UNDERGROUND NOT UNDEREXPOSED: BLOODSHOT RECORDS, ALT.COUNTRY, AND THE CHICAGO LIVE MUSIC SCENE

by

NANCY PARK RILEY

(Under the Direction of SUSAN THOMAS)

ABSTRACT

Bloodshot Records, an independent record label based in Chicago, Illinois, released its first album, *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country* in 1994. Described by co-founder Nan Warshaw as "a snapshot of a scene at the time," the album features local bands and artists performing various styles of country music influenced by punk rock. Bloodshot's early albums contributed to the sound and aesthetic of alt.country, and the record label became associated with this emerging genre nationally, while maintaining strong ties to the Chicago live music scene. In its twentieth year, the record label boasts over two hundred releases featuring genres from country music to klezmer, or what it describes as "the music that lurks between genres." Nevertheless, Bloodshot has remained strongly associated with its early albums of "insurgent country," and has worked to distance itself from a limited generic scope. In this dissertation, I consider the function of independent record labels within local musical scenes, and the connections between local musicians, infrastructure, musical production, consumption, and reception, and sonic identity using Bloodshot Records as a case study. I examine the label's history, historical context, music and musicians, business and musical practices, and its associated community to understand its origins in and relationship to the local Chicago music

scene. I elucidate the record label's role in and contributions to alt.country's history and development, while also considering its identity beyond the constraints of the genre. Alt.country emerged in the 1990s out of direct connections to local and regional music scenes, following the aesthetic values and production and consumption practices of punk and indie rock. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that Bloodshot Records was strategically positioned to contribute to alt.country nationally, while claiming and reinforcing a specific Chicago identity associated with the city's punk and indie rock scene through its musical and business practices.

INDEX WORDS: Bloodshot Records; Chicago, Illinois; Scene studies; Record labels; Alt.country; Punk; Indie rock

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BA, Transylvania University, 1999

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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DEDICATION

For Dad, who taught me that knowledge and adventure are just a book away.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The kindness of numerous friends, acquaintances, and colleagues has made this project (and its completion) possible. My advisor, Susan Thomas, has offered endless amounts of advice and support and asked difficult questions at every step of this process. Her involvement has made this a much better project, and the same can be said of the other members of my committee: Adrian Childs, Jean Kidula, and David Schiller. Bethany Moreton provided feedback and guidance in the early stages of the research, for which I am grateful. I had the pleasure of working with Michelle Ballif and the Writing Intensive Program for many years, which greatly increased my understanding of writing and the writing process. Financial support from the University of Georgia Graduate School and the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts made fieldwork possible, while a Dissertation Completion Award from the Graduate School allowed me to actually finish this document and (finally) graduate.

Rob, Nan, and the entire Bloodshot crew have been kind and accommodating, even when I wouldn't stop asking questions or took over large areas of their office space. Joe Swank was especially helpful, beginning with his response to my very first email inquiry. The members of the Chicago musical community were immeasurably helpful, not only in sharing a wealth of information, but also providing good company, directions, rides, and even restaurant recommendations. It began with Jon Langford, but also includes Kelly Hogan, Janet Bean, Robbie Fulks, Lawrence Peters, Rick Sherry, Bill FitzGerald, Tim Tuten, Markus Greiner, Chuck Uchida; and Eric Babcock and Kelly Kessler in Nashville.

If Vic Doss had not introduced me to Brit and Joshua Robinson, a dissertation examining Bloodshot Records and Chicago music would not have been possible. I am forever indebted to the Robinsons for their repeated hospitality and grace. I crashed on their sofa more times than they likely wanted, and I am honored to now call them friends. Similarly, I owe a debt of gratitude to numerous Chicago acquaintances and friends for being genuinely nice to me over the past few years.

In the category of friends and loved ones, I boast an embarrassment of riches. The musicology/ethnomusicology students at UGA (and elsewhere), past and present, have provided solidarity, stimulating discussion, gossip, and plenty of dorky jokes, particularly on Friday afternoons. I am also indebted to friends and colleagues from ICMC, and the collegiality and support that such a wonderful conference fosters. Kentucky friends, Transy friends (and former teachers), Athens friends, UGA friends, and my church family at Watkinsville: your prayers, kind words, calls, texts, meals, drinks, love, and general awesomeness have kept me going on this long, winding, and at times, difficult journey. I am eternally grateful to you all. Thanks also to Sarah at CAPS, who helped me through the most challenging year of my life. Finally, to Mom, Becky, Chandler, Conner, and Steve, I love you all more than words can say. Thank you for your enduring support and love. I so wish Dad could have been with us to see the completed project, but I like to think he would be proud.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2012, I was in Chicago for several weeks doing research and fieldwork. For much of this time, my afternoons were spent in the offices of Bloodshot Records to examine their album and artist files, paperwork, and ephemera that paper the walls and cover the flat surfaces of the office interior. Located near a Dunkin Donuts, an employee typically went mid-afternoon to pick up coffee for anyone interested. Publicist Josh Zanger and I offered to get coffee on one particular day, and as we were returning to the office with hands full of coffee and snacks, we stopped on the sidewalk to admire Bloodshot's window display.

Figure 1.1: "Skellies in front window of Bloodshot HQ," photo by Jenny (JP) Pfafflin.[1]

[1] Bloodshot Records, https://www.facebook.com/BloodshotRecords/photos/pb.19297863192.-2207520000.1412093906./10150596193508193/?type=3&theater (accessed September 29, 2014).

As we stood in front of the decorated skeletons in the window, a man on a bike approached us, yelling to get our attention. He stopped, jumped off his bike, looked at me, pointed at my feet, and said, "There's no place for cowboy boots in the city of Chicago!" Zanger and I were dumbfounded, staring back at him in surprise. Shaking his head in apparent disgust, the stranger repeated the statement, mounted his bike, and rode away.

While this story was amusing to share with the rest of the Bloodshot office staff that day, it also resonates with issues and themes discussed throughout this dissertation. Cowboy boots regularly signify country music, and both have been associated with rurality, poverty, and even racism.[2] In the story above, this man, likely a Chicagoan, saw cowboy boots and understood the footwear to represent values and/or ideas that conflicted with his conception of his city. However, although this individual's idea of Chicago was clearly established and the offense of cowboy boots was strong enough to motivate him to yell at strangers on a sidewalk, Chicago has played an important role in country music history, dating back to the 1920s with the nationally syndicated barn dance radio show, the *National Barn Dance*. More recently, from the mid to late 1990s, the independent record label Bloodshot Records documented the city's renewed interest in country music through its production of albums featuring the music of local artists, which the label described as "insurgent country."

This project explores Bloodshot Records' history within the context of alt.country in the 1990s, while also considering the label's specific Chicago identity and role within the city's live music scene. By highlighting the often hidden work of local producers and consumers of music, the project provides insight into the formation of musical genres, the contributors to vibrant

[2] For discussion of the development of country music symbols and iconography, see Archie Green, "Hillbilly Music: Source and Symbol," in "Hillbilly Music," special issue, *The Journal of American Folklore* 78, No. 309 (Jul. – Sept., 1965): 204–28; Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Richard Peterson, *Creating Country: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

music scenes, how such scenes function, and the enduring legacy of punk and do-it-yourself practices. Based on interviews, Bloodshot's recorded musical catalogue, media materials, and archival materials, I argue the importance of Bloodshot Records' contributions to alt.country nationally, while also emphasizing the label's specific Chicago identity associated with the city's punk and indie rock scene through its musical and business practices, but also the sound of its recordings.

With its first compilations and single-artist albums, Bloodshot Records established its identity and reputation early on, and quickly became associated with a rebellious attitude and anti-establishment stance that was embraced by alt.country. Without a detailed business plan and lacking funds, Bloodshot's three founders, Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warsahaw, took advantage of local and regional press and publicity for the first albums, using bold claims, striking visual images, and consistent claims of authenticity. The record label also benefited from an association with musician and artist Jon Langford, well known for his work with British punk band the Mekons. Langford contributed album art and several tracks on early compilation albums. The record label's sound can be generalized based on its early albums, and was based on older forms of country music. The songs on these albums deviated from the predictable forms of country, and also employed unexpected sounds and timbres.

These early albums and Bloodshot's origins were in the Chicago live country music scene. Comprised of musicians, fans, and an infrastructure that includes bars, venues, local radio stations, and various forms of media, this scene was one of many regional scenes across the country that contributed to the formation of the newly designated genre of alt.country in the 1990s. As the name implies, alt.country was discursively positioned in opposition to mainstream country, identified as music mass-produced for Top 40 country radio stations and criticized as

inauthentic. In practice, alt.country employed small-scale production and consumption practices rooted in punk's "do it yourself" (DIY) approach, and upheld aesthetic values associated with punk and indie rock, such as lo-fi (low fidelity) recordings and recording practices, an embrace of irony, and disdain for overtly commercial musical endeavors. Sonically, alt.country employed older forms of country music such as honky tonk and bluegrass of the 1940s and 1950s, with influences from other genres, such as rock and punk, similar to country rock and cowpunk of previous generations. Despite these similarities, alt.country's discursive identity and practice was constructed as punk and indie rock.[3]

Bloodshot's founders quickly realized its successful marketing of "insurgent country" could be a liability, and worked to distance itself from the limitations of this descriptor and its association with alt.country. The label expanded its roster and sonic identity to include a wider range of artists and genres, as is evident by comparing its fifth, tenth, and fifteenth anniversary compilation albums. This compilation format has been an important component of Bloodshot Records' identity and practice throughout its history. The label's use of releases featuring multiple performers, such as compilation albums, free samplers and digital downloads, and tribute albums, and also live events with multiple artists performing, has served to represent the musical practices associated with the Chicago music scene and strengthen the record label's association and commitment to live music.

Live musical performance is the centerpiece of the Chicago scene, and different constructions of "liveness" have continued to influenced the sound of Bloodshot Records. This sound is related to what musicologist Marc Faris calls the "Chicago sound," associated with the

[3] Kurt Wolff, *Country Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Orla Duane (London: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2000); Bob Gulla, *The Grunge and Post-Grunge Years, 1991-2005*, vol. 6 of *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006); Vincent J. Novara and Stephen Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock (1980–2005)," *Notes*, vol. 65, no. 4 (June 2009): 816-33.

work and practices of recording engineer and musician Steve Albini in the Chicago punk and indie rock scene, and also his work with nationally known artists and bands. Although Bloodshot did not use Albini for its early projects, the record label desired a "live sound" that followed a lo-fi approach associated with punk and indie rock recordings.

I interviewed many individuals who proclaimed an idea of what I call "Chicago exceptionalism," drawing on city's history and practices of punk and indie rock. Just as the man in the opening story held strong opinions regarding a Chicago identity, musicians and participants within the local scene view it as possessing specific and unique characteristics, such as a strong work ethic, supportive and cooperative individuals and organizations, and a general sense of community. Such characteristics align with a DIY approach rooted in punk practice and values, and are upheld and championed by Bloodshot Records' co-founders and co-owners, which have also become key aspects of the record label's identity and practices.

