timeless constructions that have emanated from America and American experiences. This was seen from the very first song on the album, as “Uncle John’s Band” spun a tale of a good time band playing by the riverside and even to nature itself as it played “to the tide.” With allusions to American history from the Revolution (“Their motto is don’t tread on me”) to “buck dancers” and religious imagery (“He’s come to take his children home”), the song compressed a vast love affair with all things Americana and the romantic nature of the riverside gathering in a manner of minutes.

“Dire Wolf,” another song off the *Workingman's Dead* album, detailed the trials and tribulations of a common man trying to make his way in the wilderness: in this case, the mythologized folk-song locale Fennario. This Fennario, as Grateful Dead scholar David Dodd points out, rather than a real location, was “a rural, wooded, marshy region of the imagination.” Driven by decidedly country-flavored pedal steel guitar part, the song presented a much different outlook on nature. Gone was the idyllic good time of the band playing by and to the riverside. In its place was the voice of a simple man trying to claw out a meager existence in the “backwash of Fennario.” As he details his encounter with the Dire Wolf, “six hundred pounds of sin” the song’s voice gives the creature human-like characteristics as if he held such a strong connection to nature that when a wolf is at his door he invites him inside and the two play a game of cards. Even the song’s

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36 Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, “Uncle John’s Band,” *Workingman’s Dead*.
chorus, with the memorable “Don’t murder me,” directed at the wolf and repeated *ad nauseam,* served to reinforce this natural connection. Of course, in the end, his appeals fell on deaf ears as the “Dire Wolf collects its due while the boys sing round the fire.”

There was a sense that these men were themselves crafting a song connected to the tale of the Dire Wolf and that the story will itself be immortalized and mythologized through folk songs and stories in much the same way as a Casey Jones or Pretty Boy Floyd, both of whom will be discussed later in this thesis.

So as the unnamed voice of the song met his fate after trying to reason with the irrepressible forces of nature as represented by the wolf, what does the song reveal about modern man’s relationship with nature? Another *Grateful Dead* song serves to answer this question. “Easy Wind” focused on the disconnect between man and nature as the “easy wind cross[es] the bayou today” but the “river keep atalkin’/ But you never head a word it say.”

The inability to understand the language of the river spoke to a larger sense that the band obviously held, mainly that the greater population of modern America was no longer in tune with nature and could no longer understand the ebb and flow of the river in the natural world nor escape trying to reason and rationalize their way out of death and destruction from the irrational forces of nature.

*American Beauty,* also released in 1970, fell in much the same vein as *Workingman’s Dead* in terms of American imagery and country rock music stylings and was just as well received. The album’s cover, which displayed a

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bright red rose in a wooded center with the title circling it, was one of simplistic beauty. In fact, as rock critic Andy Zwerling pointed out, the “American Beauty” of the cover could also have been read as “American Reality.” The contemporary critic’s summation was that “If more of the American reality were this album, we’d have a lot more to be thankful for.”40 “Sugar Magnolia” tied romantic love with romanticized nature to such an extent that the love for a member of the opposite sex and nature became nearly inseparable. The singer’s love came “skimming through rays of violet/ she can wade in a drop of dew” and together they could “discover the wonders of nature/ Rolling in the rushes down by the riverside.” The connection drawn between sex and natural beauty was fairly obvious in this context.41 “Ripple” shared this same view of nature as a thing of beauty, as it presented a small fountain “that was not made by the hands of man” as possessing the essence of life and spiritual renewal. The song also detailed a sense of communal happiness and well being as those whose cup is empty at the fountain can “reach out your hand” while if your cup is full, “may it be again.”42 Even “Brokedown Palace,” a song about leaving an unhappy place in search of spiritual and physical renewal, shared this romantic imagery concerning nature and natural beauty. The lonesome wanderer in search of his beloved home “listen[ed] to the river sing sweet songs/ to rock my soul” as he rested down by the riverside. He even pondered

“planting a weeping willow/ On the bank’s green edge” that will “grow grow grow” as long as the river will “roll roll roll.”

The Band, partners, contemporaries, and students of Bob Dylan’s lyrical and musical stylings, also, not surprisingly, employed many of the same literary devices in their songs. By combining so many influences that rock critic Greil Marcus saw their music as “dense as it was elusive,” The Band created a sound that was new but offered to the listener the chance to “recognize yourself” in the music and lyrics. The group, made up of four Canadians and one Southerner, had played their way “up and down the spine” of America for over a decade and had fallen in love with the country as the place from where the best music came and as a symbol of “limitless” success and opportunity.

Their 1969 single “Up on Cripple Creek” employed the same nature/love relationship common in the music of this genre. It was in this one location, “straight down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico,” where the relationship took hold of the singer. Anytime the song’s voice was tired of life on the road, or of the other women in his life, he could retreat to his hideaway where “Up on Cripple Creek she sends me/ If I spring a leak she mends me.” Another Band composition, “King Harvest (Has Surely Come),” gave a more fully-realized picture of rural life in yet another highly romanticized song about farm life and unionism that could have been written and performed in the later half of the nineteenth century. The chorus focused on the beauty of farm

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45 Greil Marcus, Mystery Train, 51.
life: "Corn in the fields/ Listen to the rice when the wind blows 'cross the water/ King Harvest has surely come," while the verses told of the more trying aspects of such an existence from everyday troubles to having to deal with bankers and bosses, who always seemed to threaten this Jeffersonian view of American life. This threat to the self-sufficient farmer had long been a concern of American populist popular culture characterized by the likes of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* which, not coincidently, included a focus on folk songs and music as a means to bring people together, and *The Band's* work was no exception.47

Other songs by *The Band* spoke further to this sense of nature and a rural existence as being more pure than that of a more modern urban life. Whether *The Band* advocated falling out of capitalistic society, "We don't need no big car/ Don’t eat no caviar/ When we come to rest/ We take to the nest/ You know where we are," or mocked an existence where rural life was seen as oppositional, "Did you ever milk a cow?/ I had the chance one day but I was all dressed up for Sunday," their sympathies were clearly with a more natural way of life.48

On the other hand, however, *The Band* also utilized allusions to place and nature that evoked feelings of sadness, loneliness, and bitterness. There was no sense of love of the Southern way of life and landscape in "We Can Talk" where they sing "...I'd rather be burned in Canada than to freeze here in the South/ Pulling that eternal plough." Nor can the lyrics of "Whispering Pines," which detailed the wanderings of a lonesome, desperate man through a lonely, desolate landscape, offer any sense of love for nature. The connection to nature was still

47 Jaime Robbie Robertson, "King Harvest (Has Surely Come)," *The Band.*
present however, as the landscape in the song was as lonely as the singer. The musicians in these bands all displayed some connection with nature, whether it be positive or negative, longing or foreboding, and love and hate, and sometimes it was one or the other on different songs on the same album. This coupled with Levon Helm’s (drummer/singer and the lone American in *The Band*) admission to *Time* Magazine in 1970 that music was, for him, a “way to get off that stinking tractor, out of that 105-degree heat” it becomes clear that while these songs were portraying a more natural existence as ideal, it was more a state of mind than anything corporeal.

A second key aspect of nature found throughout this genre of music was the sense of the open road and the freedom associated with the ability to move along it through the mythical American landscape. This sense was expressed via lyrics that discussed travel on foot, horseback, and, in concert with a long tradition of American folk balladry, the railroad. Each musical act employed this open road symbol of freedom in their music in one way or another throughout this time period.

*Creedence Clearwater Revival*’s songs often employed this open road motif as a way to escape the perceived problems of modern existence or as a way out of a life that had become painful in one specific location. “Porterville” on their 1968 debut album offered up such a tale, centering on a young man who, after having dealt with a rough childhood in his home of Porterville, hit the road for good and

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tried to never look back. When Fogerty sings "Been an awful long time since I've been home/ But you won't catch me going back down there alone," the audience immediately sympathizes and roots for this character as he heads out to prove himself. Likewise, "Proud Mary" offered up the freedom of life on the Mississippi riverboats as ideal in contrast with the modern city life, of which the singer has yet to ever see the "good side."\(^{51}\)

"Commotion" took this criticism of modern life one step further, as Fogerty bemoaned city traffic, the senseless harried pace of life, and the overall lack of communication of our age of technology. In comparison, Fogerty romanticized a drifter's life in "Cross-Tie Walker" as the traveler made sure he "never do sit down" and loved the fact that he "ain't tied down" so that he could have the absolute freedom to walk along "where the freight trains run."\(^{52}\) "Ramble Tamble" found Fogerty leaving behind the "Commotion" of modern existence by moving along this open road. Decrying the mortgages on his "home," "car," "life," and other modern hassles like "Highways in the back yard" and (with considerable foresight) "Actors in the White House," the singer offered up as a solution an escape: "Move/ Down the road I go."\(^{53}\)

As a traveling musician, Fogerty certainly saw a connection between his desire to keep on the move with the financial necessities that required him to be on the road for long periods at a time. His 1970 song "Travelin' Band" glorified such an existence. Fogerty expressed his desire to "Wanna move" with the simple joys

of life on the road: "Playing in a Travelin’ Band. Yeah!/ Well I’m flying ‘cross the
land, trying to get a hand/ Playing in a Travelin’ Band." Couple this freedom of
movement with the ability to excite crowds to the point that they “had to call the
State Militia” at the last show, and this song set up the modern rock outfit as quasi-
cowboys and desperadoes. This portrait of the life of a band on the road, with the
ability to move in, create a scene, and then move on out again, fell very much in
line with mythologized American heroes of the West.\(^5^4\)

