MUSIC AND THE US WAR ON POVERTY: SOME REFLECTIONS

by Jeff Todd Titon

Jesus reportedly said that "the poor will be always with us" (Matthew 26:11) but, brimming with confidence after the Second World War, sociologists and economic policymakers in the United States dared to think otherwise. In a modern, affluent society, poverty was embarrassing. Social critics used to believe individuals were poor because they were unlucky or lazy or stupid, but mid-twentieth century sociologists saw the causes as cultural: if society could but change those cultures, then poverty would disappear (Galbraith 1998; Harrington 1963). The editor of this volume invited me to reflect on music and poverty in relation to my scholarly research over the past forty-five years. It so happens that the musical communities in the United States where I've done most of my field research were characterized as cultures of poverty and targeted in President Lyndon Johnson's 1964 State of the Union address in which he declared a War on Poverty. Daniel Moynihan, one of the architects of the War on Poverty in the US, put the then culture-of-poverty theory into bureaucratese: "Poverty leads to *cultural* and environmental obstacles to motivation which lead to poor health, inadequate education, and low mobility limiting earning potential which leads to limited income opportunities which lead to Poverty" (1966:4, my italics). While I did find material poverty in the musical communities that I participated in and studied since the 1960s, I found the people in those communities to be rich in music and expressive culture.[1] I never found a cyclic culture of poverty in the Moynihan sense, either. Instead, I came to understand that poverty was imposed from without by discrimination, exploitation, and corruption.

Expressive cultural richness sometimes is explained by a Victorian fancy, that suffering artists experience more emotional intensity from which to create art. Nonetheless, I never met a musician who desired poverty any more than I met a Christian who desired sin (so that God's grace might more greatly abound).[2] I found that if expressive culture among the materially poor I visited is particularly intense, I believe it's because expressive culture brings people together who find strength in numbers, strength to maintain their collective identity, to continue their traditions, and to resist the wealthy and powerful who would keep them poor even while modernizing them. Given the limitations of space, in what follows I will discuss music and poverty briefly, and in relation to my participant-observation research with blues singer Lazy Bill Lucas in the African American musical community in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the 1960s; and also since the 1970s with the music of two Baptist groups in the southern Appalachian Mountains.

1. Increasingly, folklorists have come to prefer the term "expressive culture" to "folklore" because it emphasizes the performance aspects of the verbal arts such as music. See Feintuch (2003).

2. Romans 6:1: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?"

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Lazy Bill Lucas (1918–1982), the blues singer and pianist whose band I joined in the late 1960s while I was a graduate student in the city of Minneapolis, fell within the black population of urban poor targeted by the War on Poverty. When I knew him, he received a small monthly welfare cheque from the US government for an eyesight disability. Music jobs supplied him a small amount of extra income. Lazy Bill Lucas grew up in rural Arkansas in the 1920s. His parents understood that poor eyesight would handicap him in the work world, so when he was a boy they bought him a guitar (his father traded a pig for it) and, later, a piano so that he could learn and earn a musical living. Like the majority of black families in the area, the Lucas family consisted of sharecroppers; materially poor, their buying Bill a guitar and a piano was a financial sacrifice for the boy's future.[3] But they made the sacrifice, he learned to sing and play, and eventually he moved to Chicago during the World War II years where he performed on Maxwell Street and, in the early 1950s, joined the musicians' union and played with a half dozen or so blues bands. He led his own group for a while, made a couple of records under his own name and played as a sideman on other records.[4] In the early 1960s, he and some of his musical friends moved further up the Mississippi River to Minneapolis, where they thought there would be less competition among blues singers. They were correct; but there was less of an audience too.

