

AMERICA, THE CITY OF GOD AND OTHER IMAGINARY PLACES: IVES, ROOTS AND ROCK

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Abstract: The topic of this essay is musical geography: certain places are conjured up by music. Such places may be based on actual, physical, historical locales, or they may be entirely imaginary. American music, in particular, is haunted by a sense of place. What follows is a discussion of several important places in American music, and of the ways in which they connect to one another.

Keywords: American Music; Charles Ives; History of American Music; Rock.

1 Early american hymns¹

Although the early Puritans of New England frowned on earthly pleasures of any sort, they felt that music was an essential part of their worship. The first book published in the English colonies was *The Bay Psalm Book*, in 1640. Its first eight editions contained only the words to the Psalms, plus notation of their meter. In 1698, however, the ninth edition included tunes to accompany some of the psalms; these tunes were composed in England. The level of musical literacy in the colonies was low; a common practice was the lining-out of hymns, in which a trained singer would sing a line of music, the congregation would repeat it, and so on. By the 1720s, a reaction against this practice occurred; so-called singing schools appeared throughout New England as a means of educating churchgoers in the proper performance of hymns and psalms in a more melodically interesting and rhythmically regular style. From the singing school movement came the practice

1 Background material for this section is taken from SOUTHERN (1971, pp.31-39); MARK (2008, pp. 13-27) and OGASAPIAN (2004, pp.29-45).

of shape-note singing, a simplified kind of solfeggio and part-song performance that influenced the earliest composers of sacred music in New England. The folk tune “Nettleton” (“Come, Thou Fount of Ev’ry Blessing”) provides an example of a hymn of the Singing School period. Probably composed by John Wyeth, an amateur composer living in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania sometime before 1813, the tune is found in Protestant hymnals to this day.

The music of composers like Wyeth, and the prolific sacred music composer William Billings (1746-1800) went out of fashion, in turn, when musicians educated according to European standards began to influence the sacred music of the United States in the 1830s and thereafter. One hymn in the later style, by composer Lowell Mason (1792-1872), is “Watchman.” (“Watchman, tell us of the night / What its signs of promise are [...]”)² Just as lining out was discarded by relatively affluent, urban white churches in the 1700s, only to find a home in African-American worship, shape note singing and the earlier tradition of American hymnody was discarded by relatively affluent, urban white churches in the United States in the 1800s, only to find a home in the rural south and west of the country, in the African-American and poor white churches of Appalachia, the Mississippi Delta, and other peripheral areas.

The Gospel of Matthew is an obvious source of the “Watchman” text.³ But in addition, there is a special American resonance to this hymn, which evokes a quite specific imaginary place.

The city on the hill

In 1630, John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, preached a sermon that has resonated in the American ear ever since. When he gave the sermon for which he is best known, Winthrop was still aboard the *Arbella*, the ship that was transporting him and the other Puritans to Massachusetts Bay. In this sermon, he borrowed an image from the Sermon on the Mount, saying,

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God’s sake. We shall shame the faces of many

² Performances of both “Nettleton” and “Watchman” in authentic style are included on Appling (2001).

³ Matthew, Book 5, v. 14 (King James Version): Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.

of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going (WINTHROP, 1996, p. 10).

Winthrop's city has remained in the back of the American mind for the next three and a half centuries. Consider President Ronald Reagan's farewell address:

The past few days...I've thought a bit of the "shining city upon a hill." The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined [...].

[I]n my mind [the Shining City] was a tall proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace, a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity, and if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it and see it still (REAGAN, 2002, p. 459-460).

As the popular music critic Greil Marcus has pointed out, the city that Reagan saw as a sign of American triumph "was founded more than three hundred years before as a warning, as a prophecy of self-betrayal" (MARCUS, 2011, p. 209).