Of course, Fogerty did not completely eschew any sense of loneliness or
desperation while being on the road. “Lodi,” a song about a traveling musician
stuck in a go nowhere town, can attest to this fact. Detailing how “things got bad,
and things got worse,” Fogerty longed for the chance to “catch the next train back
to where I live,” and be free of Lodi forever. If being in a “Travelin’ Band” was a
dream for Fogerty, begin stuck in “Lodi” was his nightmare.\(^5^5\)

In “Up Around the Bend,” another hit single (it went to number four on the
charts in April 1970), and the prototypical Creedence open road song, Fogerty
advocated traveling on the open road until one got to a point “Where the neons turn
to wood.”\(^5^6\) The sense of peace of a return to nature will, in Fogerty’s view, affect
everyone for the better as they are given the chance to take a deep breath and now
have the serenity to “ponder perpetual motion,/ [or] Fix your mind on a crystal
day,” and there is “Always time for good conversation,/ There’s an ear for what
you say.” So as Fogerty hurries around the bend “just as fast as my feet can fly,”

\(^5^5\) John Fogerty, “Lodi,” Green River.
\(^5^6\) Robert Christgau, “Cosmo’s Factory Album Notes,” Creedence Clearwater Revival Box Set, 63.
he feels no remorse in leaving the “sinking ship” of modern society far behind him.\textsuperscript{57}

However, while the open road had a strong pull on Fogerty and shaped much of his music and lyrical outlook on life, there was still a tension present reminiscent of the larger issues found throughout American popular culture dealing with nature and the open road. This tension arose between the desire to have the freedom to move at will and elude the “bedrock[s] of... human experience,” and the longing to have a good woman, a comfortable home, and a happy family.\textsuperscript{58} This tension can be found quite often in Fogerty’s music and served as a foil to keep his wandering spirit in check. Songs such as “Long As I Can See the Light,” “Sailor’s Lament,” and “Lookin’ Out My Back Door” spoke to this sense of not wanting to leave a place where comfort, security, and a loved-one existed.

“Lookin’ Out My Back Door,” released in 1970 as the group’s fifth and final number two hit single, offered up a tale of a troubadour who finally arrived home after a long time on the road. He sits down to revel in the simple pleasures of his front porch and singing while his imagination runs wild and he can push off all his troubles back onto another day.\textsuperscript{59} “Long As I Can See the Light” offered up a reverse portrait of that of “Lookin’ Out My Back Door.” Sung through the point of view of a man who is about to set off on a long journey “cause I feel I’ve got to move” and “drift a while,” due to “that old trav’lin’ bone” that “won’t leave me alone,” he hopes his love will place “a candle in the window” to show she wants

\textsuperscript{57} John Fogerty, “Up Around the Bend,” \textit{Cosmo’s Factory}.
\textsuperscript{58} Tompkins, \textit{West of Everything}, 82.
\textsuperscript{59} Robert Christgau, “\textit{Cosmo’s Factory} Album Notes,” \textit{Creedence Clearwater Revival} Box Set, 63.
him back. As long as the restless traveler can “see the light” he will make his way back to his beloved. And finally, “Sailor’s Lament,” the second song off the group’s 1970 album *Pendulum*, was placed firmly in the tradition of nautical folk tunes as it focused on the love/hate relationship between a sailor and the sea. His reluctance to head back out can be found in its chorus as Fogerty sings of the “Shame, it’s a shame” of a life constantly away at sea.⁶⁰

Bob Dylan similarly utilized the open road as a symbol of freedom. Like the best music of this type, Dylan’s ruminations on nature, the open road, and American character all seemed out of “some odd displacement of art and time” as his music seems both “transparent and inexplicable” so that much of his music from this era could “carry the date 1932 and... be as convincing” as that of 1967.⁶¹ His “Goin’ to Acapulco” displayed this sense of going off to a better place where he’s “going to have some fun.” And although “going on the run” and traveling on the open road might turn out to be tough, the song’s voice is definitely not complaining as it is obvious that to this restless spirit, the journey is worthwhile. Likewise, songs like “Tiny Montgomery” and “Yea! Heavy and A Bottle of Bread,” while full of lyrics that border on nonsense, contained allusions to the glories of life on the open road. “Tiny” told the story of a man who left his hometown as a nobody, grown successful, and now wishes to let everyone “down in Old Frisco” know how well off he is. Likewise, in “Yea! Heavy,” Dylan sang of catching a bus and heading to Wichita to fish for trout. On other works, Dylan

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wonders why “if dogs run free/ then why can’t we?” as well as romanticizing the life and death of the legendary outlaw Billy the Kid as he laments “Billy they don’t like you to be so free.”

However, like that of Creedence Clearwater Revival, Dylan’s music also contains a sense of this tension between staying and going. Songs such as “Lo and Behold!”,” “Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here With You,” and most of his New Morning album speak to this tension as to whether the tremendous desire to go will overcome the equally strong ties to stay in one location. “Lo and Behold!” centers on the railroad escapades of a common man as he journeys through the countryside enduring slight after slight in different locations until he arrives back on the train to shout “Get me out of here, my dear man!” until, at the end of the song, the narrator decides he will be “Goin’ back to Pittsburgh.” Rock critic Greil Marcus feels the strong pull of centuries of American cultural influence in such a song as the travails that our unnamed protagonist endures “makes a story as shapely and complete as one of Hawthorne’s Twice Told Tales of humiliation and withdrawal” or “as casually doomstruck as one of Melville’s fables of embarkment....” On the other hand, “Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here With You,” released on 1969’s Nashville Skyline, eschewed taking that trip as he throws both his ticket and suitcase out of the window and opts to stay with his love. Not wanting to think any more of leaving her behind, he decides that if there is “a poor boy on the street/ Let him have my seat.” There is no sense of regret expressed in not taking the journey in

63 Bob Dylan, “Lo and Behold!,” The Basement Tapes.
64 Marcus, The Old, Weird America, 46-7.
this song.\textsuperscript{65} Finally, Dylan’s 1970 \textit{New Morning} album conveyed that love and family was more important than being on the open road and having the freedom to move at any given whim. Faced with being “the mouthpiece, spokesman, or even conscience of a generation,” Dylan having had enough with “whatever the counterculture was,” and decided that outside of his newly-expanding family, “nothing held any real interest for me.”\textsuperscript{66} As a testament to this sentiment, the \textit{New Morning} album romanticized family and small town life to such an extent that the decidedly un-hip prospects of getting married, having children, and living a quiet normal life are presented as “that must be what it’s all about.”\textsuperscript{67}

Not surprisingly, \textit{The Byrds} also displayed considerable talents at employing the open road as a key symbol of masculine freedom. Their cover of “I Am A Pilgrim” coupled this wanderer of the American landscape with religious overtones as the singer admitted, “I am a pilgrim and a stranger traveling through this lonesome land” looking for a religious touchstone the likes of the river of Jordan.\textsuperscript{68} Likewise, “The Ballad of Easy Rider,” the title song of the 1969 film, portrayed an idealized masculine wanderer who was not tied to anything and was simply out and about rejoicing in his freedom to wander throughout the land. With its key lyrics written by, but not credited to Bob Dylan, \textit{The Byrds} led by Roger McGuinn’s heartfelt vocal compared this man to the unending flow of a natural

\textsuperscript{67} Bob Dylan, “Sign on the Window,” \textit{New Morning}.
\textsuperscript{68} Traditional arranged By Roger McGuinn and Chris Hillman, “I Am A Pilgrim,” \textit{Sweetheart of the Rodeo}.
river. According to The Byrds official historian, Dylan disliked the movie, particularly its ending, so much that he requested he be given no credit for the film’s theme. Johnny Rogan, “Song Notes,” The Ballad of Easy Rider, 7.


"Uncle John's Band" in one of the band's signature songs was not simply a call to follow the band throughout the country (although many would surely do that throughout the band's career), but to fall out of modern society and join in with the idealized natural, free society presented in the song. Part romanticization of nature and its beauty and part mythologization of America, its folk heroes, and its supposed glorious past history, this song expressed much of what the music of The Grateful Dead was all about. Similarly, songs such as "Friend of the Devil," which tells the story of a man on the run from the law, and "Truckin'," a song glorifying the travels of the band, served to present life on the open road as a thing of both beauty and nobility. In "Friend of the Devil," once the song's hero was out and about in the western American landscape, he met up with the devil, a decidedly Americanized version, which helped him out by loaning him "twenty bills." Of course, this American devil, so eager to help, a la Stephen Vincent Benet's The Devil and Daniel Webster and blues great Robert Johnson, would soon come back to reclaim his prize. And sure enough later on in the song he returns to take back the money owed him and "vanished in the air."73 This song, set almost exclusively in the Californian countryside and centered on a character of tenuous moral fiber, will be discussed in further detail later in this thesis in the context of heroes and anti-heroes of this musical genre.

Like Creedence's "Traveling Band," "Truckin'" served to set up the band as modern practitioners of the absolutely free and roving lifestyle extolled in many of

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their songs. The song admitted the duality of a life characterized by such a transient lifestyle as when “You’re sick of hanging around… you’d like to travel” and when you are “tired of travel, you want to settle down” are consistently at odds with each other. These lines, however, showed no sense that the band, much like the roving characters found in the lyrics of their songs, ever really wanted to stop with their nomadic existence. The song’s chorus emphasized this point, as no one desired to give up being on the road and miss out on the “long strange trip it’s been.” 74

The Dead’s 1971 live version of “Me & My Uncle,” written by John Phillips (of The Mamas and The Papas fame), fit easily into this category of masculine freedom and life on the open road. Set in a mythic American past, the song detailed two riders on horseback as they crossed from Colorado into Texas and interacted with a group of cowboys at a barroom. While the song’s narrator tended to the horses, his uncle got involved in a wild card game that quickly descended into violence once cheating was claimed. In the scuffle and ensuing shootout, the two made off with the cowboy’s gold and hightailed it off down to Mexico. And, as the song ended, the song’s narrator listed his set of loves:

Now I loved those cowboys, I loved their gold/ I love my uncle, God rest his soul/ Taught me good, Lord, taught me all I know/ Taught me so well, I grabbed that gold/ And I left his dead ass there by the side of the road.