When I met Bill Lucas in 1966, at first just hanging out with him and his friends and playing music, and later joining his band, he was renting a small apartment on Lake Street in a working class section of Minneapolis. He lived by himself, cooked for himself, took care of himself; he had an upright piano in the apartment and on many days he had visitors. On Sundays he played gospel piano at a local Baptist church, while his work with blues bands—his own and others'—was sporadic.[5] A gig might last as short as one night or possibly for a few weekends. It could also be for a few months; I recall that in 1970 we had a steady weekend job for three months in Dinkytown (a section of Minneapolis near the university). When he was in his apartment by himself he seldom played music; instead, he listened to the radio or to recorded books made for the blind, which he played on a phonograph. He also listened to his collection of 78 rpm records, 45s, and LPs, not only blues but also rhythm 'n' blues and gospel music. Lucas did not experience poverty in the technical sense that he was unable to supply his basic needs for food, clothing, health, and shelter. He may have been poor by the standards of the Great Society, but he was rich in music. He had many friends and a wealth of cultural and musical knowledge that I and other young musicians sought.

3. Sharecropping is a farming arrangement in which the farmer rents a house and farm land in exchange for a share of the crop grown, usually half of it.

4. A brief biography of Lazy Bill Lucas may be found in *Wikipedia* (Wikipedia Contributors 2013). A longer biography is available in Titon (2009:170–76). An example of his music can be found on the ICTM website (http://ictmusic.org/ytm2013).

5. Homesick James Williamson, a Chicago blues singer, gave Lucas the nickname "Lazy" in the 1950s because he seldom helped set up and adjust the instrument mics and amps on stage. Of course, that was because of his eyesight, not laziness. But the nickname stuck.

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Economic poverty had been on Bill's parents' minds when they provided him with the means of making his way in the world through music. Was poverty reflected in the music? Writers thought so then. When in the 1960s I began to read what various writers had to say about blues music, I noted a consensus that the lyrics protested poverty and racial discrimination (see, e.g., Courlander 1963). My own experience of blues lyrics (not only with Lucas, but also after years of listening to other blues singers as well as to recordings) was that they protested mistreatment, but that mistreatment in the songs was described between men and women, not white bosses and black workers. To be sure, there were a few lyrics that noted hard times, and the rare lyric that protested racial discrimination. And I don't doubt that singers and listeners could and did transfer mistreatment from lovers to bosses and back. But the singers who made up the blues songs did so based on personal experience—theirs or others'—mostly with lovers, seldom with bosses. Lucas had a girlfriend named Johnnie Mae who left him for someone else (another blues singer, it turned out). Johnny Mae was kind of a serial romancer with bluesmen, and when he wrote a song about her, it became popular among his musician friends in part because he mentioned all their names. When he recorded it, he had a minor hit.[6]

I never thought Bill Lucas was poor. I resisted the idea that he was held back by a culture of chronic poverty. I felt there was a disconnect between what I was reading about a black culture of poverty in the inner city and the culture I experienced through making music with him. Not that I overlooked the racial discrimination, class divisions, drugs, and crime in the Twin Cities; in fact, some of the musicians we played with had a few "bad connections." But, like black activists in Minneapolis at the time, whom I worked with on occasion, I rejected the culture of poverty theory that blamed the victim and instead looked to Civil Rights and black self-empowerment as more effective actions. Music, of course, was central to the struggle for black civil rights; local activists in Minneapolis also drew on musicians and the arts for their educational activities in which they offered their own narratives of black history.[7]

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Music in Appalachia has been a focus of my research since 1977. The "mountainous backyards of several of our southern states," was how Berea (Kentucky) College president William Goodell Frost defined "Appalachian America" in 1890 when he coined the term (Williams 2002:11–14). For more than a hundred years, Appalachia has been trapped in two outsider myths that construct this region and its people. The first, the latest incarnation of those messy backyards, is a poverty narrative. Through the Office of Economic Opportunity (which was the federal administrative arm of

6. "Johnnie Mae," recorded by the Blues Rockers (Earl Dranes, Lazy Bill Lucas, Jo Jo Williams, P. T. Hayes), Nashville, 1955 (Excello Records 2062).

7. I was involved with Lazy Bill's band, for example, in a black history revue put to music, called *Dat Feelin'*, which was presented at Minneapolis's Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in 1967. The show was written and produced by local black activist-historian Milton Williams.