2 Charles Ives: his own private danbury [slide]

Danbury, Connecticut was first settled in 1685. In 1780, the first hat factory was established in Danbury; eventually millinery grew to be its major industry, and by the early twentieth century Danbury was known as the "Hatting Capital of the World." The railroad came to Danbury in 1852, accelerating the transformation of this small country town into a manufacturing hub that attracted workers, many of them immigrants who eventually outnumbered the original Yankee Protestants. Danbury's most famous native musician is the composer Charles Ives, born there in 1874. His music is, in a special sense, strongly rooted to the place of his birth. One element of Ives's own private Danbury was the religious music of the nineteenth century. As a church organist, he knew intimately an eclectic array of hymns from Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, and other sources within the Anglo-American Protestant tradition.

A hymn like "Nettleton" or "Watchman" represented several things to Ives. As a church musician, it was a staple of his repertoire, something he could play in any key, improvise on and re-harmonize as required; as an artifact of his childhood, it

was a web of memories. As a composer, it represented certain melodic and harmonic relationships, including some that no one else had thought of before he came along.

“Nettleton” and hymn tunes like it served for Ives as portals into a distant, and basically imaginary, past. The Ives biographer Jan Swafford has pointed out that the Danbury depicted in Ives’s music and commentary is closer to the small Yankee village of his father’s pre-Civil War boyhood than to the bustling factory town of Ives’s own experience (SWAFFORD, 1996). His Danbury is an imaginary place that, by the time of his birth, had ceased to exist. This is made explicit in one of his several appropriations of the “Nettleton” tune, in a song to which he wrote his own text, called “The Things Our Fathers Loved”⁴.

Ives is accused of nostalgia, but his recovered memories manipulate his source materials in ways that personalize the musical narrative they are originally intended to convey, sometimes to the point of dissolving it. If the original hymn is a prayer to a benevolent deity, Ives’s re-imaginings of it move uneasily between the prayer itself, the mind of the one praying, and his experience of the social setting in which he originally encountered it.

Ives wasn’t through with “Nettleton.” He ends his Second Violin Sonata with a movement he calls “The Revival”⁵. It is, superficially, a musical depiction of a tent revival in New England, circa 1880; less superficially, it is “Nettleton” as a portal to the composer’s past. The movement is an example of a unique musical process invented by Ives; the Ives scholar J. Peter Burkholder calls it cumulative form (BURKHOLDER, 1995). Cumulative form basically inverts classical sonata form, which begins with a clear exposition of the main themes and then develops them through a process of fragmentation and reassembly. Instead, Ives begins with wistful scraps of his chosen theme, half-remembered and mixed in with completely extraneous thoughts. Slowly the “Nettleton” theme assembles itself, and the movement ascends to what Ives termed a “Glory trance,” the old revival hymn regaining its roots in the ecstatic tent meetings of a forgotten New England.

Where is this place “all made of tunes?” It seems to be a place conjured into being by Ives’ ability to take the parlor and the parade ground, the church and the baseball diamond, art music and heart music, and perceive them all as different facets of a single experience. At a time when highbrow and lowbrow music and culture were far more clearly delineated than they are now, Ives unapologetically blended them. In this

⁴ Recordings of this song include Jan DeGaetani and Gilbert Kalish, Charles Ives: Songs. Elektra Nonesuch 971325-2. New York: Nonesuch Records, 1992.

⁵ Recordings of the complete cycle of Ives’s four sonatas for violin and piano include Curt Thompson and Rodney Waters, *Charles Ives: Violin Sonatas Nos. 1-4*. Naxos, 2003.

he was far closer to a literary influence, Walt Whitman, than to any other American composer. Ives was, in fact, the first American composer to speak American⁶.

Whitman wrote extensively about the dichotomy between “heart music” and “art music”. By “heart music” he meant music in the vernacular tradition; by “art music” he meant Eurocentric musical culture, which in the mid-nineteenth century had just established a toehold in some of the larger coastal cities of North America. When forced to choose between “heart” and “art” music, Ives chose both, mixing the high and the low, creating a musical language out of the multiplicity and cognitive dissonance that seems a truer expression of American life than either would be by itself. Ives’s music was too disturbing for traditionalists; on the other hand modernists found it too backward looking, too rural, not ironic and urban enough, the opposite of “cool”.