Despite Bloodshot Records' major contributions to alt.country, the label's integral role in the history of alt.country remains unexplored. This dissertation addresses that gap, while also considering the record label's connections to the Chicago music scene. Using Bloodshot Records as a case study, I consider the function of independent record labels within local musical scenes, and the connections between local musicians, members of musical communities, and musical production, consumption, and reception. I explore the label's history, historical context, music and musicians, business and musical practices, and its associated community to understand the record label's origins in and relationship to the local Chicago music scene. Furthermore, the role of Bloodshot Records within the context and history of alternative country elucidates the record label's role and contributions in alt.country history and development, while also considering its identity beyond the generic and historical constraints of the genre. Alt.country emerged in the

1990s out of direct connections to local and regional music scenes, following the aesthetic values and production and consumption practices of punk and indie rock. I argue that the city of Chicago and the Chicago music scene, through the work and practices of Bloodshot Records, were uniquely positioned to contribute to this new genre, based on the city's history of country music and its punk and indie rock scene.

Methodology

Alt.country has received minimal critical analysis in academic publications, although popular press, music journalists, fan websites and discussion boards devoted a great deal of attention to this music and subculture as it developed. Further, much of this journalistic literature on alt.country is encyclopedic, including comprehensive lists of bands, artists, and albums, and are decidedly celebratory. Scholars and academics who have approached the topic have focused on the movement's cultural and political aspects, and have largely ignored the music of alt.country, and given little attention to the importance of artists and record labels in establishing and defining this musical style.[4] Although Uncle Tupelo and *No Depression* have been cited repeatedly in discussions of alt.country, the importance of independent record labels and "indie rock" grassroots infrastructure, both of which were also critical to the beginnings and development of alt.country, remain unexplored. Likewise, few studies of musical scenes have specifically considered the structural role of independent record labels.

[4] Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, *Old Roots New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.country Music* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 5. This text is the only current published book-length academic work addressing alt.country and gives little, if any, emphasis on the music, noting that only "some" of the music's meanings are sonic. See also Robert Austin Russell, "Looking for a Way Out: The Politics and Places of Alternative Country Music," PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2009; Ashley Denise Melzer, "Times the Revelator: Revival and Resurgence in Alt.Country and Modern Old-Time American Music," Master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009.

Throughout this project, I employ a music-centered scenes perspective, as demonstrated by musicologist Travis Stimeling's work on Austin's progressive country music scene.[5] In Stimeling's study of Austin, Texas, during the 1970s, he examines how participants and actors (musicians, producers, venue owners, journalists, and fans) in the Austin scene enacted and articulated their individual and collective identities. He considers the role of individual musical compositions, musical practices, and musical styles in the construction of an Anglo-Texan identity within a countercultural context to establish a literal and ideological alternative to "mainstream" country music.

This sort of ethnographic approach further emphasizes the local context of music production and consumption, and examines the uniqueness of particular localities and how such local identities interact within a particular scene, but also in broader contexts as concerning issues of race, class, and gender, as seen in the work of Andrew Bennett, Sara Cohen, and Holly Kruse considering the importance of specific local music venues in constructing identity, community, and meaning.[6] Bennett specifically considers choice of lifestyle and local knowledges in the connections between local music production and consumption. This approach allows for a multi-faceted take on the role of a specific scene in the formation of the genre of alt.country, but also allows for an investigation of musical communities and issues of identity considering macro and micro concerns.

I emphasize the perspectives of the musicians who have been involved with Bloodshot Records, alt.country, and the Chicago music scene. My approach is influenced by David Pruett's

[5] Travis Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[6] Andrew Bennett, "'Going Down to the Pub?': The Pub Rock Scene as a Resource for the Consumption of Popular Music," *Popular Music* 16, no. 1 (1997): 97–108; Sara Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Holly Kruse, "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture," *Popular Music* 12, no. 1 (1993): 33–41.

model for a fieldwork-based study of mainstream American popular music in the article, "When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Toward an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S," based on five years of fieldwork with the MuzikMafia, and also his book, *MuzikMafia: From the Local Nashville Scene to the National Mainstream*. Noting that much popular music scholarship treats musical subjects as "texts," Pruett emphasizes the voice, opinions, and perspectives of the artist, while also emphasizing how much these mediated star texts are filtered and manipulated by public relations representatives, managers, and producers.[7]

Following the work of those who have investigated record labels and the historiography of record labels, I employ a combination of ethnographic and archival research methods.[8] In *King of the Queen City: the story of King Records*, Jon Hartley Fox uses personal interviews, research in contemporary newspapers and periodicals, and the King archives to construct a history of the label. Similarly, I will consider the perspective of the founders and owners of Bloodshot Records in constructing a historical narrative and framing issues related to the label, while also examining archival materials from and related to Bloodshot Records, including marketing and public relations materials, record and live performance reviews, and CD liner notes.[9]

As editors Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett argue in the introduction of *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, scenes can transcend geographic boundaries through Internet-

[7] David Pruett, "When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Toward an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S," *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 55, No. 1 (Winter 2011): 1–30, and *MuzikMafia: From the Local Nashville Scene to the National Mainstream* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2010).
[8] See Jon Hartley Fox, *King of the Queen City: the story of King Records* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Michael F. Scully, *The Never-ending Revival: Rounder Records and the Folk Alliance* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Nathan D. Gibson, *The Starday Story: The House That Country Music Built* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); Many other label studies are based exclusively upon archival materials and/or focus on specific artists of a particular label. See also Richard Cook, *Blue Note Records: The Biography* (Boston: Justin, Charles & Co., 2004); Anthony Olmsted, *Folkways Records: Moses Asch and His Encyclopedia of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
[9] Fox used personal interviews, research in contemporary newspapers and periodicals, and the King archives to construct a history of King Records. Both Scully and Gibson privilege the perspective of the founders and owners in the narratives of these respective record labels.

based chat rooms, email-based listservs, and artist and/or fan websites. Just as Steve Lee and Richard Peterson focus on the leading listserv of alt.country music as a virtual scene in "Internet-Based Virtual Music Scenes: The Case of P2 in Alt.Country Music,"[10] I consider digital content as a source of data for this project, including websites, online bulletin boards, and listservs related to Bloodshot Records, alt.country, individual musicians, and the Chicago music scene.

Theoretical Framework

Current work in scenes studies forms the theoretical framework for this project. Scenes research emerges from studies of subcultures.[11] This term dates back to the 1940s, yet the social phenomenon that the term references certainly precedes that date. Subcultures can be defined as "groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it."[12] Although subcultural studies were originally concerned with deviant communities, the work of John Irwin and Dick Hebdige moved subcultural studies toward concerns of lifestyle choice, social identity, and ideas of social difference with a focus on marginalized and/or disenfranchised communities.[13] John Irwin introduced the sociological concept of a scene in

[10] Steve Lee and Richard Peterson, "Internet-Based Virtual Music Scenes: The Case of P2 in Alt.Country Music," in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, ed. Richard Peterson and Andy Bennett (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004).

[11] These terms are contested and used in a wide variety of analyses. See David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, eds., *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (New York: Berg, 2003). These authors acknowledge the limitations of "subculture" as a way to understand youth cultural tastes, and seek to move beyond the theoretical apparatus of the CCCS (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies), while challenging the usefulness and meaning of the subcultures approach altogether. See also Andy Bennett, "Subcultures or Neo-tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste," *Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1999): 599–617 and Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1995). These authors suggest the terms tribes and neo-tribes to emphasize the fluidity and instability of modern group identity. Also, David Hesmondhalgh in "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," *Journal of Youth Studies* Vol. 8, No. 1 (March 2005): 21–40, argues for an abandonment of all of these terms and suggests a return to the ideas of "genre and articulation."

[12] Ken Gelder, "Introduction," *The Subcultures Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

[13] Subcultural studies originated within the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago with an emphasis on empirical urban fieldwork studying marginal or unassimilated social types. Researchers from the Centre for

Scenes.[14] Irwin was one of the first researchers to consider subcultural identity as a symptom of lifestyle choices, and emphasized the mobility and flux of social identity. Irwin also considered one's relationship to a scene as something casual rather than permanent.[15] This approach can also be seen in Dick Hebdige's influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Hebdige's work was significant in shifting subcultural studies away from sociological and criminological approaches and toward work in arts and humanities, incorporating semiotic theory, and identifying subculture as a matter of aesthetics and expression, or the deployment of fashion, music, attitudes, and values by 1970s youth in England.

While the focus on marginalized British youth of Hebdige's work is not relevant for this project, his employment of semiotic theory and his contributions toward a cultural studies approach are foundational for scenes research. Nevertheless, several critiques of a subcultural approach emerged following Hebdige. The first critique can be summarized with the question, "Where were the women?" an issue first addressed by Angela McRobbie.[16] Second, subcultural studies focused primarily upon youth and leisure, ignoring cultural meaning within the context of home and work environments. Also, the meaning and function of music was placed in the background, often accompanying other activities or presented solely as a tool of leisure. Music's role in resistance or its ability to achieve political means was not generally made clear in subcultural studies. Finally, scenes research, with its origins in subcultural studies, rejects binary notions of resistance versus dominance, and relationships of exploitation and oppression in

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Contemporary Cultural Studies a the University of Birmingham shifted away from empirical sociology and a focus on deviant groups to "a theoretically informed semiotic approach that turned its attention to style as the key to subcultural meanings and subcultural distinction" in considering everything as a cultural "text," including popular media, popular culture, literature, and everyday life and practice. See Gelder, "Introduction to Part Three," *The Subcultures Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Ken Gelder (New York: Routledge, 2005), 143–47.

[14] John Irwin, *Scenes* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., 1977).

[15] Gelder, "Introduction," 10–11.

[16] Angela McRobbie, "Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique," *Screen Education* 34 (1980): 34–49.

understanding scenes, "tribes," or communities, as scholars began to question the assumption of a homogenous cultural mainstream against which the subculture was situated.[17] Certainly, alt.country audiences were generally middle-class, young adult consumers differentiating themselves through their musical choices and by their social decisions, and were not necessarily disenfranchised youth.

Based upon the influential work of Barry Shank and Will Straw, the concept of musical scenes moved from a journalistic and colloquial term to an analytical one. A musical scenes approach considers groups of producers, musicians, and fans, and how these groups collectively share music and musical taste as forms of entertainment and identity, while distinguishing themselves from others.[18] This framework allows for multiple perspectives of how such musical communities are constructed, negotiated, and maintained. Research on scenes has emphasized the role of critics, journalism, and fans, yet the scenes framework can also attribute agency to all the contributors to the scene, including the musicians, a perspective that has often been missing in scenes scholarship, along with a consideration of the role played by venues, music festivals, and record labels.[19]

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[17] Derek Scott, "Introduction," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek Scott (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 8; Adam Krims, "Studying Reception and Scenes," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek Scott (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 401–2. See also Andy Bennett, "Subcultures or Neo-tribes? Rethinking the Relationship between Youth, Style and Musical Taste," *Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1999): 599–617 and Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society* (London: Sage, 1995).

[18] See Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1991): 368–88; Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, "Introducing Music Scenes," *Music scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 1.