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the War on Poverty) and the Appalachian Regional Commission, the US government tried to remediate poverty chiefly through technology and development: industry, education, transportation, medical delivery, and, lately, cultural and ecotourism, in an effort to modernize and mainstream the mountain people.[8] Others, particularly educators and various progressives, have constructed the second myth: Appalachia as an alternative America, as a fragmented remnant of a folk society. And in various ways they have promoted the virtues of an earlier, pre-industrial America thought to have left its traces there: modesty, honesty, loyalty, family, honour, craftsmanship, and an emphasis on personal, neighbourly relationships. At odds with one another, these two narratives are based on a stereotype of a land and people "that time forgot"—where in the remotest areas one might hear Elizabethan English spoken, and overhear ballads sung at the family hearth; where community corn huskings and barn raisings were followed by fiddle tunes and frolics.[9] When the stereotype of the shiftless, in-bred, drunk-on-moonshine mountaineer prevailed, development, modernization, and mainstreaming were the proposed remedy for cultural deviance. When the romantic stereotype endured, difference was emphasized in a positive way: crafts and settlement schools, music festivals, and celebrations of mountain culture became institutionalized. In recent decades, a third response—the development of cultural and heritage tourism—has combined the developmental and alternative America sides of the mountain stereotype. In most cases, these interventions from without have been spectacular failures (see Whisnant 1994; Eller 2008). The myth of Appalachia as an alternative culture traps the region into a drama of make-believe (make and believe). On the other hand, development enriches large corporations and a small class of indigenous politicians, entrepreneurs, and power-brokers while maintaining a large class of industrial and service workers among the ranks of the working poor.

One of my conclusions about the people in the first religious community that I did ethnographic work in, from 1976 to 2000—an independent group of Baptists formerly associated with the Freewill Baptist denomination and located in Virginia's northern Blue Ridge Mountains—was that they did not conform to

8. Whisnant (1994) and Eller (2008) offer critical historical treatments of the War on Poverty in Appalachia. But as Williams (2002:342–48) notes, that war lasted only five years until it was ended under the Nixon administration. However, the federally funded Appalachian Regional Commission has continued to administer anti-poverty projects aimed at education, health, agriculture, job training, and major highway construction to encourage development and modernization ever since (see http://www.arc.gov/ and my discussion on p. 79 of the present article).

9. Jean Ritchie's autobiography (Ritchie 1988) offers a good description of music's place in rural Appalachia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, she writes of corn huskings and frolics, handcrafts, and ballads. Her family was notable for conserving the old English and Scottish ballads. Cecil Sharp collected folk ballads from the Ritchie family around the time of World War I during his journeys into Appalachia. But the Ritchies scarcely were shiftless and illiterate. Balis Ritchie, Jean's father, collected and preserved ballads by writing down the words in his "ballit book," a not uncommon practice in that time and place. Jean's sisters attended settlement schools in the mountains. Jean herself graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Kentucky. After graduation, she found work in a settlement school for immigrants in New York City.

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outsider stereotypes of an Appalachian culture of poverty (the powerless poor withdrawing into a fantasy world of born-again Christianity where they could imagine themselves to be powerful). Instead, they expressed inherited cultural traditions through sacred language (including song) which, they found, had the power to change things—and their lives (Titon 1988:7). Most of the members of the community, including the pastor, could indeed be counted among the working poor (holding jobs paying little more than minimum wage). They looked back to a time of comparatively greater material poverty, when they had been children on mountain farms during the Depression, but with more food security than their out-of-work urban class counterparts. But now they had telephones, electric appliances, television sets, and automobiles; most were paying mortgages on ranch houses or double-wide trailer homes. Of course, it took two incomes per household to maintain that standard of living, and they were anxious about their jobs, their children, and their futures. They had moved materially into the modern world, while their values remained old-fashioned. The cultural dissonance was palpable. As I wrote twenty-five years ago, "The mountain folk were not so much left behind by the modern industrial state as victimized by it" (ibid.).[10]