This song served to romanticize not only the transient lifestyle, but the unfeeling, extreme masculinity characterized by the remorseless killing of other

men, including in this case a family member, as the ideal state for men. The song’s narrator, another interesting subject to be represented as the ‘hero’ of the song, rationalized his actions by stating, “I’m as honest as a Denver man can be,” as if the location and landscape of the American West left him with no choice but to act in this way. In this song the relationship between landscape and masculinity was reciprocal, as living in a harsh, unflinching terrain will craft man that were harsh and unflinching as they traversed the countryside and become harsher, less sentimental, and more masculine.

Their cover of Kris Kristofferson’s “Me & Bobby McGee” off their 1971 Grateful Dead live album spoke to this same transient lifestyle, albeit in a much softer and more romantic fashion. Detailing a romantic relationship blossoming while hitchhiking across the country, this tune painted a picture of the road that played up both the positive and negative aspects of being out there on America’s open road. For, while the time spent together with Bobby McGee was near bliss as they “shared the secrets of the road,” and the inevitable parting of ways had left the song’s narrator willing to “trade all of my tomorrows for one single yesterday,” there was never a sense that he was going to give up his freedom and mobility to stay with her in one location as he “let her slip away.” In so choosing his freedom over any romantic attachments, the singer feels confident to utter one of the song’s most memorable lines, that “freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,” as those that are left wandering on the road with this freedom are often down and out and looking for a better tomorrow and existence, even if it was never to be found. An interesting comparison to be made is between this

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version, or Kristofferson’s original with the one made famous by Janis Joplin in which the sex role have been reversed and Bobby McGee was portrayed as a male. The tone of the song is roughly the same, but the sense of lonesome masculinity and freedom of movement has been replaced by a more feminist quality.\(^76\)

Another *Grateful Dead* cover, of a traditional folk song made famous by Woody Guthrie, “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad,” echoed these very same sentiments. The song’s lyrics focused on a lonesome wanderer in his unending search for his own type of utopia where “the weather suits my clothes,” and “the water taste like wine.”\(^77\) In the Dead’s live recording of this work, it is paired with Buddy Holly’s “Not Fade Away,” so that the two segue seamlessly into one another. A phenomenon of many Dead live performances, this tying together of different songs from different eras, served to unite all the music together into one package that was not confined to time period or subject matter. Likewise, their coupling of their own “China Cat Sunflower” with the traditional “I Know You Rider,” also served to combine the past with the present and mix it together to create something both recognizable and new, historical and current.

Both “I Know You Rider” and “Ramble On Rose” off their live *Europe ’72* album spoke to their view of the power and beauty of the open road. “I Know You Rider” utilized the railroad, a tradition in American folk music, as symbolic of a freedom to move when and where one pleased. When the singer admitted that “I wish I was a headlight on a northbound train” it tied into a whole history of

\(^76\) Kris Kristofferson, “Me & Bobby McGee,” *Grateful Dead.*
\(^77\) Traditional arranged by Grateful Dead, “Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad,” *Grateful Dead.*
American expansionism and the utter freedom of movement available to restless souls thanks to the advent and popularity of railroad technology, as well as tying into the subculture of both hobos and drifters whose way of life is defined by riding the rails. "Ramble On Rose" combined a restless spirit reminiscent of the best American folk songs; "Ramble on baby/ And settle down easy," with jumbled word play that utilized historical, mythological and literal allusions and brings to mind some of the best of Bob Dylan's mid 1960's absurdist songscapes.⁷⁸

A notable exception to this spirit of blissful wandering across the American countryside was their song "Tennessee Jed." Focusing on the exploits of the title character as he wandered across the country, the song portrayed the country as a place that offered all types of dangers and hardships to this innocent drifter. In the course of the song poor Jed is repeatedly subject to being physically beaten, frequently arrested, and eternally poor as he struggled to get "back to Tennessee." Jed's freedom to wander was so threatening to these characters in the song that if he did not make it home soon, he's "bound to wind up dead." Someone even kicks Jed's faithful dog as the poor drifter endured the hardships of Americans not ready to accept Jed and his lifestyle.

From the very beginning of their recording career, The Band employed the open road as symbolic of freedom in very much the same manner as the previous bands. These songs were complex works, filled with biblical references, and sly, often opaque lyrics that tended to make the listener try and decipher exactly what

⁷⁸ Traditional arranged by Grateful Dead, "I Know You Rider," Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, "Ramble on Rose," Europe '72.
they were truly about, that again tended to be largely reminiscent of Bob Dylan’s own approach to songwriting. “The Weight,” off their 1968 debut album and perhaps their most well known song, fit comfortably in this niche. Detailing life on the road throughout an America populated by the weird characters so often found in a Dylan composition, “The Weight” mixed biblical references, (“Pulled into Nazareth,”) with road weariness, “feeling ’bout a half past dead,” to paint a picture of American on the road. Interactions ranged from characters such as “Crazy Chester” to the mysteriously unexplained “Fanny,” in a chorus that didn’t seem to make much sense but resonated just the same as a road anthem: “Take a load off Fanny, take a load for free; / Take a load off Fanny / And you can put the load right on me.” As part of the soundtrack to the movie Easy Rider, this song fit perfectly as a musical meditation as the main characters traveled on motorcycles through the great American countryside. Likewise, another Band composition, “Caledonia Mission,” echoed the same sentiments as the lyrics painted a picture of a quick escape (“We’ll be gone in moonshine time”), from “a mission down in Modock, Arkansas.”

Another perfect Band portrayal of the open road was the opening track to their timeless 1969 The Band album. The song, “Across The Great Divide,” presented a timeless conflict between a man who wanted to hit the open road and his love who was in favor of staying put in their more sedentary and less reckless existence. This argument centered on the man as he tried to encourage his lady to both drop the gun she was brandishing to make her case, and “grab that hat and

take that ride” across the Great Divide and head west. As the song unfolded, he continually tried to convince her to leave “this one horse town” for the greener pastures over the horizon. The tension between the two served as symbolic of the traditionally-accepted stereotypes that the man will want to pull up and leave for a chance of a better future, while the woman will want to stay in a place where she has roots and was more comfortable with family, friends, and her position in society. The promise of such better times has surely taken hold on the song’s narrator, as well as the excitement of the journey, and his final appeals to his significant other seemed to push the argument in his favor, as heading over the Great Divide will not only serve the two of them better (“You’ll feed your man chicken every Sunday”), but also their future generations as they will be able to “bring your children down to the riverside.” This song was completely caught up in the mythical past America that so fascinated the group, especially principle songwriter Robbie Robertson, and bore little resemblance to the 1960’s contemporary society where the women’s rights movement was attempting to redefine the roles of women in American society.80

Other Band songs also focused heavily on life on the road. “Just Another Whistle Stop,” similar to The Dead’s “Tennessee Jed,” painted a picture of a journey through the country that was not entirely pleasant as the song’s protagonist was subject to many painful interactions with people all the while wishing to just go home. However, a majority of their songs depicted life on this open road in a much more positive light, as “When You Awake”, with the lines

"... [he] showed me the fork in the road./ You can take to the left or go straight to
the right" utilized the road as a metaphor for a man’s ability to choose his own
destiny and head where he pleases. Likewise, “Rockin’ Chair” portrayed an
elderly former sailor who once spent “my whole life at sea” and now found
himself confined to his rocking chair longing to have the strength to travel and be
“home again down in Old Virginny.” Stuck in his “big Rockin’ Chair” that
“won’t go nowhere” he longed for both his younger days and the freedom to go
wherever the wind would take him, and stripped of his freedom, he believed that
all “the days that remain ain’t worth a dime.”

These songs sought to convey a sense of the beauty of nature and utilized
the populist notions of a meaningful connection with the land in order to present
an America that existed only in their minds and their music. The America in
these songs, like the one presented in western tales and movies, was one of open
roads, masculine men, and the constant tension present when one possessed the
desire to be free and find a good woman, that shared little in common with the
real America of the 1960s and ‘70s. However, this music possessed powerful
lyrics and a timeless quality that gave each verse and chorus added meaning as
expressing powerful truths concerning both American life and human nature that
resonated with their young listeners as they struggled to make sense of their own
place in the postmodern world. Likewise, while the 1960’s might be viewed in
retrospect as a period of increased women’s rights and a breakdown of the
traditional mores involving gender and sex, the politics of the counterculture and

81 Richard Manuel and Jaime Robbie Robertson, “When You Awake,” Jaime Robbie
Robertson, “Rockin’ Chair,” The Band.
the views of these artists never lived up to these lofty expectations. Therefore, songs that present a life of happiness and camaraderie on the road as oppositional to having a meaningful relationship with a good woman lost none of their potency. To the many of the young men that formed these groups or bought in to the youth culture, sexual liberation simply meant more opportunities to have sex with multiple partners while still controlling the cultural and "sexual agenda for most of this movement’s existence." 82

CHAPTER 2:

John Wesley Harding, Casey Jones, and The Working Man:

Heroic Portraits in Roots Rock

As we have seen, the songs from this era all have a distinctive tie to the American landscape and nature, from the bayous of the South to the trails and open roads of the Wild West that have always been a key part of American popular culture. In addition to this romantic view of America and its natural world, these songs also paint pictures of American heroes and anti-heroes very much in the same vein as other distinctly American works of popular culture from westerns to folk and blues songs. The roots of such songs can be found in “outlaw stories” of both fiction and folklore where “social bandit” as symbolic of the populist working classes “uncovers and attacks the dark side of modern capitalism.” Folk social bandit heroes such as Jesse James, Pretty Boy Floyd, John Wesley Hardin, and the literary Tom Joad of Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath (for whom Woody Guthrie wrote a ballad), all fall into this category. These popular heroes, presented in both song and literature as modernized American versions of the mythologized Robin Hood are, according to Richard Slotkin, key components of the ideology that arose out of lower class, rural culture in the face of such perceived machinations of the dangerous “advanced capitalism” of powerful corporations. Not only is it important to view how the music of the so-called youth counterculture utilized such American popular