Ives’s music is neither traditional nor modern, but rather a work of alternate history. In his works, hymns like “Nettleton” become a sort of memory-palace for Ives, its every phrase, motive, and nuance bearing not just links to the corresponding fragments of each verse of hymn text, but also to places, people, events, and social institutions that held significance for him. The dissonances and asymmetries of Ives’s music are a way of depicting the workings of memory. In this way, Charles Ives restored magic realism to New England.

3 The old, Weird America

We have seen how certain earlier musical practices in early America began in the white, urban centers of the eastern colonies and, as they were displaced by newer practices more indicative of the colonies’ (and then the United States’) increasing affluence and improved communication, moved toward society’s margins, to the Appalachian poor, to rural areas, to the new western settlements, and to the African-American population of the southern states. Music for religious worship and music for secular entertainment developed among these marginal populations somewhat unremarked by the educated elites of America’s cities until the advent of recording technology in the early 1900s abruptly shrunk the distances between city and country.

By the mid 1920s, a small but vigorous market had developed for two specialized kinds of music: “race” records, or music performed by African-American artists, and “hillbilly” music, or music by white performers from the southern Appalachian region (KILLMEIER)⁷. “Race” records included black jazz, gospel, and the blues; “Hillbilly,”

6 In “Song of Myself,” Whitman famously states, “Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, stanza 51.

7 KILLMEIER, Matthew A. Race Music. In *St. James Encyclopedia of Pop Culture*. <FindArticles.com>.

“Old Time,” or “Mountain” music included ballads, dance music, and white gospel numbers, some with their origins many centuries back, in the folk music of the British Isles. Taken together, along with the music of the Cajuns in southwestern Louisiana and the music of the cowboys in the Great Plains, these different kinds of music have recently been termed “roots” music by scholars and fans (FILENE, 2000).

The heyday of “Race” and “Hillbilly” music was between roughly 1927 and 1932, between the development of electronic means of recording sound and the peaking of the Great Depression, which destroyed the last vestiges of a cash economy in the Appalachians and the Mississippi Delta region. During that brief period, however, a number of unschooled musicians made their way to New York, Chicago or other metropolitan centers to try their luck at the big time. This meant cutting two or more 78 r.p.m. record sides in the hope that their renditions of gospel standards, murder ballads, dance hall stomps, or songs of doomed love would earn them a measure of lasting fame, and perhaps a reprieve from a life of coal mining, sharecropping, day labor, or itinerant minstrelsy. The Great Depression ended the heyday of these marginal niches in the American music market; all but a handful of these “race” and “hillbilly” performers returned to their prior lives, and their music was largely forgotten by the nation as a whole⁸.

Enter Harry Smith, a sometime ethnomusicologist, mystic, bohemian and experimental filmmaker (MARCUS, 2011). Smith had been fascinated by the music of people on America’s margins since his teens. In 1941, at age eighteen, he was already studying the music, languages and rituals of the Native tribes of the Pacific Northwest, where he himself was born. He had already begun collecting out-of-the-way recordings, and ultimately conceived of a grand project, his *Anthology of American Folk Music*⁹. Issued in 1952, Smith’s anthology distilled the music of the various groups making up what we know as “roots” music into a sort of crash course in the musical vernacular of America. It should be noted that Smith did not record this music himself; rather, he collected commercially available recordings that he often had rescued from thrift stores and attics and reissued them, often without obtaining permission from the artists.

Smith’s *Anthology* immediately became a primary source for the folk music revival then taking place in Greenwich Village and elsewhere. Folk musician Dave Van Ronk said,

The *Anthology* was our bible. We all knew every word of every song on it, including the ones we hated. They say that in the

⁸ According to Marcus (2011), documents that by 1933, record sales were 7 percent of what they had been in 1929.