Old Regular Baptists, the second Christian religious community I've gotten to know in Appalachia, come from all walks of life. They inhabit the coal-mining country of central Appalachia, where they are the dominant religious group. Some are miners, a few are mine inspectors; some are business owners; some are unemployed or "discouraged." Most of those of working age are in the service economy, while a fair number are retired. Visiting with them since 1990, I've learned that neither the culture of poverty narrative nor the alternative culture narrative is helpful for describing their community. Instead, positive outcomes can result from working discussions and partnerships between "fotched-on" people (i.e., people not native to the community), like me, and indigenous people, like them, to achieve mutually desired goals, such as the conservation of their hymn-singing tradition. Their lined-out hymnody is the oldest English-language religious music in the United States. They sing that way not because of tradition but because it best enables them to praise and feel the presence of God. They identify the place they love (the mountains of central Appalachia) with a special sound that reverberates in their sacred spaces, not only in church, but at home and in the natural world. It is the sound of their singing and, as one of them said, "It has a drawing power" (Titon, Cornett, and Wallhausser 1997).

When their leader, Elwood Cornett, approached me in the early 1990s about how we might work together to help conserve their music, we discussed a number of projects. I helped them receive a self-documentation grant to buy and learn how to operate recording equipment, and to make recordings of their most endangered melodies. After I taught them how to use the equipment, they embarked on a field recording project of their own. In addition, we partnered with Smithsonian Folkways to record and release two cassettes and CDs that were distributed at

10. This ethnographic work resulted in the book (Titon 1988), documentary double-LP recording (Titon 1983), and documentary film (Titon, Dornfeld, and Rankin 1989), each titled *Powerhouse for God.*

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cost within their community and sold to the world at large (Titon, Cornett, and Wallhausser 1997, 2003). The Smithsonian brought us to their folklife festival in 1997 where some of them demonstrated their hymn-singing tradition (Titon 1997).[11] Gradually coming to the attention of the wider world, a group of them were invited to two conferences at Yale on lined-out hymnody in 2003 and 2005. This partnership led Cornett to conclude that "All of this has led our people to say, 'We want to hang on to this way of singing'" (Cornett 2007). I believe they will.

Cultural and musical sustainability was not, however, the first priority of the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Appalachian Regional Commission in the southern Appalachian Mountains. Quite the opposite: if Appalachia was a culture of poverty, then the culture must change. Moynihan had identified the causes of the culture of poverty in poor health, inadequate education, and low mobility. Technology would come to the rescue. Modern medicine and hospitals would replace mountain herbalists. Consolidated schools in the larger towns would replace the rural one-room schoolhouses. Major highway improvements would increase mobility, and attract new industry and jobs for a work force suffering from automation in the coal mines. Shopping malls and automobile dealerships sprang up on the outskirts of the larger towns. While the plans were made in Washington and administered in cooperation with the local and regional power brokers in Appalachia, anti-poverty workers, many of them young idealists just out of college, came and stayed to work directly with the families and communities. These workers for the pre-VISTA, anti-poverty programme called Appalachian Volunteers became radicalized in the 1970s when they saw how the local power structures gamed the system to their own advantage. The enemy, as Whitesburg, Kentucky, native Harry Caudill wrote in *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, was the combination of "giant [absentee] corporations which own the region's wealth" with the often corrupt state and local officials who had colonized Appalachia as if it were a third-world nation and who now diverted anti-poverty programs to serve their own ends (quoted in Eller 2008:136; see also Williams 2002:348–53). The more radical of these anti-poverty activists felt that traditional music was quaint, and that the efforts to preserve it along with handicrafts and older Appalachian values—efforts that had been underway since the early twentieth century settlement schools—were at best diversions and at worst obstacles in the fight against the longstanding economic exploitation that had perpetuated class differences and income inequality.

When in the late 1970s I began attending conferences of the then newly-formed Appalachian Studies Association (Williams 2002:362–63) and presenting my research on sacred language and music in Appalachia's northern Blue Ridge, I was classified with those academics whose interests in Appalachian traditions got in the way of efforts to overturn the political and economic structures that colonized the region. The Association, formed by a combination of academics associated with Appalachian Centers at various regional colleges, and Appalachian activists,

11. An example of a performance by the congregation of the Blair Branch Old Regular Baptist Church can be found on the ICTM website (http://ictmusic.org/ytm2013).