[19] Numerous studies have investigated a multiple aspects of musical scenes. For example, see Holly Kruse, "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture," *Popular Music* Vol. 12, No. 1 (1993): 33–41; Joanna R. Davis, "Growing Up Punk: Negotiating Aging Identity in a Local Music Scene," *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (2006): 63–69; Andrew Bennett, "'Going down the Pub!': The Pub Rock Scene as a Resource for the Consumption of Popular Music" *Popular Music*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Jan. 1997): 97–108; Julian Gerstin, "Reputation in a Musical Scene: The Everyday Context of Connections between Music, Identity and Politics," *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Autumn 1998): 385–414.

As analytical studies of alt.country have largely come from fields outside of musicology and ethnomusicology, including English, geography, cultural studies, and sociology, an emphasis on the music have been lacking. A scenes approach allows for the consideration of musical texts and musical style. Thus, using a musicological framework, I view the music of alt.country and Bloodshot Records as a text to be analyzed, understanding that meanings can also be found within these musical texts. Considering the importance of live musical performance in alt.country music and the musical scene connected with Bloodshot Records, I also examine performance practice and reception within a live music context.

Literature Review

This project draws from and builds upon work from a variety of perspectives and disciplines, including musicology, history, journalism, cultural studies, women's studies, and gender studies. The following literature review considers work on country music and alternative country, as well as related research on subcultures, punk, and indie rock, and record label studies.

In *Country Music: The Rough Guide*, Kurt Wolff includes a chapter entitled "Settin' the Woods on Fire: Alternative Country in the 1990s," and explains the genre in terms of its connections to punk, rock, and country-rock.[20] Attributing alt.country's origins to the band Uncle Tupelo and *No Depression* (their album and the subsequent magazine), Wolff also acknowledges the importance of Bloodshot Records' first compilation album. He connects alt.country to past hybrid musical styles, such as country-rock and rockabilly, but also interactions of country and punk. Finally, he notes connections to older forms of country music Similarly, *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History*, whose sixth volume, "The Grunge and Post-Grunge Years, 1991–2005," includes a chapter on alternative country, providing an overview and featuring a selection

[20] Kurt Wolff, *Country Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Orla Duane (London: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2000).

of artists.[21] This reference work also explains alternative country within the context of alternative rock and the musical landscape following the success of bands such as Nirvana and Pearl Jam.

Also emphasizing alt.country's emergence as a reaction to mainstream country music and maintaining the strong connections to punk, in the edited collection *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, Trent Hill asks "Why Isn't Country Music 'Youth' Culture?" He argues that alternative country emerged in direct response to the "dominance of the Nashville establishment and the perceived collapse and commodification of alternative rock culture."[22] Suggesting that alternative country might align with country music's construction of tradition, ultimately, Hill concludes that this is not the case due to the movement's tendency toward irony and its connections to punk rock."[23]

Brian Hinton and S. Renee Dechert both understand alt.country as a reaction to mainstream country of the 1990s and also emphasize alt.country's connections to the country music of the past. Brian Hinton, in *South by Southwest: A Roadmap to Alternative Country*, uses "Americana" and "alt country" synonymously. He claims the emerging genre was a direct response to mainstream country and Nashville, leading musicians to delve "back into the past to make something brave and new and strange," and describes alt.country's numerous and varied musical roots and wide-ranging influences. Despite the work's emphasis on history and various traditions, Hinton privileges Uncle Tupelo and its related bands, Wilco and Son Volt, in his account of recent Americana.[24] S. Renee Dechert, examining Uncle Tupelo's album *No Depression* in "'Oh, What a Life a Mess Can Be': Uncle Tupelo, Bahktin, and the Dialogue of

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[21] Bob Gulla, *The Grunge and Post-Grunge Years, 1991–2005*, vol. 6 of *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Rock History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006). See also David Dicaire, "Part Two: Alternative Country" in *The New Generation of Country Music Stars: Biographies of 50 Artists Born After 1940* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2008).
[22] Trent Hill, "Why Isn't Country Music "Youth" Culture?" in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformation in Popular Music Culture*, eds. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 177.
[23] Hill, "Why Isn't Country Music "Youth" Culture,"183.
[24] Brian Hinton, *South by Southwest: A Roadmap to Alternative Country* (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2003), 9.

Alternative Country Music," draws connections between alt.country, the country music tradition, and punk.[25] Dechert argues that Uncle Tupelo's album *No Depression* and alt.country in general represent a dialogue between country and punk on both philosophical and practical levels.[26] Alt.country adopted punk's do-it-yourself attitude, which Dechert equates with traditional country music's "populism" and its emphasis on the individual. Practically, alt.country relied on grassroots scenes and independent record labels, a hallmark of punk and a long-missing aspect of country music. The author argues that Uncle Tupelo's significance in the movement was due to "the band's exciting and accessible sound," as well as a matter of timing when grassroots scenes, indie labels, and the Internet coalesced.

In historicizing alt.country, David Goodman moves away from these narratives of alt.country to provide a broader definition of the genre, explaining the music in terms of a long tradition of alternative country music. *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide and Directory*, published in 1999, primarily consists of encyclopedic entries detailing individual artists. However, in the introductory essay, Goodman defines alternative country as "the reinterpretation and enhancement of traditional country music styles, themes, and images by incorporating a variety of modern musical and non-musical influences."[27] In this context, the author includes a wide range of styles, such as Cajun, zydeco, and folk revivalists of any variety, and argues that alternative country began in the 1960s as part of a "widespread rediscovery of American roots music in general and traditional country in particular by a generation of young people raised on rock," and as such, was not a direct revolt against Nashville and mainstream

[25] S. Renee Dechert, "Oh, What a Life a Mess Can Be: Uncle Tupelo, Bahktin, and the Dialogue of Alternative Country Music," in *Country Music Annual 2001*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 73.
[26] Dechert, "Oh, What a Life a Mess Can Be," 73.
[27] David Goodman, *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide and Directory* (Nashville: Dowling Press, 1999), ii.

country music.[28] Goodman further suggests four waves of alternative country music, the first beginning in the late 1960s and the subsequent waves following by decade. Of the fourth wave, he states that new fans and musicians joined with those of the previous three waves and became "a full scale movement."[29] He further notes the importance of grassroots networks, independent record labels, radio, and technological advancements for this alt.country wave.

Arguing that alt.country of the 1990s is not simply another form of alternative country music, John Molinaro suggests that alt.country emerged as a response, not only to mainstream country music, but also to the contemporary political and social landscape of the 1990s in a post-Reagan era economy. Molinaro identifies connections between alt.country and Depression-era elements of country (the most "authentic" version of country music) paired ironically with a punk and post-punk musical lens. He states:

> Alt.country compil[ed] images, ideas, and sounds from folk and country music, the photography of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, the fiction of John Steinbeck, and other icons of the Depression. While the present may not exactly replicate the events of the Depression, the icons of that era provide a precedented means of understanding the problems and a line of empathy between alt.country's young, under-employed audience and the blue collar audience of early country music.[30]

Thus, he emphasizes alt.country's connections to the past and earlier versions of country music, but also explains alt.country in terms of its multiple musical influences, including liminal artists from a wide spectrum of popular music styles, particularly rock, country, bluegrass, folk, punk, and indie rock. With such varied influences, Molinaro argues that alt.country suggests an audience as much as any single musical style.

Three other authors follow Molinaro on this final point, and emphasize alt.country's audience rather than its musical style or influences. In an essay that seeks to define and examine

[28] Goodman, *Modern Twang*, ii.
[29] Goodman, *Modern Twang*, iv.
[30] John Molinaro, "Urbane Cowboys: alt.country in the 1990s" (master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1998), http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA98/molinaro/alt.country/front.html (accessed March 30, 2009).

alternative country's beginnings, Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal, in "Alternative Country: Origins, Music, Worldview, Fans, and Taste in Genre Formation – A Discographic Essay," argue that "no single musical aesthetic binds [alt.country's] diverse artists together" and instead suggests a consumption-based aesthetic. That is, like teen music, the aesthetic is determined by the audience, and in this case a largely virtual one, noting the pre-dominance of alt.country fan-generated listservs. The authors thus define alt.country as "any music…that seems home-made and heart-felt" and uses some form of popular or folk music, whose artists and lyrics are nostalgic, and were identified by its consumers as alt.country.[31]

In the introduction to the edited collection *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.country Music*, editors Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox emphasize the audience of alt.country music, but also incorporate considerations of authenticity and commodification, while noting familiar themes such as alt.country's connections to the past. Ching and Fox present a history and overview of alt.country, and identify it with "a rhetoric of taste, ties to country tradition" and a sophisticated, hip audience separate from that of mainstream country, with "an *ironized* conflict between commodification and authenticity…as its truly defining feature." The essays in the collection present case studies that examine the formation, institutionalization and boundaries of alt.country, the use of alt.country in film, and issues of identity and authenticity as related to several alt.country artists. The concluding essay suggests a new "alternative" in three female artists (Miranda Lambert, Gretchen Wilson, and the Dixie Chicks) that traverse the borders of alt.country authenticity and mainstream country commercial viability.[32]

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[31] Richard A. Peterson and Bruce A. Beal, "Alternative Country: Origins, Music, Worldview, Fans, and Taste in Genre Formation – A Discographic Essay," *Popular Music and Society* 25 (Spring/Summer 2001), 244.
[32] Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching, eds., "Introduction: The Importance of Being Ironic – Toward a Theory and Critique of Alt.Country Music," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 4.

While other authors have examined alt.country's musical connections to the past, two authors consider alt.country's relationship to the past in regards to issues of race, class, and gender. In "Going Back to the Old Mainstream: *No Depression*, Robbie Fulks, and Alt.country's Muddied Waters," Ching examines *No Depression* and its role in the genre formation of alt.country and constructions of masculinity. She argues that *No Depression* used a "macho nostalgia" to identify alt.country as separate from mainstream country and rock,[33] noting the aesthetic elitism embedded in the magazine's simultaneously open and closed definition of alt.country ("whatever that is"), a privileged male subject position, an authenticity defined in opposition to Nashville, and the magazine's self-conscious nostalgic visual style. The author concludes with a discussion of singer-songwriter Robbie Fulks as an example of *No Depression*'s discourses of elitism, masculinity, authenticity, and nostalgia. Pamela Fox examines gender's role in the production of classed and racialized performative practices in country music and country music culture in *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music*. She examines five sites – the barn dance, the honky-tonk, female country stars' autobiographies, and alt.country – to investigate country music's notions of rusticity, authenticity, and history, using the work of Eric Lott and others to show that country music managed historical change and the effects of modernity by donning a series of masks, providing representations that allow for both identification and disavowal. Fox's chapter on alt.country describes the genre as the self-proclaimed heir of country music authenticity, and investigates how various artists that she identifies with alt.country adopt and adapt the past. She presents some artists as "revivalist" as they reproduce and define a nostalgic "past" to secure their own

[33] Barbara Ching, "Going Back to the Old Mainstream: No Depression, Robbie Fulks, and Alt.country's Muddied Waters," in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music*, ed. Kristine M. McCusker and Diane Pecknold (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 178.

hegemony, while some artists "conceive of their music as a surviving residual 'trace' of ostensibly 'extinct' economically depressed communities in the late capitalist era."[34]