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83 Marcus, Old, Weird America, 12-3, 21-6; Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 281-4, 286-303, 569-612.
84 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 126-8.
culture landmarks and keystones, but also how they were retextualized and reimagined in a modern setting. If, as H. Bruce Franklin maintains “the Vietnam War shattered many of the traditional narratives central to formerly prevailing visions of the United States and its history,” so that the realities of modern “warfare...threatened to undermine or even replace...romantic figures” of violence and warfare common in American mythology, these songs consciously sought to create threads to that past. If Vietnam caused a sense of disenchantment with the realities of the American experience, these songs – populated by lone figures who practiced frontier justice and were forced to choose between a life on the road and the comforts of home – sought to craft a new American consciousness that transcended their current political and cultural climate.85

*Creedence Clearwater Revival*’s main focus on the hero theme was to present the working class elements of society as positively as possible. Throughout the band’s recording career it sought to glorify the workingman and his lifestyle as someone that was more heroic and purely American than those that were wealthy or in positions of power in modern American society. Right from their first album, 1968’s *Creedence Clearwater Revival*, the band tackled this issue with songs such as the previously discussed “Porterville,” and “The Working Man,” both of which dealt with the life and times of members of the lower rungs of America’s social pyramid. In “Porterville” the lament of a young man trying to overcome a town’s view of him as nothing more than the poor offspring of a ne’er-do-well, fit in perfectly with Fogerty’s salute to the unending

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struggles depicted in “The Working Man.” By employing both a fiercely impressive blues shout and the first person perspective in this song, Fogerty sought to relate himself, and his own humble beginnings, with that of the poor workers: “I was born on a Sunday/ By Thursday I had me a job” and “I ain’t never been in trouble/ I ain’t got the time.” “Gloomy,” also on their debut album, decried the elements of society that “count your money” and leave you feeling ill at ease. Overall, a decidedly anti-wealth and even a quasi-anti-capitalism position was taken by the band that they would continue to explore on subsequent albums. 86

“Penthouse Pauper” continued along in this vein as Fogerty sang of being “the Penthouse Pauper, baby/ I got nothing to my name,” while listing all the things he would like to do with the money available to a wealthy man. The song never takes on an overly sad or tragic tone, for while it could be viewed as tragic for a man of limited means to live out his dreams only in his mind, Fogerty painted the Penthouse Pauper as nothing dangerous or pathetic, but as a relatable dreamer who found comfort in the fact that he had the freedom to dream in such a way, for “I can be most anything/ ‘Cause when you got nothing it’s all the same.” 87

Perhaps the most striking example of Creedence’s glorification of America’s poor and working classes as symbolic of an idealized true America was their 1969 album Willy and the Poorboys. Whether it be the good time street corner band of “Down on the Corner,” that encourages you to “bring a nickel”

and “tap your feet,” to the simpleminded hillbilly farmer who discovered a UFO in “It Came Out of the Sky,” the reinterpertations of old folk and blues songs as “Cotton Fields” and “The Midnight Special,” and the political-minded messages of “Fortunate Son,” and “Don’t Look Now (It Ain’t You or Me),” all served to offer up loving portraits of this type of Americana.\(^88\) In Creedence’s idealized American world the heroes and good citizens were rural residents who were anything but aristocratic and urbane.

“Fortunate Son,” the B-side of the immensely popular “Down on the Corner” single, served to decry the current political climate, while not being exclusively relevant to that particular time period and war effort, that seemed to be sending off the poorer classes of society off to Vietnam and leaving the favorite sons of America at home, safe and sound.\(^89\) Fogerty, obviously angered by the situation, and himself a former draftee, aimed his sharpest political criticisms for those in positions of power and affluence and their sons and daughters who were “born silver spoon in hand.”\(^90\) An anthem for the poor with its chorus of “It ain’t me, it ain’t me, I ain’t no Fortunate Son,” served to separate this class and the band themselves from the likes of the “Senator’s son” draped in “red, white and blue,” those sons and daughters of privilege who “inherit star spangled eyes,” and all other such privileged offspring who “don’t help themselves” and do nothing to earn the status they occupy. In this context, those who had grown up in wealth without earning any of it were seen as antithetical to

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88 John Fogerty, “Down on the Corner,” Willy and the Poor Boys.
the true American stature of the working classes to whom *Creedence* related. Therefore, these sons and daughters of the social elite were presented as modern enemies to their idealized American heroic models, the working classes who struggled to survive and were shipped off by the thousands to fight a war in Vietnam so a “Senator’s son” won’t have to.\(^{91}\)

“Don’t Look Now (It Ain’t You or Me),” on the other hand, served to separate Fogerty and the rest of the band, and most of America, from his view of the true American heroes. The song, built around a series of questions the likes of “Who’ll take a leaf and grow it to a tree?” and “Who will work the field with his hands?” and the answer “Don’t look now, it ain’t you or me,” served as an indictment of those who looked past the daily struggles and oft-unappreciated importance of such individuals. While Fogerty himself might have related to and held these people up as his own vision as truly heroic Americans, he was careful not to overdo any connection he might have felt as a voice for the downtrodden and actually being downtrodden himself. It is of course a fine line that Fogerty tried to toe as he chastised the rest of America: “Don’t look now, someone’s done your starvin’/ Don’t look now, someone’s done your prayin’ too.” In his eyes, the people that do these much needed tasks to ensure basic human survival were much more heroic and worthy of praise than either “you or me.”\(^{92}\)

Bob Dylan’s view of the American hero can be seen as more or less in the same light as that of *Creedence*’s vision. However, his songs offered more complexity to the discussion and depiction of heroes whether they are roving

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\(^{91}\)John Fogerty, “Fortunate Son,” *Willy and the Poor Boys*.

\(^{92}\)John Fogerty, “Don’t Look Now (It Ain’t You or Me),” *Willy and the Poor Boys*. 
western desperadoes or downtrodden poor drifters. Opening the 1967 classic album of the same name, “John Wesley Harding” is a straightforward folk song detailing and glorifying the exploits of legendary outlaw hero John Wesley Hardin, who, during the later part of the nineteenth century, was known to be one of the most notorious outlaws and killers in all of America. Famously quoted that he “never killed a man that didn’t need killing,” Hardin actually killed at least one black man and eleven Union soldiers during his lifetime. He was, in truth, hardly a romantic figure. However, Hardin the romantic folk hero, the same as Dylan’s Harding (with the ‘G’ added), was an ideal romantic populist hero for nineteenth century rural Americans. In his song Dylan set him up as a “friend to the poor” who was “never known to hurt an honest man” even though he always “traveled with a gun in every hand.”

“Drifter’s Escape” from the same album told the story of a poor man pleading for mercy while an unfair and, in his eyes, “cursed jury,” eagerly awaited the opportunity to throw the book at him. The drifter of the song served as a symbol of both the United States legal system’s dubious fair treatment of the lower classes as it strove to maintain the status quo, and personal prejudices of those who had immediately seen the worst in him and judged him guilty of any and all such crimes. As he stood to hear his fate, the poor drifter “still do[es] not know what it is that I’ve done wrong” and can no longer bear to wait pondering his fate, as “the trial was bad enough, but this is ten times worse.” Luckily for the drifter, and corresponding with Dylan’s view of right and wrong in society, a

decidedly Old Testament God made his presence felt by which the drifter could make his escape.\textsuperscript{95}

Likewise, “I Am a Lonesome Hobo” placed Dylan in the first person context of one of the most downtrodden and disliked members of modern American society. In his sympathetic portrayal of a man eternally down on his luck, Dylan’s lyrics described a man without “family or friend” who came face to face with his fate as he realized he would soon “pass on.” In the end, Dylan presented the hobo as a normal man worthy of sympathy and not the scorn that was traditionally heaped upon those of his ilk. With a final warning via the voice of the suffering and lonesome hobo, Dylan cautioned, “And hold your judgment for yourself/ Lest you wind up on this road.” Also, his “I Pity the Poor Immigrant” sought sympathy for a man, who alone and scared in this country, “uses all his power to do evil” and is a pariah of American society. Dylan’s view was that since “in the end [he] is always left so alone’ and both “hates his life” and “fears his death,” the person for whom hate was so easy to come by must be pitied instead as one strove to understand his condition.\textsuperscript{96}

His “Lay Lady Lay,” released as a single in 1969, and set over a backdrop of heart wrenching pedal steel guitars, also looked for love and understanding for a character of the lower class. Through a pleading message to an unnamed woman, Dylan extolled the virtues of the simple man, and advised her to stay with him even though “his clothes are dirty” because, in his eyes, “you’re the best

\textsuperscript{95} Bob Dylan, “Drifter’s Escape,” \textit{John Wesley Harding}.
\textsuperscript{96} Bob Dylan, “I Am a Lonesome Hobo,” “I Pity the Poor Immigrant,” \textit{John Wesley Harding}. 
thing he’s ever seen.” 97 Almost at odds with “Lay Lady Lay,” Dylan’s “Girl From the North Country” ideal hero was a rambling man who has once loved and left a lady there as he moved on to another part of the country. Even though he often thought back to her “in the darkness of my night/ and the brightness of my day,” he would not go back there and settle down with her, even though “she once was a true love of mine.” 98

The lyrics on Dylan’s soundtrack to the western film Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid focused almost exclusively on this theme of a man who possessed a distinctive heroic quality. In Dylan’s mind, Billy the Kid has the “lawman on your trail” because his lifestyle threatened the country’s progress into the twentieth century. Obviously disenchanted with the current state of affairs in his own time, Dylan looked back and saw his villains as those that tried to keep law and order and shaped America. Therefore, the lawmen were mere “bounty hunter[s]” who were out to get the film’s hero not because he was an outlaw, but because “Billy they don’t like you to be so free.” The most famous song off this soundtrack, “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” combined pathos and a quality of senselessness to the death of a lawman shot down. As the chorus repeated “Knock, Knock, Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” ad infinitum and Dylan moaned during the verses “Mama take this badge off of me/ I can’t use it anymore” and “Mama put my guns in the ground/ I can’t shoot them anymore,” the song possessed a meditative tone. Has the lawman done any good in this world? Was there a connection between the cries to his mother as he lay dying and the fact that

it was from a lifestyle that was profoundly masculine in nature? And is there an aura of senselessness around the entire desperado mindset and morality?