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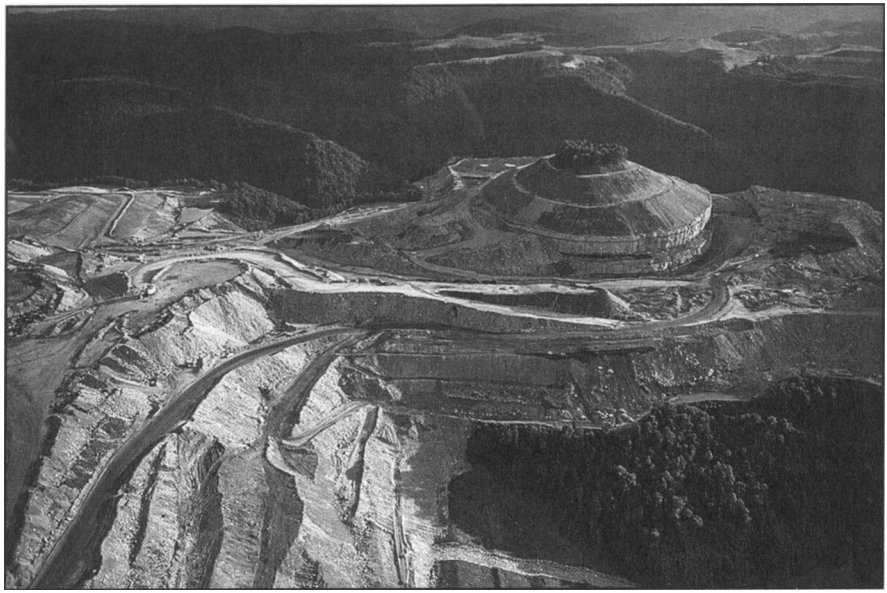


Figure 1. Mountaintop removal, West Virginia, USA
(photo: Ami Vitale; courtesy of Ami Vitale (http://www.amivitale.com)).

seemed split between these two groups, except that a few of the academics regarded themselves as radical activists. In the 1980s, however, when Appalachian Regional Commission funding was drastically reduced by the Reagan Administration, the activists increasingly came to understand that the mountain people did have a culture worth preserving, that it was not a culture of poverty, and that if smaller gains could be made, they would have to be done in a way consonant with traditional Appalachian identity and values, values that were expressed in music and other aspects of Appalachian culture (see, e.g., Jones 1999). Many activists also came to understand (some had always understood this, of course) how music acted as a powerful repository of a collective identity that enabled the people to come together and resist efforts to exploit them—a tradition extending in Appalachia back in time to the Depression era, unionization in the coal mines, and the songs of Aunt Molly Jackson and Sarah Ogun Gunning. It wasn't a culture of poverty that kept the people poor. It was the extractive industries, the absentee corporations, and the politics of corruption that did so. The War on Poverty, however well-intentioned by liberals in the Washington think-tanks, was aimed at the wrong target. Roads, schools, and hospitals were helpful, but to overcome poverty that War would have had to change the region's economic and political institutions—and it would not, could not, and did not do so.

Ironically, coal mining today no longer employs anywhere near a majority of the central Appalachian population. Income inequality is perpetuated as it is elsewhere in the United States, through a host of low-wage service industry jobs in fast food chains, retail stores in mini-malls, and other business establishments. Yet mining

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exploits the region more than ever, through ecosystem degradation brought on by strip mining, mountaintop removal, and the resultant periodic floods that put the people and their way of life at even greater risk (figure 1). Mountaintop removal levels the mountains, extracts the coal, and dumps the toxic waste into the stream beds in the hollows below, where it poisons the water and sickens the people. It may even be the cause of earthquakes (Titon 2012). Old Regular Baptist elders had often spoken to me of the way the sounds of their singing echoed up and down the mountains of southeastern Kentucky (Titon, Cornett, and Wallhausser 1997, 2003), turning the mountains into sacred space (Titon 2011). Now poverty has been forced into the natural environment, where "the land had always shaped human relationships and personal identity [and] had always defined cultural meaning" (Eller 2008:155). Instead of eliminating a culture of poverty, modern technology (as embodied in mountaintop removal) is impoverishing the culture. It is doing so by destroying the mountains that the people have made sacred with the sound of their singing.

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