As alt.country has been associated with punk and indie rock ideology and aesthetics, several works addressing these are relevant to the present study. Discussing punk in the 1980s in the United States, Kevin Mattson in "Did Punk Matter? Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture during the 1980s" emphasizes not the consumption of punks, but rather how these youths created and produced culture, examining records, zines, and journalistic accounts, and how they rebelled against and resisted the dominant forces of corporate America.[35] Ryan Moore similarly attributes agency to punks within the context of postmodernism, arguing that punks responded to the postmodern condition, defined as a crisis of meaning resulting from the commodification of everyday life via a culture of deconstruction and the culture of authenticity.[36] The culture of deconstruction aligns with Hebdige's notions of subcultural style, wherein punks "recycled cultural images and fragments for purposes of parody and shocking juxtapositions" and deconstructed dominant meanings. Alternately, the culture of authenticity sought independence from the hypercommercialism of the culture industry, by attempting to go "underground," and creating independent media and interpersonal networks, also known as the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic.[37]

Alt.country relied heavily upon indie rock scenes and independent labels, and several works on independent record labels are relevant. When considering independent record labels, the concern remains how such a label can maintain its integrity within a capitalist economy

[34] Pamela Fox, *Natural Acts: Gender, Race, and Rusticity in Country Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 16.
[35] Kevin Mattson, "Did Punk Matter? Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s," *American Studies* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 69–97.
[36] Ryan Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction," *The Communication Review* 7 (2004): 305–27.
[37] Moore, "Postmodernism and Punk Subculture," 3.

without compromising "indie" values, such as maintaining literal and figurative distance from the "majors" and allowing artists aesthetic and artistic control over their music. As noted by Novara and Henry, indie rock as a genre was introduced in the United Kingdom in the 1980s, while American indie rock reached its maturity in the 1990s, emerging from "alternative" or "college rock" of the 1990s.[38] Ryan Hibbett considers the cultural work of such a distinction, noting that "indie rock" functions not just as an aesthetic genre, but as a method of social differentiation and as a marketing tool. Thus, despite the "new-ness" or distinction of the genre, it is a part of a familiar and enduring social structure.[39]

David Hesmondhalgh examines the complex relations between institutional politics and aesthetics in indie rock as an oppositional forms of popular culture, noting indie's roots in punk's institutional and aesthetic challenge to the popular music industry. However, as indie rock becomes part of the "mainstream," the author considers what it means for an independent record company to partner and collaborate with major corporations, concluding that this move is not simply "selling out" or "burning out," i.e., running out of resources, but rather a negotiation in the context of a capitalist framework, such as Chicago's Wax Trax! Records.[40] Hesmondhalgh further examines the institutional and political-aesthetic consequences of such business moves, suggesting that collaboration with major record companies may involve a relinquishing of autonomy for independent record companies, but does not necessarily represent a complete failure of "indies." Instead, he argues that such a business move only reinforces the reality of

[38] Vincent J. Novara and Stephen Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock (1980–2005)," *Notes*, vol. 65, no. 4 (June 2009): 816–33. Nirvana and the band's success are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.
[39] Ryan Hibbett, "What Is Indie Rock?" *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 55–77.
[40] See Stephen Lee, "Re-examining the Concept of the 'Independent' Record Company: The Case of Wax Trax! Records," *Popular Music*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1995), 13–31.

punk's ambivalence toward being popular, thus making it "impossible to reconcile being 'outside' the music industry with producing a new mainstream."[41]

Authenticity is an important theme related to these genres and rock music in general. Notions of authenticity have been key in rock's history and development since the 1950s. As described by media studies scholar Keir Keightley, "[A]uthenticity is a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences."[42] Thus, concepts of authenticity in rock music have been somewhat fluid, reflecting "developments of new musical styles and new social contexts for rock's creation and consumption."[43] Many scholars have reflected on and theorized rock's authenticity with differing conclusions, yet several general issues seem to persist in defining and identifying rock authenticity, such as the persona or identity of a performer, the ideas of seriousness and originality, particular performance practices, historicity, and relationships with and apart from technology and the mainstream.[44] Keightly specifically offers historical models of authenticity based in Romanticism and Modernism. Romantic authenticity can be found in a focus on tradition and a continuity with the past; a sense of community; populism; sincerity; directness; "liveness;" and "natural" sounds; while Modernist authenticity is found in the binary opposites of these, e.g., experimentation vs. tradition, the individual vs. community, elitism vs. populism, etc.[45]

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[41] David Hesmondhalgh**, "**Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," *Cultural Studies* 13 (1) 1999: 34–61.
[42] Keir Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock" in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, eds. Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 131.
[43] Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York, Routledge, 2013), 67.
[44] For a historiography of rock authenticity, see Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analyzing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2012), 259–71; for an additional perspective, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 73–97.
[45] Keightly, "Reconsidering Rock," 137.

For rock, "tradition and continuity with the past" often refers to connections to older styles and genres of music, including folk, country, rhythm and blues, or earlier forms of rock. However, country music specifically has its own formations of authenticity with some overlap with rock authenticities. Sociologist Richard A. Peterson notes that beginning in 1953, the year of Hank Williams's death, "the look, sound, and lyric of country music was instantly recognizable."[46] In country as in rock, authenticity has been a flexible, relational term, yet it always denotes the idea of something "real" or genuine, also implying something sincere and trustworthy, often indicated by spontaneity.[47] Country music also established its authentic identity in an ethos of originality.[48] Peterson explains that performers needed the marks of tradition to make them credible, but their songs had to be original enough to show that they were not inauthentic copies of the past, but real in a current context.[49] Finally, country music "was based in the history of a people and was drawn from the experiences of those who lived in the everyday world," particularly white, working-class people, often characterized by difficult or challenging realities.[50]

In punk culture, authenticity is established in opposition to mainstream culture, and is characterized by small-scale practices of production, or DIY.[51] Using "punk culture" and "underground culture" synonymously, cultural studies scholar Stephen Duncombe notes the delicate balance between the search for an authentic culture and the dangers of a capitalist mainstream culture,

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[46] Keightly, "Reconsidering Rock," 2.
[47] Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commericialization and Country Music* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 9.
[48] Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music : Fabricating Authenticity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], 201.
[49] Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 208–9.
[50] Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 210.
[51] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso Press, 1997), 40–1.

> Underground culture…[is] an attempt to create an authentic, non-alienating culture... At the root of underground culture is its separation from the dominant society – its very existence stems from this negation... [T]hese dividing lines are also based on a realistic assessment of the threat posed by living in a commercialized society in which all culture - especially rebellious culture - is gobbled up, turned on its head, and used as an affirmation of the very thing it was opposed to.[52]

The threat of a commercialized society is the idea of "selling out," or entering the commercial culture industry and benefiting financially as a result. Citing the 1994 suicide of Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the band Nirvana, Duncombe acknowledges an example of the dark consequences of engaging the mainstream from a counter-cultural position,

> [I]t was Kurt's discomfort with the demands of the corporate music industry and his fear that he was "faking it" that filled his suicide note. But what also killed him was the underground culture from which he came: a culture that divided the world into polar opposites: our world and theirs, integrity and selling out, purity and danger. Caught between the demands of the commercial music industry for popularity and the underground call for authenticity, Kurt killed himself."[53]

The underground's adherence to what Duncombe refers to as "purity" is necessarily accompanied by obscurity, and "is part of its romance, but it is also its tragic flaw." Nevertheless, despite this contradiction, participants of underground culture are in a constant dance, negotiating engagement with dominant culture to various degrees.

The concept of the "mainstream" in music has been defined and theorized by several scholars. Musicologist David Pruett adopts Wendy Fonarow's straightforward definition of mainstream music as "the majority of music that appears in national charts and appeals to a broad cross-section of the public," while he further qualifies "commercial music as any music that is created or produced with commercial purposes (i.e. financial gain) in mind."[54] Similarly, Adrian Renzo uses the term to refer to Top 40 pop music, while acknowledging the

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[52] Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground,* 141–2.
[53] Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground*, 167.
[54] David Pruett, "When the Tribe Goes Triple Platinum: A Case Study Toward an Ethnomusicology of Mainstream Popular Music in the U.S.," *Ethnomusicology* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 1; See also Wendy Fonarow, *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

heterogeneous nature of the Top 40.[55] Renzo also notes "certain production standards and processes" and aesthetics that are characteristics of songs appearing on the Top 40, thus identifying a particular sound associated with the mainstream.[56] Alison Huber states, "[T]he term 'mainstream' is deployed in a variety of contexts, ranging from politics and social policy to cultural identity and popular culture, and emerging from academia, journalism, public debate and beyond," thus rendering the term vague, taken for granted, and considered uncritically.[57] Further, scholar Sarah Baker acknowledges the difficulties in defining mainstream music, noting, "[T]he notion of the musical mainstream is inherently complex, problematic and contentious," as the term applies to music made and consumed by "people of all classes, ages, nationalities, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities," yet is often gendered as "feminine," characterized by its "conformity and artifice," and dismissed as inauthentic.[58] Nevertheless, "mainstream music" generally refers to popular music that is "banal, homogenous, unsophisticated, undiscerning, uncultured, low, inauthentic, fake, commercial, conservative, unimaginative, [or] conformist."[59] In addition to its negative characterization, mainstream music broadly serves as a cultural other, standing "in antithetical relation to the more 'authentic' music of subcultural producers and participants."[60] Throughout the dissertation, I refer to components of these definitions and boundaries to identify mainstream country music. Generally, I use "mainstream country" in

[55] Adrian Renzo, "'Sounds Like an Official Mix': The Mainstream Aesthetics of Mash-up Production," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, eds. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013), 140.
[56] Renzo, "'Sounds Like an Official Mix'," 140.
[57] Alison Huber, "Mainstream as Metaphor: Imagining Dominant Culture," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, eds. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
[58] Sarah Baker, "Teenybop and the Extraordinary Particularities of Mainstream Practice," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, eds. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013), 14; Jodie Taylor, Sarah Baker, and Andy Bennett, "Preface," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, eds. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013).
[59] Huber, "Learning to Love the Mainstream: Top 40 Culture in Melbourne" (PhD diss, University of Melbourne, 2005), 82.
[60] Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor, "Preface," in *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*, eds. Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett, and Jodie Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2013), i.

reference to country music produced and distributed by major record labels, intended for Top 40 country radio stations and a wide listening audience.

Chapter Summaries

The chapters that follow examine Bloodshot Records within the context of alternative country music broadly, its contributions to alt.country in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and also consider the record label's relationship to a live music scene in the city of Chicago. Chapter Two provides an overview of alt.country, examining its musical style and its discursive identity. I suggest that the musical style of alt.country followed previous versions of alternative country music and ultimately older forms of country music such as honky tonk and bluegrass of the 1940s and 1950s. Beyond this stylistic identity, alt.country employed small-scale production and consumption practices rooted in punk's DIY (do-it-yourself) approach, with a focus on local scenes and musical infrastructures. Alt.country adhered to aesthetic values associated with punk and indie rock, such as lo-fi (low fidelity) recordings and recording practices, an embrace of irony, and disdain for overtly commercial musical endeavors. Thus, while alt.country's sound was similar to country music from previous decades, its discursive identity and practice were aligned with punk and indie rock. Alt.country's prevalence of local and regional scenes contributed to and constituted the genre nationally.