*The Byrds'* main focus on heroes and anti-heroes throughout their musical output was much more closely related to idealized western heroes than the average Jeffersonian-idealized, yeoman farmer. Their songs tended to focus on and glorify cowboys and outlaws who wandered the vast American landscape on horseback searching for adventures. These heroes were always ready and willing to fight, often for the little guy being trodden upon by some ugly and powerful element of American capitalism.

Their cover of Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd" perfectly illustrated this point. Recounting the exploits of the famed outlaw, this song set up a wandering outlaw as a literal Robin Hood of the American West as he gave food to families "on relief" while on the run from the corrupt police. With a socialist-tinged message, lines such as "Some will rob you with a six gun and some with a fountain pen" but "You'll never see an outlaw take a family from its home," *The Byrds* saluted both the outlaw hero and Guthrie's controversial folk ballad by including it on their 1968 *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* LP. Whether or not such statements should be seen as accurate was surely debatable, however, that was not the key to understanding the band's version of this song. It served to both tie their music with revolutionary music of the past as well as recalling the folk circle days of leader Roger McGuinn. Likewise, the "Ballad of Easy Rider" viewed in connection with the film for which it was written, presented the movie's

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protagonists in much the same way. Even though they were drug dealers, the theme and film combined to portray them as modern desperadoes traveling the open road with motorcycles standing in as modern horses. As they searched for happiness and peace of mind, the audience was taken on the journey with them, until, in the final scene, their murder was presented as an ultimate tragic event due to the song’s assertion that “all he wanted was to be free.” Likewise, their cover of the Z. Manners and S. Seely homily to the astronauts who first landed on the moon, “Armstrong, Aldrin, And Collins,” sought to make heroic figures out of these astronauts. These three men were presented as cosmic wanderers and trailblazers and served as idealized modern day cowboys as they went out and revealed in what President John F. Kennedy dubbed “The New Frontier.”

Another Byrds’ Guthrie cover, “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos),” was one of the few instances where the band utilized the poor and downtrodden as noble figures. Recounting the death of migrant workers in a plane crash, the song spoke to the daily struggles of such noble individuals who scrapped out a meager existence while being chased “like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves.” Even in death they will receive none of the distinction or caring that is due them, for “All they will call you will be/ Deportee.”

“Lover of the Bayou” created a heroic figure out of a bayou ruffian, who “swam with the crocodile” and consumed both “the bat in the gumbo” and “blood from a rusty can.” This hardened individual was seen as an idealized example of masculinity to the point that his self-proclaimed title of “Lover of the Bayou”

102 Slotkin, Gunfighter Nation, 2.
103 Woody Guthrie, “Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos),” The Ballad of Easy Rider.
implied not only a sexual prowess but an intimate attachment with the nature that surrounded him. “Chestnut Mare” found The Byrds recounting another tale of heroic proportions tied in with nature, as the song revolved around a horse wrangler’s quest to rope the perfect wild chestnut mare. The song, in turn, focused on the beauty of the landscape surrounding our hero, his undying drive and masculinity to “get that horse if I can,” complete with sexual connotations, “And we’ll be friends for life/ She’ll be just like my wife,” culminating in the rider and horse plunging over the edge of a cliff.104 This song also served as a take-off on an old western story, The Mustangs, by J. Frank Dobie, which detailed the hunt and attempted capture of a wild horse. In this tale, as in the song, the horse chose leaped over the edge of the cliff rather than be conquered and subjugated by man.105

Finally, The Byrds’ “Just a Season” combined their rock ‘n’ roll traveling lifestyle with that of an old west cowboy. The parallels between the two can be seen in the ways in which the lyrics combined the sexual prowess of a modern rock star, “I’d have my fun with a shy girl, then maybe hop a train,” with that of a western gambler, “I’d have my fun with a gambling man and bluff him with my face/ And it’s drinks for everybody in the place.”106 The connections between the freedom enjoyed by the roving gambling men of this mythic American West was akin to the roving rock group that rose to prominence in the 1960’s and was acutely apparent to the men who were caught up in such an existence.

105 Tompkins, West of Everything, 103-4.
The Grateful Dead’s music and lyrical focus was attuned to the previously-mentioned bands as they sought to paint heroic portraits of the lower classes as well as glorifying the idealized western cowboy and desperado. The band consciously sought, according to Jason Palm, to “align itself with a steady stream of fictional and complex drifters” often set in the back drop of the American West as they faced hardship in their desire to both possess unbridled freedom and sustain themselves.  

1970’s “Cumberland Blues” recounted the daily struggles of Depression-era miners. Faced with a thin line between being able to support oneself and being caught in abject poverty was the “five dollar bill” that a man could make a day at the mine. Unfortunately, the opportunity to make such money was not available to all, so that while one may “Make good money/ Five dollars a day/ Made anymore I might move away,” others were “making nothing at all/ and you can hear him crying....” This tenuous survival served to portray a sympathetic view of the miner’s world through both the good times and bad, for even the miner that is doing well for himself is still looking to move away. Therefore, it was not surprising that “Lotta poor man got the Cumberland Blues/... can’t win for losin’/ Lotta poor man got to walk the line/ Just to pay his union dues.” Lyricist Robert Hunter felt it a great compliment when a “grizzled veteran” of the mine asked, “I wonder what the guy who wrote this song would’ve thought if he’d ever known that something like the Grateful

Dead was gonna do it?” It wasn’t a cover of someone else’s song, and the fact that the band could write and record a song that immediately struck a former miner as being of another time and place spoke volumes of the power the group possessed in tapping into this mythical American past and adding to it their own particular voice and vision. Another Dead song, “Black Peter,” sung through the perspective of a dying poor man, decried the fact that “People may know but/ The people don’t care/ That a man could be as poor as me....”

Perhaps the most interesting Grateful Dead tune that fit in this hero category was their take on the legend of Casey Jones. This legend, taken from the real story of a railroad engineer killed in an accident on the Illinois Central Railroad in 1900, was based more on folklore and romance than actual events. Different incarnations of this song appeared from different regions of the country, as musicians would put their respective spin on the original source material. Each version would focus on different aspects of the tragedy while employing varying slang terminology and placing the action in different parts of the country. Some versions had Casey dying in Memphis, Tennessee, while others in Canton, Ohio. Contributing further to this folk tradition of remaking a song into one’s own, The Grateful Dead’s version of “Casey Jones” reconceptualized the railroad folk hero for the 1960’s.

The Dead’s take on the song served to reimagine this legend into their contemporary society and in turn make the story and the character more hip. In

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their version, the heroic Casey Jones was not a tragic figure on a doomed track, but instead he was “Driving that train/ High on cocaine/ Casey Jones you’d better watch your speed.” Through this melding of the newer drug culture, complete with a knowing snort at the opening of the track, with the older folk tradition, the band was drawing a clear connection between their cultural understandings and landmarks of the past.112

On their American Beauty album, The Dead incorporated the hero and anti-hero motif into such classics as “Friend of the Devil” and “Truckin’,” both of which combined the freedom of the open road with that of heroic activity. As the voice of “Friend of the Devil” headed “out from Reno/... trailed by twenty hounds,” the sense that he was a criminal on the run was understood even though no crime was specifically mentioned. His road lifestyle was also apparent from his confession that he’s “Got a wife in Chino, babe/ And one in Cherokee/ First one says she’s got my child/ But it don’t look like me.” So not only was this man on the run from the law and involved with two (or more) women, he also had an intimate relationship with the devil so that he can claim any “Friend of the Devil is a friend of mine.” Yet, he is presented as anything but a villain, for he is both the protagonist and the hero of the song. The listener will want him to escape both the captors and the women trying to tie him down and raise a child that might be his.113

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112 Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, “Casey Jones,” Workingman’s Dead.
“Truckin,’” as previously mentioned, portrayed the band in the context of modern day cowboys as they traveled throughout the country dealing with the law, women, and boredom as they continued on their “long, strange trip.” “Me & My Uncle,” also previously-mentioned, painted a semi-heroic portrait of the narrator, an unrepentant murderer characterized by his unflinching masculinity. Continuing in this manner of idealizing western masculine heroes, members of the band created a side project in the early 1970’s that focused solely on their country music fascination. That they chose the name New Riders of the Purple Sage served to tie them together with Zane Grey’s classic 1912 western novel Riders of the Purple Sage, offered them up as new heroic figures akin to the cowboys presented in that fictional work.