⁹ Reissued on compact by Smithsonian Folkways, 1997.

19th century British Parliament, when a member would begin to quote a classical author in Latin the entire House would rise in a body and finish the quote along with him. It was like that. (VAN RONK¹⁰, 1991 *apud* MARCUS, 2011, p. 88)

The popular culture critic Greil Marcus has documented the history of the music and musicians that make up Smith's *Anthology*, seeing in the collection a kind of atlas of what he terms "the old, weird, America," the nation as it was in the imagination of those populations in which the old stories and old mythologies of America retained something close to their original forms, and were thus handed down to us in the form of recordings like those on the Smith anthology. To a large extent, the Smith recordings present us with a collection of archetypes drawn from the margins of American life.

One source of these archetypes lie far back in the American religious past, back long before the advent of sound recording. Two imaginary places lead us there. The first such place is the world of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. This was the single most popular book in the New England colonies from its publication in the 1680s until well into the 18th century.

Pilgrim's Progress was an allegorical novel about the journey of its protagonist, Christian, who journeys from his home in the City of Destruction toward the Celestial City. En route he undergoes many temptations and dangers, and has encounters that are instructive of the Christian faith. There is a literal Valley of the Shadow of Death, evoking the 23rd Psalm, for example, through which Christian must travel; *Pilgrim's Progress* is a kind of virtual Calvinist theme park. Many of the places and situations in the novel became common linguistic emblems and tropes in subsequent English-language literature: the expression "staying on the straight and narrow," for example, which is a way of describing one's efforts to keep out of trouble, derives from the "straight and narrow" King's Highway that Christian traverses to the Celestial City¹¹.

A second imaginary place that is part of the American consciousness is Hell. Specifically, the Hell conjured up by the sermons of Jonathan Edwards and his successors. In the 1730s and early '40s the Reverend Jonathan Edwards traveled up and down the Connecticut River Valley preaching a new kind of American gospel. In his most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," delivered in Enfield, Connecticut, Edwards' prose is vividly pictorial, depicting hell as a real, tangible place:

10 VAN RONK, Dave. *The Folkway Years 1959-1961*. Smithsonian Folkways – CD SF 40041. Washington DC: Smithsonian Folkways records. 1 CD, Compiled and Remastered. 1991.

11 Two scholars who emphasize the spatial and the geographic in Bunyan's magnum opus are James Turner and Philip Edwards. Turner (1980): *Bunyan's Sense of Place and Edwards* (1980): *The Journey in The Pilgrim's Progress*.

That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up [...] (EDWARDS , 1976, p. 32)¹².

Edwards was perhaps the first great salesman in North America. His description of Hell is a way of softening up the congregation for his sales pitch – he is offering eternal membership in the Shining City. You have, he continues, an extraordinary opportunity, for today “Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open.” How awful it would be, Edwards continues, using every tool in his salesman’s arsenal, to be left behind on such a day, to “see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing!” Playing to the American desire to keep up with the Joneses, Edwards closes the deal by asking the people of Enfield, “Are not your souls as precious as the souls of the people at Suffield, where they are flocking from day to day to Christ?”

Making explicit the parallel he sees between contemporary New England and an infamously doomed city, Edwards ends with a final caution: “Let every one fly out of Sodom: ‘Haste and escape for your lives, look not behind you, escape to the mountain, lest you be consumed.’” In other words, are you on the road to the New Jerusalem, or to the City of Destruction?

Paradoxically, the evangelism of Edwards and the Great Awakening took root most firmly and permanently not in New England, but in two other places: First, among the restless or desperate pioneers that left the coastal settlements of English-speaking America for new lives to the west. Some of these found in the mountains of Appalachia a bleak life of subsistence farming, and then (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) of coal mining. Second, among the African-Americans who, freed from legal slavery but not yet recognized as either fully American or even fully human, created a hardscrabble way of life for themselves in the Mississippi Delta and other parts of the former slaveholding South from the 1860s onward. These two populations and others on the margins of America’s self-awareness – the cowboys of the western Plains, the Cajuns of Louisiana--were the true heirs to the dualism of Winthrop, Bunyan, and Edwards, their music the soundtrack for the latter day round-trip itinerary between the Shining City and Sodom.