One such scene in Chicago, Illinois, is the focus of Chapter Three. In the 1920s, the city was home to the preeminent national country music radio show, *National Barn Dance*, while in the 1970s and 1980s, Chicago was home to a thriving and nationally known punk and indie rock scene. These two diverse strands of music history provide a context for independent record label Bloodshot Records and its fierce identification with Chicago. Bloodshot's current owners, Rob

Miller and Nan Warshaw, proclaim a particular Chicago musical identity that is marked by a hard working, supportive, and cooperative musical community. This characterization aligns with punk's DIY approach, and has shaped Bloodshot Records identity. Further, the importance of live music and performance in the city's music scene has influenced the sound of Bloodshot Records, privileging a particular construction of "liveness" on its albums. A so-called "Chicago sound" emerged in association with the work and practices of recording engineer and musician Steve Albini, and Bloodshot's early albums follow Albini's lo-fi, analog approach and sound.

Chapter Four is concerned with Bloodshot Records' early history and identity formation. Considering its first albums, publicity, and press coverage, I examine how the record label branded and marketed what it called "insurgent country" in its early years. Bloodshot established its identity using bold claims, striking imagery, and consistent, repeated claims of authenticity, while taking advantage of an association with Jon Langford and his contributions to the label. In addition to the record label's branding and identity formation, I also generalize the sound of Bloodshot's insurgent country based upon its first two compilation albums. Bloodshot's sound was based on older forms of country music, but also deviated from generic expectations through structural alterations and/or unexpected sounds and timbres. This chapter also summarizes the record label's move away from insurgent country. Bloodshot was an important contributor to alt.country, and its insurgent country became synonymous with alt.country; yet by the early 2000s, the record worked to expand its roster and sonic identity beyond alt.country's limited generic scope.

Chapter Five examines Bloodshot Records' use of the compilation format. I argue that this format has been representative of Bloodshot Records' identity and practice throughout its history. Bloodshot's use of compilation albums, free samplers and digital downloads, and tribute

albums featuring multiple performers has enacted and reinforced the positive musical practices associated with the Chicago music scene. Further, this format is performed at live events associated with the record label and within the city of Chicago, strengthening the record label's association and commitment to live music, but also revealing Bloodshot Records' influence and position within the Chicago music scene. To conclude, Chapter Six provides an overview of the themes of the dissertation, a consideration of the record label's twentieth anniversary compilation, and possibilities for further study related to Bloodshot Records and alt.country, but also independent record labels and local music scenes.

CHAPTER TWO

"WHATEVER THAT IS": ALT.COUNTRY, PUNK, INDIE ROCK AND THE BOUNDARIES OF GENRE

Alt.country of the 1990s and early 2000s was a hybrid genre that borrowed musically and discursively from several genres, including country, punk, and rock. This hybridity resulted in an ambiguity that came to characterize the genre, most notably captioned by alt.country magazine *No Depression*'s tagline, "the bi-monthly magazine for alternative country, whatever that is." Despite this ambiguity, alt.country followed in the tradition of non-mainstream country music, which I label broadly as alternative country music. This genre has been characterized by the use of country's musical style, often blended with other styles, and/or performed by musicians not associated with the country music establishment. However, moving beyond issues of musical style, alt.country adopted a political and aesthetic stance aligned with punk and indie rock, resulting in business, musical, and production practices that differed from previous versions of alternative country music.

In this chapter, I examine alt.country's discursive and direct connections to country, punk, and indie rock. Beginning with an overview of two key precursors to alt.country, country rock and cowpunk, I also consider two publications that were important in alt.country's formation and institutionalization, *No Depression* and *Gavin*, exploring how these publications constructed and framed the new genre. I briefly examine punk and post-punk, alternative rock, grunge, and indie rock, illustrating how alt.country followed punk's business and musical

practices, and argue that alt.country aligned with these genres based on aesthetics, political ideology, and modes of production and consumption.

Alternative Country Music in the 1960s - 1980s

The history of alternative country music parallels that of mainstream country. In the 1950s, the Country Music Association centralized its institutional, industrial, and musical practices in Nashville, TN, establishing the city as country music's "home."[1] However, music stylistically identified as "country" continued to persist and flourish in locations outside of Nashville. Places such as Bakersfield, California, and Austin, Texas maintained thriving country music scenes and functioned as sites of production, fostering musical innovation and experimentation.[2] As geographic "outsiders," the music produced in these non-Nashville locations often became labeled as not-country, or received hyphenated titles and/or dual labels, such as western swing, outlaw, or progressive country.

These alternative forms followed traditional styles of country music, adhering primarily to honky tonk and bluegrass, both of which were popularized in the 1940s prior to country music's institutionalization. Honky tonk developed in the 1940s with origins in dance hall music. The style was popularized by Ernest Tubb (1914–1984), Webb Pierce (1921–1991), Lefty Frizzell (1928–1975), and Hank Snow (1914–1999), but was immortalized by Hank Williams (1923–1953), who wrote his own songs, employed a performance style that was characterized by direct and personal communication, and his struggle with addiction and untimely death.[3] Honky

[1] Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[2] See Gerald Haslam, *Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) and Gary Hartman, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008).
[3] Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 110–4. See also Colin Escott, *Hank Williams: The Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995); Bill Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 2nd rev. ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 201–43; John W.

tonk can also refer to "to the venues where that music was played, and to an attitude and philosophy represented by the major performers and songs within the style."[4] The venues were originally bars or taverns located in the Southwest that also featured dance floors. The music was for dancing, consisting of "up-tempo drinking and party songs and laments that wallowed in the depths of human misery," with an occasional religious or gospel song about redemption, reflecting honky tonk's Saturday night/Sunday morning duality.[5] The music's most notable feature was a "naturalized" vocal style that lacked any trace of formal training, and a direct delivery that communicated the story or message of a song following "the expressive nature of speech."[6] Vocal timbre varied by range, and various inflections, such as breaks, cracks, or quavers, were used to convey emotion, and singers regularly sang with a nasal tone (often referred to as "twang") with no vibrato.[7] Instrumentation was generally an acoustic rhythm guitar, electric lead guitar, steel guitar, acoustic upright bass, and fiddle. Steel guitar (particularly pedal steel by the 1950s) players regularly slid from low to high notes, creating another aspect identified as "twang" associated with honky tonk, while rhythm guitar players would use a "sock rhythm," muting strings with the left hand while strumming with the right hand, resulting in a percussive effect, or a "chuck" sound on beats two and four.[8]

While alternative country has borrowed from honky tonk and its use of electric instruments, the genre has also employed bluegrass and its use of acoustic string instruments.

Rumble, "Fred Rose and the Development of the Nashville Music Industry, 1942–1954" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1980); Tracey E.W. Laird, *Louisiana Hayride: Radio and Roots Music Along the Red River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[4] Neal, *Country Music,* 103–5.

[5] Neal, *Country Music,* 103–5; Jocelyn R. Neal, "Country Music," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:434–45.

[6] Neal, *Country Music*, 104.

[7] Neal, *Country Music*, 104–5.

[8] Neal, *Country Music*, 104.

Bluegrass is a style of country music that also developed in the 1940s, but eventually became a distinct genre. The style originated from Appalachian string bands, featuring acoustic guitar, mandolin, banjo, and fiddle. Bill Monroe (1911–1996) is credited with establishing the "classic bluegrass" instrumentation and style, featuring the aforementioned acoustic instruments plus upright acoustic bass.[9] The five-string banjo is played in a rolling style, called Scruggs style, named after its creator, Earl Scruggs (1924–2012). The continuous three-finger style makes use of the high fifth string, which serves as a drone and also creates syncopated rhythms and accents.[10] Bluegrass is characterized by virtuosic playing, instruments improvising and trading solos between sung verses and choruses of songs (referred to as "breakdowns"), and what is called "high lonesome" singing.[11] This singing style features a vocal range that is higher than most country music sung with a bright, nasal tone, and homophonic three and four part harmonies, although vocal counterpoint is sometimes present in gospel songs.[12] The repertoire of bluegrass is traditional folksongs, previously recorded bluegrass songs ("standards"), country and gospel songs, and newly composed material.[13]

California

Migration from the Southwest during the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s created audiences enthusiastic for country music in central California's honky-tonks and large dance halls with Bakersfield as a hub.[14] The region produced numerous country musicians and hits, largely due to Capitol Records' presence in Los Angeles beginning in 1942, and establishing the west coast as a

[9] See Neil Rosenberg, *Bluegrass: A History*, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
[10] Neal, *Country Music,* 131–3.
[11] Neil Rosenberg and Joti Rockwell, "Bluegrass," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1:529–31.
[12] Rosenberg and Rockwell, "Bluegrass," 1:529–31.
[13] Rosenberg and Rockwell, "Bluegrass," 1:529–31; Neal, *Country Music*, 133.
[14] Ajay Kalra, "Bakersfield Sound," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1:291.

key producer of commercial country music.[15] Buck Owens and Merle Haggard brought the "Bakersfield sound" to mainstream country in the 1960s, garnering national and international recognition for California country music.[16] The Bakersfield sound was a style of country music related to honky-tonk that drew from rock and roll, featuring drums, electric guitar, specifically a Fender Telecaster solid body, dual-pickup electric guitar, the use of an electric bass, rather than an acoustic, upright bass, rhythm guitar, steel guitar, and occasionally piano or fiddle.[17] With roots in large dance halls, the Bakersfield Sound featured a swing rhythm influence by western swing, sometimes referred to as a "Bakersfield shuffle," with rhythm instruments accenting offbeats.[18] Thematically, songs were explicitly oriented to working-class concerns, while the singing style featured a nasal timbre, or a recognizable twang.[19]

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[15] Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 180.

[16] Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 180; Neal, *Country Music*, 221–3. See also Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

[17] Neal, *Country Music*, 221–2.

[18] Western swing was a hybrid style of dance music that fused jazz and string band music, originating in Texas and Oklahoma in the 1920s. Influenced by Appalachian string band music, jazz and Dixieland from Louisiana, and Mexican mariachi, the style flourished in the Southwest and gained great popularity in California into the 1950s. Western swing bands consisted of typical honky tonk instruments (although western swing was the first to incorporate amplified guitars), along with piano and horn sections. Bands performed an eclectic and diverse repertory, including pop, jazz, and blues numbers with complex harmonic progressions and jazz-influence harmonies, and elaborate song arrangements. However, western swing was first and foremost dance music with swing rhythms and prominent rhythm sections. Milton Brown and his Musical Brownies were the first successful western swing band, but Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys moved the genre into mainstream popularity. Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music*, 74–83; Bill C. Malone, "Western Swing" in *Grove Music Online*/*Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/30173 (accessed October 18, 2010); Cary Ginell, "The Development of Western Swing," *JEMF Quarterly* 20 no. 74 (Fall–Winter 1984), 58. See also Gary Hartmann, *The History of Texas Music* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008); Charles R. Townsend, *San Antonio Rose: the Life and Music of Bob Wills* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976); Jean Boyd, *The Jazz of the Southwest: An Oral History of Western Swing* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); and Rich Kienzle, *Southwest Shuffle: Pioneers of Honky-Tonk, Western Swing, and Country Jazz* (New York: Routledge, 2003). The Pine Valley Cosmonauts' tribute to Bob Wills is on Bloodshot Records, *Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills* (BS 029, 1998). For more discussion of this album, see Chapter Five.