The Band’s musical output also fit nicely into this genre’s phenomenon of painting heroic images of both downtrodden Americans and wandering desperado types. On their debut album, three songs truly captured this sentiment: Bob Dylan and Richard Manuel’s “Tears of Rage,” “The Weight,” and their cover of Bob Dylan’s “I Shall Be Released.” “Tears of Rage,” the opening track from their 1968 Music From Big Pink album, was sung through the perspective of a pleading parent addressing a child who felt some sort of disdain and disconnect between the two generations. This song, filled with “fatigue and sorrow” as it recounted a tale of “forgetting, rejection, betrayal, and... abandonment,” ran in opposition to much of the youth-oriented culture of the time, and was certainly an interesting way to open a debut album.114 “Tears of Rage” was a powerful, slow song that lamented “Tears of rage/ Tears of grief/ Why must I always be the thief,” as the

114 Marcus, Old, Weird America, 205.
parent tried to form a connection with the wayward child: “We carried you in our arms/ On Independence Day/ And you’d throw us all aside/ And put us on our way.”115 In The Band’s moral universe, the warning to not trust anyone over thirty certainly did not apply.

“The Weight” focused on an unassuming wanderer as he interacted with others traversing the American landscape. Lyricist Robbie Robertson felt he was born “to pack my bag and be on my way down the Mississippi River” and this song spoke of such a transient lifestyle.116 The sense of ragged beauty in their struggles to survive and to help out those they met on the road was powerful. When the song’s protagonist was given a dog that its owner could no longer care for and was told to just feed him “whenever he can,” the listener gained a deep sense of these people’s everyday struggles for survival. “I Shall Be Released,” on the other hand, was sung from the point of view of an unrepentant prisoner as he awaited the day in which he would be freed. While others around him screamed out “crying he was framed,” our singer quietly bides his time remembering “every face of every man who put me here” so that he could be assured to exact complete revenge on his enemies.117

Their second, self-titled album was released in 1969 and contained even more of a focus on American characters presented in heroic fashion, especially in three songs: “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down,” “Jawbone,” and “The Unfaithful Servant.” All three songs presented members of American society

who possessed certain degrees of heroic characteristics that have been deemed praiseworthy; whether it be a Civil War era farmer, an unrepentant Wild West criminal, or a house servant recently fired for an unnamed offense against the homeowner.

The hero of "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" was one Virgil Kane, who, complete with biblical ramifications, was a poor southern farmer trying to survive as the Civil War closed. The song offered up a highly romanticized view of the Old South and helped to perpetuate the "Lost Cause" mythology surrounding the Confederate States of America. With allusions to Robert E. Lee, the fall of Richmond, and the death of his eighteen-year-old brother at the hands of a Yankee farmer, the song painted the picture of a Confederacy of the imagination. Through the eyes of the song's voice, a humble farmer who adhered to the policy of "take what ya need and ya leave the rest" when dealing with his life and livelihood and didn't mind a rural existence of "choppin' wood" even if "the money's no good," the presentation of the South was that of a populist paradise where common farmers were starved and killed by the northern army. 118 There is no mention of slavery, Southern patriarchs, or the plantation lifestyle and mindset that was also a vital part of the South and served as an impetus for going to war. In this song, the Old South took on a mythic quality as a land where romantic heroes like Virgil used to call home. The sense that someone else "drove" the South and this idyllic region down is presented in as a tragic event.

118 Jaime Robbie Robertson, "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down," The Band.
“Jawbone” depicted the life of a horse thief and bank robber who, as the chorus stated, was “a thief and I dig it.” For this character, “temptation stands just behind the door,” and he always seemed eager to open it and jump right in. As Jawbone drifted in and out of prison, the only thing that truly upset him was when he saw his “name upon the post office wall,” that puts him “on edge ‘cause they wrote it too small.”\(^{119}\)

Finally, “The Unfaithful Servant,” centered around a servant who had been released from service due to some unnamed infraction that had raised the ire of the employer. As the song shifts points of view from that of the house owner who was satisfied that the fired servant will finally “learn to find your place” to the servant facing an uncertain future; “Goodbye to that country home,/ So long to a lady I have known.” As the servant faced the future in which there may not be too many options for employment, it became clear that the listeners’ sympathies should reside with the lower class as the angry employer could easily replace any stolen merchandise or restore any unruly behavior in a matter of days.\(^{120}\)

The heroes presented in these songs, whether thieves, killers, or simple working men, served to create a connection between 1960’s era listeners and the populist mentality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These songs served to reassert claims that the real and true heroes of American society were those that often were denigrated or ignored by society. They also profoundly influenced the youth of the 1960’s as their ‘hippie’ counterculture coalesced around such sentiments.

\(^{119}\) Richard Manuel and Jamie Robbie Robertson, “Jawbone,” *The Band.*  
\(^{120}\) Jaime Robbie Robertson, “The Unfaithful Servant,” *The Band.*
CHAPTER 3:

Death and Destruction:

Graveyard Trains, Floods, and Visions of the Apocalypse

As key components of many early blues and folk songs, the themes of death and destruction not surprisingly emerged full fledged in the country rock movement of the late 1960's. Ranging from personal anguish and pain to employing apocalyptical imagery, these songs painted pictures of American life as one of turmoil and struggle. Often biblical imagery was used to great effect to symbolize this sense of dread and unease surrounding both this very personal and widespread fear of death and destruction.

This imagery appeared from the very beginning of Creedence's recording career. The final song off their first LP, "Walk on The Water," conveyed a sense of dread as a man walking down by the riverside sees, complete with biblical implications, a man "walking on the water...calling out my name." Evoking a spiritual being, perhaps even the spirit of Jesus Christ himself, the image coming towards our lone wanderer told him "do not be afraid," but it was no use, as Fogerty's protagonist was off running away from his fate screaming, "I don't wanna go," and hedging his bets against any further run-ins with such visions as he "swear[s] I'll never leave my home again." It begged the question whether a man could truly outrun his fate.

121 Marcus, Old, Weird America, 104-8, 162-4, 202-3, 261-2.
“Graveyard Train,” off 1969’s *Bayou Country*, recounted a car accident in which a loved one was killed thought lyrics that were largely reminiscent of Robert Johnson’s blues pastiche. Johnson, one of the early twentieth century most famed blues men, had a preoccupation with death being on his trail, and evil portents that the crossroads on the outskirts of town offered. These sentiments could be found in his classic acoustic blues songs such as “Hellhound on My Trail,” and “Crossroad Blues.” Fogerty decried the “Hound” as in a Greyhound bus that took his love’s life down at the “crossroads.” What made the song interesting was how Fogerty employed the railroad imagery in an entirely different context; rather than focusing on the freedom it might offer, he emphasized the chance of death and destruction it presented. This song portrayed a man wishing for death “standing on the railroad, waiting for the Graveyard Train.” In this case, the train would bring him the ultimate freedom and lead to a reunion between him and his love.123

“Tombstone Shadow,” “Bad Moon Rising,” and “Feeling Blue” are also prime examples of how Fogerty employed these themes of death and destruction throughout *Creedence’s* music. In “Tombstone Shadow,” death seemed to be truly stalking the song’s protagonist as “everytime I get some good news, Ooh/There’s a shadow on my back,” and he found himself afraid of traveling on that beloved open road and truly living life to the fullest. “Bad Moon Rising” likewise employed a sense of dread that consumed the individual. This song was noteworthy for two key reasons: one, its catchy and pleasant musical structure

completely contradicted the nature of its apocalyptic lyrics; two, those lyrics combined to form a paranoid vision of the destructive forces of which nature is capable. Every perceived danger was presented from the first person perspective as “I see the bad moon rising/ I see trouble on the way./ I see earthquake and lightning/ I see bad times today.” In this individual’s mind, “the end is coming soon,” because he could “hear the voice of rage and ruin.” In one sense this song served to reassert the awesome powers of death and destruction that we cannot take out of nature’s grasp. On the other hand, it pointed to the utter futility of constantly worrying about any perceived death at nature’s hands. Perhaps that was why the music was so catchy, as a sort of black humor hung around the proceedings since who knows what might befall any of us as we “go around tonight.” In “Feeling Blue,” the like-minded voice could “feel it in my bones, my book is due” and at every tree he spies “over yonder,” he felt there will be “a rope hangin’ just for me.” In his mind, “Things are pilin’ up to break me down.”

Finally, a quartet of Creedence songs served to combine this sense of fear, death, and destruction with contemporary events in such a way that the songs took on adding meaning with an understanding of the current political climate. Creedence’s audience would be able to relate with Fogerty’s lyrics of uncertainty and dread that characterize his songs “Effigy,” “Run Through the Jungle,” “Who’ll Stop the Rain,” and “Have You Ever Seen the Rain?” These songs served to combine such current political events, especially the Vietnam War, with

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124 John Fogerty, “Tombstone Shadow”; “Bad Moon Rising,” “Feeling Blue,” Green River; Willy and the Poor Boys.
such a feeling of sadness and confusion that were part of the human condition that they remain both powerful and significant to this very day.