The music critic Greil Marcus suggests that the Smith anthology presents a musical

¹² The Biblical text on which Edwards preached his sermon was Deuteronomy 32:35: “Their foot shall slide in due time.” Edwards (1976, pp.7-12). See also commentary in Marcus, 48-51.

map of a place he calls Smithville, which is similar in many ways to the world of Bunyan's novel. In Smithville, there are traps and temptations galore; the subject matter of the songs includes murder, banditry, jealousy, adultery, betrayal, industrial accidents, and agricultural disasters. Presidential assassinations share space with the murder of lovers and children; there is religious music that evokes Judgment Day, Hell and Salvation, and dance music that evokes good times and drunkenness.

The performers from this world lived in a society where there were two kinds of music, the sacred and the profane, each associated with different – but connected – lifestyles. The second volume of Smith's anthology, which he titled *Social Music*, expresses this duality most clearly. Volume Two Part One consists of dance music in a wide variety of styles, from mountain fiddling tunes to Cajun waltzes and jug band stomps. Volume Two Part Two is a disc of sacred music and encompasses both black and white Gospel, some in a more contemporary style and others that sound as though they must predate Emancipation.

Three examples illustrate the disc's cope. The first is a gospel tune called "Must Be Born Again" by the Rev. J. M. Gates. Until his death in the early 1940s, Gates was the pastor of a Baptist church in Atlanta, Georgia. Many of his songs were strong warnings of the hellish punishments that awaited sinners. The second is "Present Joys" by a group calling themselves the Alabama Sacred Harp Singers. First they sing the hymn using Sacred Harp-style solfa syllables; then they sing the words of the hymn to the same tune. Finally, "I'm In the Battlefield for My Lord" by the Reverend D.C. Rice and His Sanctified Congregation. Rice was inspired by Gates, and made a few recordings in Chicago with his Sanctified (Penetcostal) congregation. He received \$75 per recording, but no royalties. The style here is popular, the choir and soloist accompanied by piano, trumpet, trombone, string bass, drums, and triangle. This is an eclectic performance of a hymn that is still performed in some African-American churches.

It's not difficult to hear the ecstatic shouts of early rock and roll in this kind of gospel vocalizing. Carl Perkins, Little Richard, Elvis Presley, and Johnny Cash all grew up in the Pentecostal church, and their early music often creates a kind of "glory trance" of its own.

What Marcus calls Smithville – the imaginary village inhabited by the people, situations, and events documented in the *Smith Anthology* – is, as he says, a township of masks (MARCUS, 2011). All the killers in the town – the vicious Staggerlee, who murders a man over a Stetson hat, the bandit Cole Younger, the presidential assassin Charles Guiteau – share masks with the murderers of the Elizabethan Child ballads in the *Smith* collection; likewise, every murdered woman, in these songs,

becomes the same woman, wearing the mask of the murdered lover, sweetheart, or wife; and so it is with every predator, every bad trail boss and tyrannical overseer, every scorned lover or failed gambler drinking himself to death, every doomed or saved soul. America – the real or the imagined America – is a land of masks.

One musician who took in the full Smithville experience was Bob Dylan, who has borrowed from the Smith Anthology for his own songs all his life. In 1967 Bob Dylan was recovering from a motorcycle accident. He was also convalescing from a controversial world tour during which he had famously “gone electric,” thereby severing his ties to the folk music scene. He and a group of musicians who had backed him on the tour met in a house in upstate New York named Big Pink, and also in Dylan’s home nearby. In the room where Dylan did his composing a King James Bible was always open on a bookstand (HAJDU, 2001). Together, Dylan and the Band recorded a series of performances that, for various reasons, remained officially unissued until 1975. In the interim, these performances became the most famous bootleg recordings of the twentieth century.