[19] Neal, *Country Music*, 221–2. The Bakersfield sound is contrasted with the Nashville sound that developed in the 1950s. The Nashville sound borrowed instrumentation and characteristics from popular music, employing full strings and thicker arrangements, and smoother, "crooning" vocals. Piano became a prominent instrument, along with drums played with brushes, vibraphones, and various other orchestral instruments. While steel and electric guitars were regularly employed on Nashville sound recordings, they were not prominent and lacked any characteristics of the honky tonk "twang." Also, studio technology became an important component of the Nashville sound with the use of echo, reverberation, and overdubbing. Thematically, songs addressed universal emotions and experiences, while moving away from personal narratives. Country artists experienced "crossover" success on pop

Country rock, originating in the 1960s, was a form of alternative country music that borrowed from both honky tonk, bluegrass, and the tradition of California country music. It featured American rock music with the addition of instruments that typically signified country music, such as steel guitar, pedal steel, mandolin, fiddle, or banjo, often performed by musicians identified with rock rather than country.[20] The West Coast produced several rock bands that were greatly influenced by the history and tradition of California country music, including the Byrds, the Eagles, and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band.

California band, The Byrds, led a trend of rock and folk performers showing an interest in country music in the 1960s.[21] The personnel of this band featured musicians with backgrounds in bluegrass and folk, and when the band added country-minded guitarist, vocalist, and singer Gram Parsons, the band recorded a country album in Nashville, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, in 1968. The album went relatively unnoticed by the country music establishment, and country music fans were skeptical of the Byrds and their identity as a long-haired hippie, rock band from California.

Parsons and band mate Chris Hillman left the Byrds to form the Flying Burrito Brothers in 1969, and solidified their country rock sound with the album, *Gilded Palace of Sin*, which

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charts, while pop artists experienced success recording country albums. While the Nashville sound was an incredibly successful era of country music, it ha been criticized by fans and scholars as "selling out" or compromising country music's tradition and authenticity. Neal, *Country Music*, 191–217. See also Joli Jensen, *The Nashville Sound: Authenticity, Commercialization, and Country Music* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1998); Michael Kosser, *How Nashville Became Music City U.S.A.: 50 Years of Music Row* (New York: Hal Leonard, 2006); and Diane Pecknold, *The Selling Sound: The Rise of the Country Music Industry* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[20] Olivia Carter Mather, "Country Rock," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:446.

[21] Outside of California, Nashville also played a role in country rock's development. The city's recording studios flourished, and Nashville became a recording destination for musicians from a variety of genres, including folk and rock. Most notably, Bob Dylan recorded three albums in Nashville, culminating with *Nashville Skyline* in 1969, a country album which features a duet with Johnny Cash, simple, direct songs, and instruments associated with country music, such as steel guitar. The reception of this album was split: it was not considered "country" by country audiences, and did not appear on country charts, while Dylan's fans, in fact, labeled the album as "country." Neal, *Country Music,* 235.

featured “part honky-tonk, part Bakersfield, lyrics tinged with emotional angst, and the musical wash of sound characteristic of late '60s psychedelia.”[22] Parsons was committed to creating “cosmic American music,” a new strand of American music blending rock and country, although he did not achieve much success toward that end in his lifetime. Moreover, he did not attain great fame or commercial recognition in his lifetime, and following his death by overdose, he was most commonly known for bringing Emmylou Harris into the spotlight. In the years since his death, and particularly in the 1990s, he became an icon of alternative country and achieved a great deal of posthumous fame.[23]

Country rock persisted into the 1970s. In 1973, California rock band, the Eagles, recorded a country rock concept album called *Desperado* based on stories of the Old West and bank robbers. The album was not well received by country music, a reception based more on the band's identity as a rock band rather than the songs on the album.[24] However, not all country rock albums went unnoticed (or shunned) by country music and its fans. Where previous country rock projects were viewed with skepticism or disdain, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s collaboration with country music legends on *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* was well-received by the country music establishment. The foregrounding of country artists on the album and numerous covers of traditional country songs superseded the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band’s identity and moved their project beyond a rock band incorporating country signs and tropes on a concept album.

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[22] Neal, *Country Music*, 238–9.
[23] Tony Byworth, *The History of Country & Western Music* (New York: Exeter Books, 1984) 127; Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.,* 387–88; John Lomax III, *Nashville: Music City USA* (New York: Harry Abrams Inc., 1985) 94–6. A great deal of freedom has been taken with Parsons’ biography, and he has become a cult figure due to his artistry, struggle with ‘personal demons’ in the form of alcohol and drugs, as well as his untimely and tragic death from overdose. In addition to these factors, three days after his death, his road manager, Phil Kaufman, stole his body from the Los Angeles International Airport, drove it to Joshua Tree National Park, the location of the overdose, and immolated it in order to fulfill an alleged pact with Parsons. See Olivia Carter Mather, “’Regressive Country’: The Voice of Gram Parsons,” in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.country Music*, eds. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 154–8.
[24] Neal, *Country Music*, 240.

California's Nitty Gritty Dirt Band (NGDB) had several albums that revealed a country music influence, but when the band recorded an album in Nashville in 1971, the band strove to highlight older forms of country music. As scholar Jocelyn Neal notes, "[T]he NGDB's approach was different... They had less interest in making a contemporary country album, and were more invested in situating themselves in traditional country music."[25] NGDB's personnel, including Jimmie Fadden, Jeff Hanna, Jimmy Ibbotson, John McEuen, and Les Thompson, had backgrounds in folk, rock, and bluegrass, and for this project, the band chose to collaborate with older county stars and legends, including Roy Acuff and members of the Carter Family, and bluegrass musicians such as Earl Scruggs. The resulting album, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, included three LPs, extensive liner notes, and includes extensive audio of studio banter and dialogue between performers, introducing new generations of listeners and fans to iconic country music contributors.

For example, the track "Keep on the Sunny Side" highlights the spoken word of Mother Maybelle Carter as she discusses this legendary Carter Family song, serving to remind the listener of her important role in the history of recorded country music, but also authenticating the current project. The track begins with sounds a several instruments tuning or practicing, as Mother Maybelle Carter clears her throat.[26] A male voice inquires, "Maybelle, are you gonna stay tuned like that for all the tunes that we're doing now?" and she replies,

> I may do the "Wildwood Flower" on the autoharp, if y'all don't mind. I never recorded it on the autoharp, and I've done it with the guitar about a dozen times! And I do it in F standard, you know, I'll probably do it in F standard key on the autoharp. And um, "Thinking Tonight of My Blues Eyes," I'll probably have to do that in the same place,

[25] Neal, *Country Music,* 241.
[26] "Keep on the Sunny Side" was originally recorded by the Carter Family in 1928, and was the theme song for their radio show. See Mary A. Bufwack and Robert K. Oermann, *Finding Her Voice: Women in Country Music, 1800–2000*, (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press, 2003).

> yeah. And then, I don't know where we'll do "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" if everybody sings it, you just, you know, get the key that suits everybody."[27]

Someone then asks her, "Maybelle, do you remember the old ending you folks put on that thing?" She replies, "I know on the old record, I started it like this…" and begins playing the song. Throughout this dialogue, instruments are playing and picking around in the key of B-flat in the background, and as Carter begins to play the introduction in her trademark "Carter scratch" style (with the melody played on the lower strings of the guitar and the higher strings providing the rhythm), other instruments immediately join in.[28] Carter sings the verses, and an ensemble of voices join in on the choruses. She plays the first instrumental break following the first chorus (playing the exact melody of the verse), while an extended instrumental break features a fiddle solo (playing the verse). This is followed by a dobro solo (playing the chorus), and Carter plays a brief outro to conclude the song. This dialogue and transition into the recorded track provide a bit of country music history for the listener, while also obscuring the highly structured nature of a recording project in a professional studio involving numerous musicians and engineers, capturing an organic and natural moment that just happened to be recorded.

The project was released in 1972, comprised primarily of covers of traditional country and bluegrass tunes, and the album was well received by the NGDB's fan and the country establishment. As reviewer Bruce Eder notes, "Some of the veteran Nashville stars were skeptical and suspicious at first of the bandmembers and their amplified instruments, but the ice was broken when they saw how respectful the band was toward them and their work, and their

[27] Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, "Keep on the Sunny Side," *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* (Nashville: Capitol Records, [2002], 1972).
[28] John Lilly, "Carter Family," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2:132–3.

music, as well as how serious they were about their own music."[29] The album was a commercial and critical success, selling one million units, garnering positive reviews from both the rock and country music press, and nominated for two Grammy awards.[30]

Cowpunk emerged in California in the 1980s, following in the footsteps of California country and country rock. Historian David Goodman defines this genre as "a short –lived 1980s hybrid combining the energy and attitude of punk with country/western themes, images, and music."[31] Despite the definition and brief timeframe that Goodman posits for this particular label, the category of cowpunk, upon closer examination, was overtly ambiguous and loosely defined, and was also used more generally after this timeframe.[32]

In *Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California*, Gerald Haslam describes Southern California music culture in the 1980s and the emergence of cowpunk:

> In Los Angeles's nightclubs that [punk scene] was profoundly felt; it then combined with traditional country music, especially honky-tonk and rockabilly, as well as with hard rock, leading to what was called "cowpunk." That merging in turn produced one of California's most interesting musical scenes, highlighting young performers who – what else? – ignored labels and merged music.[33]

Haslam's description might imply that cowpunk was the result of stylistic merging. Although this was sometimes the case, and is evident in some music from these groups, this scene in Southern California was intermingled, characterized by bands of various styles frequently performing together and/or sharing personnel.

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[29] Bruce Eder, review of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/album/will-the-circle-be-unbroken-mw0000193505 (accessed January 23, 2014).
[30] Bruce Eder, review of *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*.
[31] David Goodman, *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide and Directory* (Nashville, TN: Dowling Press, 1999), vii.
[32] This discussion is intentionally limited, and does not consider several groups that merge rock and roll and country, referred to as rockabilly, or bands that merge "hillbilly" and/or bluegrass and punk, such as the Meat Purveyors, Split Lip Rayfield, the Bad Livers, and Zero Skills. For a discussion of these latter groups see Aaron Smithers, "Old Time Punk," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.country Music*, eds. Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2008), 175–91.
[33] Gerald Haslam, *Workin' Man Blues: Country Music in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 267.