"Effigy" combined the American tradition of burning effigies with a sense of impending unrest. With sly allusions to both President Richard Nixon and his Republican White House, Fogerty sang of "a fire burning on/ The palace lawn" that will soon spread to "the palace door" as Nixon's famed "Silent majority" of "non-shouters" and "non-demonstrators" "Weren't keepin' quiet/ Anymore." In Fogerty's apocalyptic vision, this fire had spread to the "country side" so that "In the mornin'/ Few were left to watch/ The ashes die." There was a sense of confusion and unease as throughout the song the chorus wonders "Who is burnin'/? Who is burnin'?/ Effigy."125

"Run Through the Jungle," perhaps Fogerty's most visceral attack on the Vietnam War, combined both a sense of death and destruction with modern politics and mixed in a touch of biblical allusion to create a song that sought to, in the space of a few minutes, recreate the confusion and devastation of a war zone. As the song began, a cacophony of sound immediately grabbed the listener's attention and held it as Fogerty's voice rose out of the din to moan, "Whoa, thought it was a nightmare,/ Lo, it's all so true" as the realities of Vietnam dawn on the poor soldier who "Better run through the jungle" to survive. In Fogerty's opinion, the "Devil's on the loose" in Vietnam and the only way for a soldier to survive is to look out for himself rather than for any cause or military glory. As the song continued, it seemed to Fogerty that the devil's influence is on both sides

of the fight now that the United States army had “Two hundred million guns... loaded,” it is “Satan [that] cried, “Take aim!” The last verse served to further dirty the hands of the United States government as it skewered its approach to the war by comparing it with a position handed down from on high: “Over on the mountain/ Thunder magic spoke/ Let the people know my wisdom,/ Fill the land with smoke,” complete with the disconnect between the government on high and the people down in the trenches. In Fogerty’s judgment the war was indeed a nightmare come true as even nature, the jungle in this song, was threatening to the common soldier embroiled in Satan’s machinations. 126

In both “Who’ll Stop the Rain?” and “Have You Ever Seen the Rain?” Fogerty posed unanswerable questions to his audience that appealed to their sympathies. Rainfall in these two works served as symbolic of the unending quagmire of the Vietnam War that faced the United States in the early 1970s. Therefore, Fogerty’s meditation that “Long as I remember the rain been coming down./ Clouds of myst’ry pouring confusion on the ground,” served a symbolic critique of the war and the continued unnecessary bloodshed. Even a lyrical retreat to Fogerty’s beloved South seeking “shelter from the storm,” does not help as he still wondered, “Who’ll stop the rain?” “Have You Ever Seen the Rain?” conveyed similar sentiments as Fogerty pondered what “Someone told me long ago,” that “There’s a calm before the storm.” In Fogerty’s mind “its been coming for some time” as the unending rain of “Who’ll Stop the Rain” must give way and “It’ll rain a sunny day” as the clouds of Vietnam will part bringing in peace and sunlight. Unfortunately, Fogerty had yet to witness this and was still actively

126 John Fogerty, “Run Through The Jungle,” Cosmo’s Factory.
seeking anyone who has “ever see the rain/ Coming down on a sunny day?” His optimism that it will end started to fade as the song came to a close and he was forced to admit it has “Been that way for all my time,” and wonder whether it “can’t stop” and will continue this way “‘Til forever.” The misery of unending rainfall via the nonstop bloodshed of the war was, in Fogerty’s presentation, akin to the disastrous effects a natural unending rainfall would bestow upon humanity.127

Much of Bob Dylan’s work focused on the themes of this chapter, and more than any of the other artist mentioned he seemed willing to employ layer after layer of meaning and biblical allusion to his lyrics in order to create song structures that tended to reveal themselves after multiple listenings. Nowhere was this more apparent than on his *John Wesley Harding* album, which contemporary rock critic Jon Landau viewed as evidence of Dylan’s “profound awareness of the [Vietnam] war” and how it was affecting Dylan’s lyrical outlook based on “the mood of the album as a whole.”128 While that view should not be entirely discounted, *John Wesley Harding* was more about the timeless human universal conditions of pain, suffering, love, death, fear that were and continue to be felt by all Americans, than one specific war, no matter how divisive or destructive.

The album’s opener, the previously-mentioned gunslinger ode “John Wesley Harding,” applauded this western folk hero for being an avenger, as he traveled around doling out justice to the wicked, while never being known to “hurt an honest man.” A type of God on earth, Dylan’s Harding traveled with a

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128 Marcus, *Old, Weird America,* 55.
“gun in every hand” and took away those that deserved death and spared those that have been honest and righteous.  

Dylan’s “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine” combined the image of a key religious figure with a sense of dread for the future as the saint out wandering the countryside in “misery” was “searching for the very souls whom already have been sold.” In the wake of such a pathetic image and bleak future for humanity, the singer “Bowed my head and cried.”

“All Along the Watchtower” and “Drifter’s Escape” fit comfortably in this same mold. “All Along the Watchtower,” crafted around an in media res conversation between an unnamed joker and thief, was a rumination on modern existence complete with feelings of emptiness and apocalyptic future warnings. The joker especially felt the weight of a meaningless modern life and acknowledged this disconnect through his powerful lament:

There must be some way out of here.../ There’s too much confusion, I can’t get no relief/ Businessmen they drink my wine, Plowmen dig my earth,/ None of them along the line know what any of it is worth.

As the thief tried to comfort him, he admitted that while “there are many here among us that feel that life is but a joke” a select few, like themselves, “have come through that and this is not our fate.” As the song ended, the quiet apocalyptic tone shone a bit brighter as “the wind began to howl” and “two riders were approaching.” Dylan quietly set the scene for an apocalyptic showdown where those who were wrapped up in this so-called meaningless modern existence

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130 Bob Dylan, “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” John Wesley Harding.
and treat life as a joke were set to suffer a terrible fate at either the hands of the approaching riders or the howling winds of a vengeful God.  

The previously-discussed “Drifter’s Escape” set up the poor drifter suffering, afraid and uncertain of his future as he was completely at the hands of the “cursed jury” as they “cried for more” condemning him. Luckily for him, Dylan’s vision of God acted in the favor of the downtrodden and sends a bolt of lightning to strike the “courthouse out of shape” so that while everyone in the jury and the crowds outside “knelt to pray,” the “drifter did escape.” Also, another previously-discussed song, “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door,” concerned with the heroic nature of both Billy the Kid and his lawful pursuers, presented a lawman’s death as almost pitiful as the overt masculinity of a Wild West lawman was lost as he cried out for his “Mama” as he lay dying.

Two songs from Dylan’s famed bootleg collection, The Basement Tapes, focused exclusively on these themes of death and destruction and were suffused with a sense of “Judgment Day.” One, “Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood)” focused on the devastation of a small rural community as the rain does not cease to fall. The other, “This Wheel’s on Fire,” written with The Band’s Rick Danko, dealt more with personal issues and alienation as precursors to devastation both on a personal scale and in terms of larger social issues.

“Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood)” displayed nature as always straddling the precarious line between necessitating survival and bringing

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131 Bob Dylan, “All Along the Watchtower,” John Wesley Harding.
132 Bob Dylan, “Drifter’s Escape”; “Knockin’ On Heaven’s Door,” John Wesley Harding; Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid.
133 Marcus, Old, Weird America, 67.
unending misery and destruction on humanity. Here, Dylan's nature offered up to man "the meanest flood that anybody's ever seen," so that human ties and social positions were rendered meaningless in its wake. It was literally every man for himself in the face of such personal and societal destruction as Dylan cried it's "Sugar for sugar, salt for salt" and "King for king, queen for queen," and if you go down in the flood to try and save either your land our property, the tragic outcome was "gonna be your fault."\textsuperscript{134}

"This Wheel's On Fire" focused on the feelings of losing control over one's own life and the impending dangers that it might entail. As the song meandered along with a decidedly menacing tone, Dylan sang, "If your mem'ry serves you well/ We were going to meet again and wait" as his thoughts of a lover who has spurned him haunt his mind until he shifts in a chorus that warns of impending disaster: "This wheel's on fire/ Rolling down the road,/ Best notify my next of kin./ This wheel shall explode!"\textsuperscript{135}

The Grateful Dead's name itself evoked these images of death and destruction. Famously chosen at random from the Funk and Wagnell's New Practical Standard Dictionary of the English Language, the name harkened back to European folktales that centered on the exploits of the "ghost[s] of the grateful dead." These helpful spirits will assist a charitable living friend or family member in a time of need long after they themselves have passed away.\textsuperscript{136}

\textsuperscript{134} Bob Dylan, "Crash on the Levee (Down in the Flood)," The Basement Tapes.
\textsuperscript{135} Bob Dylan and Rick Danko, "This Wheel's On Fire," The Basement Tapes.
Therefore, it was not surprising that *The Grateful Dead*'s music from this period also excelled at utilizing these themes. Two pertinent examples off their classic *Workingman's Dead* album were "Dire Wolf" and "Casey Jones," both works previously-mentioned due to their superior quality and ability to incorporate nearly all of the categories examined. *The Dead*'s "Casey Jones" set up his death as drug-related, thus created a bridge to the past through a huge in-joke that a beloved folk hero, who was memorialized and wept over, was actually a key forerunner of the youth-centered drug culture. Nowhere in this version were ladies moaning and children weeping. "Dire Wolf's" tale of interaction and murder at the hands of a huge wild animal once again tied man and his fate to the laws of nature, no matter how far removed he tried to become from its pull. The fact that his death was soon immortalized in a folk song that "the boys sing round the fire" also served as a connection to the past, as the band created and killed off a character to tie their creation to the long line of tribute and lament folk and blues songs.\(^{137}\)

Two other Dead songs, "He's Gone" and "Attics Of My Life," also focused on death as an exit. In "He's Gone," the unnamed man who has passed on was described as "gone/ Like a steam locomotive/ rolling down the track.../and nothing's gonna bring him back." Often played live when someone close to the band had passed away, this song served as both a loving tribute to a departed friend as well as speaking to the pain of still being here as the train rolled down the track. "Attics Of My Life" spoke to a more spiritual world where one would head after a life "spent.../ Seeking all that's still unsung" had reached its

\(^{137}\) Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter, "Dire Wolf," *Workingman's Dead.*
ultimate conclusion to a life when "my lights grow old." Both songs successfully painted death as a touching, natural release from living.\textsuperscript{138}

The last two bands to be discussed, however, did not utilize these allusions to death and destruction as often or to as great an effect. However, when these two bands did choose to include songs focused on death and destruction they were often covers of songs by artists they respected and enjoyed. In the process they legitimized their connections to the material and the artists that originally performed them, placing themselves firmly in concert with the long line of American popular culture that focused on such matters.