Marcus hears these sessions, known as the Basement Tapes, as a sort of updating of Smith’s mythical America. The songs of the *Basement Tapes* have the same relationship to the religious and cultural themes of Smith’s collection as a Cubist portrait does to a photograph. A sense of fun but also of sorrow runs through the Basement songs, as if they were a farewell visit to the America conjured up in Smith’s earlier collection. The Basement Tapes set the tone for Dylan’s next project, the album *John Wesley Harding* (1967). The paired-down arrangements and parable-like quality of the songs on the album make it a distillation of all Dylan’s prior appropriations on the mountain music, Delta blues, and gospel of Smith’s anthology. One clear link is the title track, in which Dylan recasts the tale of Texas outlaw John Wesley Hardin as a kind of Robin Hood. Its model, the Carter Family’s ballad “John Hardy,” from the Smith collection, relates in old-time murder ballad fashion the story of one John Wesley Hardin, a violent outlaw from Texas who committed his first murder at the age of fifteen.

John Hardy he was a desperate little man
He carried the guns every day
Shot a man on the West Virginia line
You oughta seen John Hardy gettin’ away

Compare Dylan’s version, the title track of his 1967 album (“John Wesley Harding/
Was a friend to the poor, [...] But he was never known/To hurt an honest man.”)

Here, the mask that Dylan places on Hardin/Harding/Hardy’s face transforms the

man within. Why transform a cowardly serial killer into an avenger of the weak and a protector of women? Perhaps Dylan wanted to suggest, provocatively, that the difference between psychopath and saint may lie more in who's telling the story than in any objective historical record.

On this album Dylan reassembles bits and pieces of the City of God, the City of Destruction, and the road between them, with all its pitfalls and points of interest, to tell enigmatic tales full of troubling imagery and moral ambiguity. The Dylan scholar Bert Cartwright counts more than sixty Biblical allusions in the album as a whole (CARTWRIGHT, 1985). The best-known song from this album brings us full circle to the imagery of the walled City of God. Dylan's "All Along The Watchtower" instantly caught the imagination of his few musical peers, and in the following year Jimi Hendrix released his own version; still more than Dylan's original recording, his virtuoso guitar work brings out an urgency underlying the song's imagery¹³.

The United States is perhaps the most mobile, and most technological, society in human history. One consequence of this technologically enhanced (and technologically-motivated) mobility is an unusually rich cross-fertilization of musical cultures. In this essay I have attempted to capture the scope and endurance of one thread of U.S. musical culture especially influenced –indeed, defined – by travel. That thread is defined by the imaginary places that dominate the deepest part of American Protestant religious thought. The music that travels Bunyan's difficult road between the heavenly City of Winthrop and the fiery Pit of Edwards has come from many sources: from the hymnody of Watts and Mason, from the music of Ives and Dylan, from the coal towns and hardscrabble of the Southern Appalachians, from the sharecropped fields of the Mississippi delta, from churches, fields, and prairies. It is a music of haunted and holy places.



13 An obvious source of inspiration for Dylan's "All Along The Watchtower" is Isaiah 21:11-12: "[...] He calleth to me [...] Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night? The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night: if ye will enquire, enquire ye: return, come."

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Estados Unidos, a Cidade de Deus e outros lugares imaginários: Charles Ives, raízes e *rock and roll*

Resumo: O tópico desse artigo é uma geografia musical: Certos locais são invocados pela sua música. Tais lugares podem ser baseados em lugares fisicamente e historicamente reais ou podem ser inteiramente imaginários. Nos Estados Unidos, particularmente, a ocorrência insistente da ideia de lugares importantes parece assombrar a música daquele país. O que se segue é uma discussão sobre vários lugares importantes para a música dos Estados Unidos e sobre a maneira como esses lugares se conectam uns com os outros.

Palavras chave: Música dos Estados Unidos; Charles Ives; história da música dos Estados Unidos; rock.