Bands were labeled as "cowpunk" quite loosely, but the personnel of the band were just as important as the music they were making. For example, a band like Rank and File was "cowpunk" because its members had been or were involved with a punk band. Rank and File was formed by brothers Chip and Tony Kinman, featuring Alejandro Escovedo on guitar.[34] Although the band was formed in Austin, Texas, the members had ties to California. The Kinmans were two-thirds of the late '70s punk band out of Los Angeles, the Dils, while Escovedo had played in the San Francisco punk band the Nuns.[35] The Dils were known for "90-second primal scream maximum punk ditties with fiery politics…topped off with Everlyesque harmonies" from the Kinmans.[36] Rank and File's songs incorporated the Bakersfield sound, with electric guitar lead lines and swinging, shuffle rhythms. However, at times, the drums are prominent, providing an insistent driving rhythm with steady eighth or quarter notes on the snare. The band was influenced by the Byrds, Gram Parsons, and Merle Haggard, while a song on their debut album quotes country and rockabilly artist Johnny Horton.[37]

Two other bands also frequently associated with cowpunk are closely related: the band X and the Knitters. X was one of the most important and influential Los Angeles punk bands from the late 1970s.[38] The band was comprised of songwriter and bassist John Doe, vocalist Exene Cervenka, rockabilly and rock veteran guitarist Billy Zoom, and drummer D.J. Bonebrake.[39] Their debut album, *Los Angeles* (1980), with traces of Zoom's rockabilly background, is

[34] Alejandro Escovedo has three albums on Bloodshot Records: *More Miles Than Money: Live 1994–1996* (BS 027, 1998), *Bourbonitis Blues* (BS 049, 1999), and *A Man Under the Influence* (BS 064, 2001).
[35] Ira Robbins, "Rank and File" in Trouser Press Online, http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=rank_and_file (accessed March 29, 2009).
[36] Jack Rabin, "Dils," Trouser Press Online, http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=dils (accessed March 29, 2009).
[37] John Dougan, "Rank and File," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/rank-and-file-mn0001357867/biography accessed June 8, 2014).
[38] Jon Young, Ira Robbins, and Matt Yockey, "X," Trouser Press Online, http://www.trouserpress.com/entry.php?a=x (accessed March 29, 2009).
[39] Bloodshot released a tribute to the Knitters in 1999, *Poor Little Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters* (BS 052, 1999). For more information on this album, see Chapter Five. Exene Cervenka has released two solo albums on Bloodshot: *Somewhere Gone* (BS 166, 2009) and *The Excitement of Maybe* (BS 177, 2011).

primarily hardcore punk with fast tempos, aggressive guitar playing, and vocals split between Doe and Cervenka, with both approaching yelling at times. For example, the title track, "Los Angeles," is a nihilistic song about a young woman to grows to hate everything around her, and has to "get out of Los Angeles." It begins with a staccato electric guitar riff, followed by eighth note strummed power chords and bassline. Doe and Cervenka alternate vocals, then join together speak-singing in unison for the first verse. The pattern changes slightly at the chorus with Doe singing a line, then both Doe and Cervenka singing together, and alternating this solo/duet. In the second verse, instead of singing in unison, they sing their trademark harmonies at fifths and fourths apart, rather than thirds or sixths. Although the electric guitar primarily plays eighth note power chords throughout the song, Zoom plays a small guitar fill before Doe enters at the verse that alludes to his rockabilly background, as seen in Figure 2.1. The bass and drums are steady and insistent throughout the song.

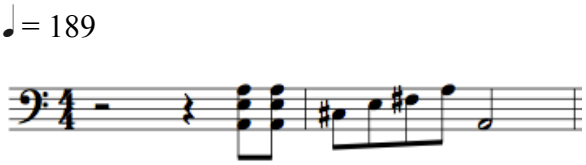

Figure 2.1: "Los Angeles," X, guitar fill (slight swing).

The band X was always considered punk rock and identified as such, but the band incorporated influences from country and blues, leading one music journalist to call their style "an imprecise amalgam of rockabilly and punk."[40] With their third and fourth studio albums, *Under the Big Black Sun* (1982) and *More Fun in the New World* (1983), the band incorporated an eclectic mix of styles in addition to hardcore punk and also produced a more polished sound. These albums contained a wide range of songs, such as the fifties ballad "Come Back to Me," a

[40] Haslam, *Workin' Man Blues*, 267.

cover of a song performed by American blues/folk artist, Leadbelly, as well as several rockabilly and country songs. Following this album, Doe, Cervenka, and Bonebrake explored this rockabilly and country avenue of their music further, performing as a side project called the Knitters. Joined by Dave Alvin and Jonny Ray Bartel, the Knitters released an album in 1985 entitled *Poor Little Critter on the Road*. This album encompassed covers of Merle Haggard and Leadbelly, as well as diverse, original songs covering a range of country styles, as well as a "country" version of X song "New World."

Cowpunk was not exclusive to California. Jason and the Scorchers, a group out of Nashville, were also considered cowpunk.[41] This group had no ties to punk bands, but rather assimilated musical styles and appropriated signifiers from both country and punk with a consistent sound that resonated with cowpunk aesthetics. Formed in 1981 by Jason Ringenberg with guitarist Warner Hodges, drummer Perry Baggs, and bassist Jeff Johnson, Jason and the Scorchers incorporated an aggressive form of country rock, incorporating "energy-crazed hardcore [punk]," blues, and gospel.[42] However, the band performed a wide range of styles, including "country classics the way the Ramones might do them," but also "a country weeper so sweet and true that everyone came away knowing they knew what they were doing inside-out.[43] For example, the song "Both Sides of the Line" is about an individual facing some sort of existential dilemma, with lyrics that are times religious and/or apocalyptic ("You're damned for all time / to walk both sides of the line;" and later, "When they ask me who I am? / A prisoner of the war to be or a prophet that is damned"). It features a fast tempo with a relentless drumbeat,

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[41] Jason and the Scorchers appear on Bloodshot Records' third compilation album, *Nashville, The Other Side of the Alley: Insurgent Country, Vol. 3* (BS 014, 1996).
[42] Laura Outerbridge, "Jason and Scorchers: Heavy Metal Hills," *Washington Times*, September 7, 1989.
[43] Tommy Womack, "Jason Ringenberg's Fruits of Honest Labor," http://www.jasonringenberg.com (accessed March 26, 2009).

layered with an extended guitar introduction featuring distortion, tremolo, and sixteenth note speed-strumming that continues through the verse. When Ringenberg's vocals enter, he alternates between nearly yelling for the verses and singing during the chorus, all with a pronounced southern accent. Two-thirds into the song, the breakdown features guitar effects, such as bent notes, slides, and distortion, all accompanied by intense drumming that builds to the return of the vocal chorus with a walking, boogie-woogie bass-line. The form of this song can be seen in Figure 2.2.

♩ = ca. 177

Intro (41 secs) electric guitar (effects, distortion /tremolo) bass drums	**Verse** vocal electric guitar bass drums	**Chorus** full band	**Verse** full band	**Chorus** full band	**Instr.** electric guitar (effects, distortion /slides) bass drums	**Verse** (begins piano, with spoken word) full band	**Chorus** full band	**Instr./ Outro** full band (ends with ritard./ fade out)

Figure 2.2: "Both Sides of the Line," Jason and the Scorchers, form.

In contrast to this song, "Pray for Me, Mama" is a slower country song in a honky tonk style about a broken-hearted man who shot his lover. The song features an acoustic guitar, electric guitar fills reminiscent of a steel guitar, a walking bassline, and drums with snare accents on beats two and four. Ringenberg's southern accent is still predominant, added vocal bends and scoops; vocal harmony is added for the chorus of the song.

Following a furious touring schedule in the early 1980s, the band garnered critical acclaim, and soon signed a deal with major record label EMI/Capitol in 1983.[44] Despite moderate commercial success, the band was eventually dropped by EMI. They signed with A & M in 1989, but that album was commercially unsuccessful. A & M also dropped Jason and the Scorchers, and the band broke up. The band's major record deals notwithstanding, they never achieved mainstream success, falling victim to difficult relationships with record labels and unable to break into mainstream radio, categorized as too country rock radio and too rock for country radio at the time.[45] While the band covered songs by Bob Dylan, Hank Williams, and Johnny Cash, they also recorded a song written by Michael Stipe of R.E.M., as the Scorchers regularly opened for the alternative rock band.[46] Such wide-ranging musical influences, along with connections to the underground and alternative rock scene, established the band as a model for alt.country of the next decade, while also positioning Jason and the Scorchers as an early alt.country band.

Texas

Just as California was an important location in country music history, Texas fiddle and string bands were key in the development of western swing, and honky tonk's origins are associated with the state.[47] In the 1970s, Austin boasted a large population of well-educated, socially and politically liberal young people, along with many musicians and artists who had relocated to the city as a cultural oasis in the center of a generally conservative state.[48] The

[44] "Jason and the Scorchers – Biography," http://www.jasonandthescorchers.com/biography (accessed June 8, 2014).
[45] John Dougan, "Jason and the Scorchers – Biography," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/jason-the-scorchers-mn0000217390/biography (accessed June 8, 2014).
[46] Womack, "Jason Ringenberg's Fruits of Honest Labor."
[47] Ginell, "The Development of Western Swing," 58; Peterson, *Creating Country Music,* 13–32.
[48] Hartman, *History of Texas Music*, 165–6. See also Travis Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

younger of both of these groups had been raised on both country and rock and roll, and were familiar with and open to the numerous styles that blended into progressive country. The vibrant live music scene of Austin –featuring bars, nightclubs, dance halls, and many other venues – provided a staggering mix of musical styles, as well as a diversity of musicians and audiences. For example, cowboys, hippies, college students, white- and blue-collar workers, along with a variety of ethnicities could all be found at a live venue on a typical night in Austin. Such diversity provided a breeding ground for innovations and experimentation for the blending of styles.[49]

Texas produced a wide range of mainstream country bands and musicians, but a style called progressive country became associated with Austin, featuring a blending of honky-tonk, folk, rock and roll, swing, jazz, blues, and Tex-Mex. Progressive country musicians valued a live aesthetic in their recordings, reflecting the music's origins in the live music scene that developed in Austin clubs, such as the Armadillo World Headquarters.[50] The genre also boasted singer/songwriters such as Townes Van Zandt, Guy Clark, and Jerry Jeff Walker, along with Kris Kristofferson, Billy Joe Shaver, Tom T. Hall, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Joe Ely, and Butch Hancock.[51] However, native Texan Willie Nelson is by far the most famous musician associated with Austin's progressive country scene, in addition to his connections to mainstream country music and Nashville, and as one of the original "outlaws" of outlaw country.[52]

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[49] Hartmann, *Texas Music*, 165–6.
[50] Travis Stimeling, "Progressive Country," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6:616.
[51] "Progressive country," Allmusic, http://www.allmusic.com/style/progressive-country-ma0000002796 (accessed January 24, 2014). See also, See also Travis Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Jimmie Dale Gilmore appears on the Pine Valley Cosmonauts tribute to Bob Wills on Bloodshot Records, *Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills* (BS 029, 1998). For more discussion of this album, see Chapter Five.
[52] Ken Tucker, "9 to 5: How Dolly Parton and Willie Nelson Qualified for the 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous'," in *Country: The Music and the Musicians*, 2nd ed., eds. Paul Kingsbury, Alan Axelrod, and Susan Costello (New York: Abbeville Press, Inc., 1994), 272. Nelson's early success in Nashville was as a songwriter, most notably

Despite Nelson's success, progressive country was not commercially viable outside of the state. It flourished in the state of Texas in the 1970s, and the city of Austin remained a site of country music production geographically and discursively removed from Nashville. Austin came to be known as a location where musicians and participants "could publicly perform their collective identity and Texas-centric values and to proclaim their difference from a perceived cultural mainstream."[53]