\textit{The Byrds}' covers of such songs as Merle Haggard's "Life in Prison," Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd," and "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)," Little Feat's "Truck Stop Girl," and Bob Dylan and Rick Danko's "This Wheel's on Fire," all tied the band into this motif. Whether it be by glorifying a enterprising gunslinger, lamenting the death of poor and unnamed migrant workers, depicting a repentant murderer who "prays every night for death to come" after killing his wife, weeping over the automobile death of a beloved girl, or warning of impending personal dread and devastation, these covers all fit into this overarching human condition to be both fearful and fascinated with the prospects of impending death and destruction. And peppered through their albums that lionized nature, the open road, their idealized heroes, such songs served to create a more fully realized picture of American existence.

The Band’s covers evoked similar responses. Whether it was recording the Basement Tapes favorite “This Wheel’s On Fire” or their own version of Lefty Frizzell’s 1959 country hit “Long Black Veil,” a song termed an “instant folk song” by one of its co-composers, the group’s focus on death and destruction was on a much more basic and personal level. The main characters of both songs dealt with their own issues, whether it be an impending sense of self-dread, or silently heading to the gallows to preserve the happiness and dignity of your alibi, “your best friend’s wife.”¹³⁹ Like most great Band songs, these songs brought to the forefront of the listener’s imagination how it must be to live and deal with these situations, and helped to create both another place and time as the soothing music and images of a song that “feel[s] too old to date” detailed a sorrow-filled woman walking among the hills and visiting her lover’s grave in her “Long Black Veil” swirled around their minds.¹⁴⁰

Death and destruction as musical themes were key parts of rural folk and blues and were utilized to display ties to both the natural and supernatural world to listeners. Therefore, both the natural and spiritual foreboding of much of the music of this genre sought to tie into the authenticity of folk and blues culture and reemphasize the ties between all human beings as they face life and death. These songs arrived at the tail-end of the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” movement and, amidst national turbulence, death, destruction, and rampant dangerous drug usage,

¹⁴⁰ Marcus, Old, Weird America, 175-6.
they paved the way for the more introspective music that achieved its highest level of commercial popularity in the early to mid 1970s.  

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Conclusion: “Come Join Uncle John’s Band,”
as Roots Rock Legacy Continues

These songs, from the clash and bang of Creedence’s “Run Through The Jungle,” to the somber apocalyptic warnings of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower,” served to fit in with other works of American popular culture that sought connections to our mythic past. These songs not only spoke to the past, but they critiqued the present and looked either longingly or hesitantly towards the future. As cultural artifacts tied in with both musical forms and literary symbolism from the past, as present day critiques of politics and society, and as warnings to future generations, they presented a treasure trove of ideas to be explored by the listener if they wished to delve deep enough. The leap from the populist sentiments of the late nineteenth century and the sentiments found in these songs all formed part of a musical and historical movement through which lower and working class culture sought acceptance and ultimately glorification as typified by Richard Slotkin’s discussion of populist cultural artifacts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{142}

The legacy of this musical movement ran deep in American popular culture as this more stripped down approach to popular music led the way for the more confessional, acoustic-based, singer-songwriter balladry that rose to prominence as the 1970’s worn on. Artists such as James Taylor, and Arlo Guthrie, the son of Woody, would continue to explore and delve deeper into this new, yet familiar, area of folksy rock and roll, all the while wearing their

\textsuperscript{142} Slotkin, \textit{Gunfighter Nation}, 281-3.
influences on their sleeves. It was not uncommon for Arlo to include both covers of works by his father and Bob Dylan on his albums as a way of marrying the past with the present and tying himself into the legendary musical status of both artists.

Concurrently, many English bands began to seek a return to their roots, so to speak, as they turned away from psychedelic musical pastures for more stripped down arrangements that had deeper historical meanings and symbolism. *The Beatles* and *Rolling Stones* re-emphasized their connection to American blues, early rock ‘n’ roll, and folk arrangement through their work of this period in songs such as “Rocky Raccoon,” “Get Back,” “Wild Horses,” “Salt of the Earth,” and “Brown Sugar.” These songs fit comfortably in the genre described throughout this thesis and were exceedingly popular when first released and remain so today. Other British groups also went forward in their musical careers by looking backwards, as Traffic’s *John Barleycorn Must Die* album, built around a century’s old folk tune focusing on harvesting grain, was both a critical and commercial success, and the folk group *Fairport Convention* sought to bring old British folk songs to the masses by combining them on their albums with covers and new arrangements of Bob Dylan songs.

This search for authenticity in culture was nothing new, and the muse of these artists was to create, through their music, an idyllic picture of American life that was rural and communal in nature. Not surprisingly some of the biggest fans of this genre fell in line with this presentation of idealized American life, although not always with the best results. And while the images and opinions presented in these songs were simplifications and distillations of American past society,
whether it be taking the African American voice and experience out of the occasion, presenting characters not quite praiseworthy as heroic, or relegating women to a second class status where they were presented as antithetical to a life of freedom, they were immensely popular and powerful in crafting an alternate vision of what American society could be. Now when current acts sing of escaping on horseback, or robbing trains, they are singing as much about the movement and feeling presented in the 1960’s as in the 1860’s. The timelessness of the music added to the authenticity of the images presented and discussed as the listener wanted to believe there was a time and a place for an American Robin Hood that wandered the West doing good deeds as they dealt with their modern existence. These songs served to illuminate and alleviate the alienation of the “crisis in the status of knowledge” and understanding of the postmodern Western world; perhaps that is why they are still so powerful.143

Nor is the spirit of this musical genre dead even some forty years later. Alternative country groups, more critical darlings and cult artists than the popular music icons of the 1960’s, still mine this well of American nature, landscape, and cowboys as inspiration. Even rap artists are part of the legacy of this musical evolution from the fields to the stereo, as their focus on urban panoramas and vigilante justice as romantic ideals of modern masculinity fall in line with populist attempts to glorify the lowest social levels of the American social hierarchy. The tone and execution is very different, but the spirit is very much the same.

Many of the artists mentioned have gone on to have long careers of popular approval highs and lows, but most have kept the spirit of their country and roots rock alive while adding various other authentic musical forms, from reggae to African, into their work. A great example of the staying power of these musical forms and ideas was Bob Dylan’s album “Love and Theft,” released nearly forty years into his musical career. Not coincidentally this album shared the same title as scholar Eric Lott’s study of blackface minstrelsy, which was discussed in this thesis as a key musical touchstone for white artists as they sought to recreate the authentic aspects of black culture and music. A critical and popular hit, the album careened throughout American history from rock, country, rockabilly, jazz, and hard hitting blues, all the while incorporating lyrics that focused on American characters and landscapes much in the same jaded and skewed vision as found on his Basement Tapes. Death, loneliness, apocalyptic floods, poor beggars, and unease abounded on this album as Dylan seemed to once again wander the countryside and depict an America that is at once timely and timeless, beautiful and desolate.

It was released on September 11th, 2001.
LYRICS

Lyrics for the songs discussed throughout the paper were found, when not based on the author's interpretations, at the following websites:

http://theband.hiof.no

www.bobdylan.com

http://www.creedence-online.net

http://arts.uscs.edu/gdead/agdl/

ALBUMS

The Band

• Music From Big Pink (1968)
• The Band (1969)
• Stage Fright (1970)

The Byrds

• Sweetheart of the Rodeo (1968)
• Dr. Byrds & Mr. Hyde (1969)
• The Ballad of Easy Rider (1969)
• (Untitled) (1970)

Creedence Clearwater Revival:

• Creedence Clearwater Revival (1968)
• Bayou Country (1969)
• Green River (1969)
• Willy and the Poor Boys (1969)
• Cosmo's Factory (1970)
• Pendulum (1970)

Bob Dylan:

• John Wesley Harding (1967)
• Nashville Skyline (1969)
• Self Portrait (1970)
• *New Morning* (1970)
• *Pat Garret & Billy the Kid* (1973)
• The Basement Tapes (1975) w/ *The Band*
• *The Bootleg Series: Volumes 1-3* (1991)

**The Grateful Dead**
• *Workingman's Dead* (1970)
• *American Beauty* (1970)
• *Grateful Dead (live)* (1971)
• *Europe '72 (live)* (1972)

**SONGS**

Beddoe, A.F. “Copper Kettle (The Pale Moonlight).”


_____ and Rick Danko. “This Wheel’s on Fire.”


_____ and Tom Fogerty. “Walk on The Water.”


Phil Lesh, and Robert Hunter. "Cumberland Blues."

Phil Lesh, Bob Weir, and Robert Hunter. "Truckin'."

Guthrie, Woody. "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)," and "Pretty Boy Floyd."


Kristofferson, Kris. "Me & Bobby McGee."

Ledbetter, Huddie. "Cotton Fields."

Manuel, Richard. "We Can Talk."


McGuinn, Roger. "The Ballad of Easy Rider."

Jacques Levy. "Chestnut Mare," "Just a Season," and "Lover of the Bayou."

Jaime Robbie Robertson and Gram Parsons. "Drug Store Truck Drivin’ Man."

Parson, Gram. "Hickory Wind."


Polland, Pamela. "Tulsa County."


Traditional. Arr. by Grateful Dead. "Goin’ Down the Road Feeling Bad," and "I Know You Rider."

Traditional. Arr. by Roger McGuinn. "Jack Tarr the Sailor."

Traditional. Arr. by Roger McGuinn and Chris Hillman. "I Am a Pilgrim."

York, John. "Fido."

WEB SITES


ALBUM NOTES


ARTICLES


SECONDARY WORKS


CHRISTOPHER LEE WITTE
Vita

Education:

Senior’s Honor Thesis:
“‘Intending to Take All We Have’: Confederate Agricultural Policy During the Civil War.”

Awards:
New Jersey Edward J. Bloustein Distinguished Scholar Award Winner
Golden Key Honor Society Member
Phi Beta Kappa Honors Historical Fraternity Member
Graduated Cum Laude