Mainstream Country in the 1990s

In the 1990s, mainstream country music experienced a drastic rise in popularity and a breakthrough into popular culture. Country music's "boom" reflected important changes in the country music industry, including advances in recording technology, sophisticated marketing

penning Patsy Cline's hit "Crazy" and Faron Young's "Hello Walls." Pursuing a performing career, he signed with small label Liberty Records as an artist and had moderate success with a few singles in the early 1960s. In 1965, he moved to RCA Victor and became a member of the Opry, but as the decade wore on, he grew continually frustrated with the restrictive recording models of the time. After his house burned down in 1969, he moved to Austin to take advantage of the musical opportunities that city had to offer, and signed with Columbia to release country music's first concept album, *Red Headed Stranger*. This album was an unexpected success, featuring stripped down arrangements that were in contrast to the thicker, lush textures associated with country music of the time. Consequently, Nashville embraced and promoted "outlaw country" in the album's wake. Originally, the designation of "outlaw" was established as a marketing ploy to promote a compilation album released by RCA Records entitled *Wanted! The Outlaws* (1976). The album artwork feature a 'wild West' style "wanted" poster featuring Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Tompall Glaser, and Jessi Colter, Jennings' wife, while the title came from a publicity chief referencing Jennings' song "Ladies Love Outlaws." These four individuals, along with Glaser's brother, Bobby Bare, Billy Joe Shaver, David Allan Coe, and Kris Kristofferson, were designated as outlaws. Musically, these artists followed the style of country rock, blending rock with older forms of country music, particularly honky-tonk, but also employing sparse textures and a live aesthetic associated with progressive country. Outlaw country's thematic material related to the Wild West and cowboy culture, or hard drinking and rowdy living. As with *Red Headed Stranger*, the country music establishment took notice, and fans responded: *Wanted: The Outlaws* became the first country album to be certified platinum, selling one million units. Ironically, as Jocelyn Neal notes, "A major record label had co-opted and profited from a trend that had started out as rebellion against the traditions that label represented." However, what "outlaw country" accomplished was a change in the business model of country music in Nashville, shifting artistic control to from producers and record labels to musicians, while also allowing them to reap greater financial profits. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1970s, the outlaw country movement had run its course; but the "outsider" designation remained with artists such as Nelson and Jennings even though they pursued new projects and material. For more information on outlaw country, see Jocelyne Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 283–98; Malone, 398–405.

[53] Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 132.

techniques, and changes in how music industry information was collected and reported.[54] The genre was greatly influenced by pop and rock, specifically a highly produced sound and image that was associated with Top Forty mainstream rock, while a line-dance craze also fueled country's popularity. Historian Don Cusic notes, "Country music had success like it had never seen before during the early 1990s. Country was on more radio stations, sold more records, and received more positive national media attention than at any time in its history."[55] The marketing and commercialism that resulted from such popularity made country ubiquitous, and the genre became an easy target for disapproval, critique, and even parody. Alt.country emerged within this context, embracing traditional country music, with an often ironic take on country music signs, tropes, and sounds, all the while proclaiming an anti-commercial authenticity rooted in punk and indie rock.

The radio format of "New Country" sounded differently from traditional country rooted in honky tonk and string band traditions, but visually all artists held onto the cowboy hat, boots, and jeans, or other western wear. The names most regularly associated with "New Country" are Clint Black, Garth Brooks, Wade Hayes, The Judds, Shania Twain, Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, along with a line-dancing fad that featured Billy Ray Cyrus and Brooks and Dunn, among others. This group of performers employed performance and productions practices from rock music, including the spectacle of arena rock, an increased presence of electric guitars (often distorted), extended guitar solos, clearer, sharper drums, and a richer, smoother vocal quality, often accented or enhanced by effects and digital manipulation.[56]

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[54] Trent Hill, "Why Isn't Country Music "Youth" Culture?" in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformation in Popular Music Culture*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 175; Neal, 375–7. See also Joli Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom" in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 183–201.
[55] Don Cusic, *Discovering Country Music* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 139.
[56] Neal, *Country Music*, 375–83.

Shania Twain, born Eilleen Regina Edwards in Ontario, Canada, was criticized as merely a sex symbol that lacked talent by journalists and critics, but she was voted Entertainer of the Year by both the Country Music Association and the Academy of Country Music in 1999.[57] Appealing to audiences outside of country music, she and her then husband and producer Mutt Lange manipulated her image and musical style, releasing two versions of her album *Come On Over* (1997): a country version and a remixed version that was released to pop radio. Her third studio project, the album was a blockbuster success and resulted in numerous radio hits on both country and pop charts. The song "You're Still the One" from this album is representative of country crossover songs of the time, featuring optimistic and sentimental themes, such as true love overcoming all obstacles, full harmonies and backing vocals, and an emphasis on the rhythm section. Although the song's most prominent instrument is a piano, markers of country such as an acoustic guitar and a pedal steel.[58] As country music reached its greatest commercial success with crossovers such as Shania Twain, traditionalists, fans, and journalists alike bemoaned the loss of country's "identity and authenticity" and its loss of integrity, an ever-present part of the discourse since the country-pop Nashville Sound emerged in the 1950s.[59]

Alt.country's Sonic and Discursive Boundaries

"Alt.country" describes a particular type of alternative country music from the 1990s and early 2000s, although the term also is used generally to refer to any music that incorporates aspects of country, rock, and punk. Similar to previous versions of alternative country, alt.country employed a variety of musical styles and signifiers. However, this new genre was

[57] Neal, *Country Music*, 394–5.
[58] Neal, *Country Music,* 383, 394–5.
[59] Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 417–18; See also Joli Jensen,"Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom" in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 183–201.

marked by key differences, including particular aesthetics values and political ideologies, and the use of alternative modes of production and consumption, following the influence of punk and indie rock. The dates of alt.country as a cultural and historical moment are debatable, though its beginning is regularly cited in the year 1990, corresponding with Uncle Tupelo's album *No Depression*.[60] The ending of alt.country less clear, with some scholars, journalists, and fans considering its demise occurring sometime in the first decade of the twenty-first century. This proposed ending includes *No Depression*'s move to an online-only format, the surprising success of the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack featuring traditional country and folk musical styles, the growing power and influence of the Americana Music Association, or the termination of the weekly *Gavin* "Americana" radio and record chart (discussed later in this chapter).[61]

The so-called origin story of 1990s alt.country that emerged during the era of "Hot New Country" began in 1990, when Uncle Tupelo, a band from Belleville, IL, released their debut album titled *No Depression* (Rockville Records, 1990), featuring a collection of punk-influenced rock songs and ballads with a country influence, including the title track, a cover of The Carter Family tune "No Depression in Heaven." The album led to a discussion group on America Online (AOL), also named "No Depression," which in turn led to a bi-monthly print magazine of the same name.[62] This online discussion group and the magazine *No Depression* identified an

[60] *No Depression: The Roots Music Authority*, "The Story of Us," http://www.nodepression.com/page/the-story-of-no-depression (accessed November 20, 2011).
[61] See "The Story of Us," No Depression: The Roots Music Authority, http://www.nodepression.com/page/the-story-of-no-depression (accessed November 20, 2011); Aaron A. Fox, "Alternative" to What?: O Brother, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music," in *Country Music Goes to War*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe and James Akenson (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004); Diane Pecknold, "Selling Out or Buying In? Alt.Country's Cultural Politics of Commercialism," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, ed. Barbara Ching and Pamela Fox (University of Michigan Press, 2008); "Who We Are," Americana Music Association, http://americanamusic.org/who-we-are (accessed November 21, 2011); Edward Morris, "Americana: The Chart Goes, The Music Stays," *CMT News*, October 16, 2000, http://www.cmt.com/news/country-music/1472439/americana-the-chart-goes-the-music-stays.jhtml (accessed November 20, 2011).
[62] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes*, 2.

assortment of music and bands under a wide variety of labels, but alt.country was the identifier that persisted.[63]

Although Uncle Tupelo's cover of "No Depression" is often cited as "edgy" and "amplified," the actual track is a straightforward cover of the Carter Family's recorded version.[64] Faster than the latter recording, Uncle Tupelo's cover features acoustic guitars and electric bass. The guitar is played in a style reminiscent of the "Carter scratch," but with a much more active strumming pattern. This rhythmic strumming, along with the electric bass's walking and bouncing lines, results in a fuller texture for the song, compared to the simple acoustic guitar accompanying the Carter Family. Jay Farrar sings the verses alone, with added harmony on the choruses, and follows the melody of the Carter version closely, with only slight rhythmic alterations. Lyrically, Uncle Tupelo omit the second verse of the song that references "that bright land" where "there'll be no hunger," and highlights the positive aspects of a future heaven. The result is a bleaker narrative that contrasts with the general hopeful message of the chorus (I'm going where there's no depression / to a better land that's free from care).

Just as the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band worked with Maybelle Carter to establish a direct connection to country music's history and to authenticate their recording project, *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*, Uncle Tupelo includes a second song associated with the Carter Family on *No Depression*. However, the band's version of the ballad folk song "John Hardy," is, in fact, edgy and amplified. The Uncle Tupelo version is accompanied by a full band instrumentation of electric guitars, bass, and drums. The song begins in a similar fashion to "No Depression" with a simple guitar accompaniment, again reminiscent of the Carter scratch, although this guitar is

[63] Kurt Wolff, *Country Music: The Rough Guide*, ed. Orla Duane (London: Rough Guides, Ltd., 2000), 549. The term "alt.country" emerged in the wake of Nirvana's commercial success and the success of other underground rock bands, such as R.E.M., that became commercially successful and were marketed as "alternative." Further, the label likely owes a debt to the prevalence of the online community and listserv labeling practices.
[64] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes*, 2.

electric, not acoustic. In the second verse, the rest of the band joins in with a sparse accompaniment, but the instrumental break following this stanza takes on the feel and sound of a rock song, with full drums and cymbal crashes, distorted electric guitar, and full band stops and hits. Uncle Tupelo repeats the final phrase of each stanza and has altered the melody. As Figure 2.3 shows, it is reduced in range from nearly an octave to a sixth, and the contour is simplified by employing repeated notes and stepwise motion, as opposed to the skips and leaps of the Carter Family version, seen in Figure 2.4.

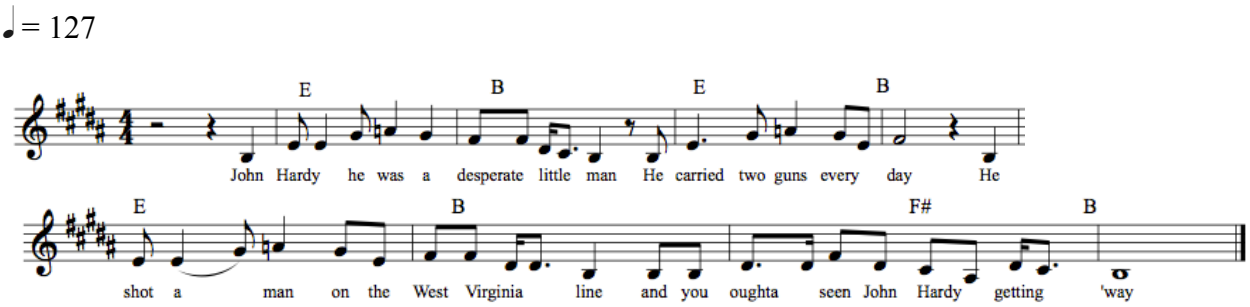

Figure 2.3: "John Hardy," Uncle Tupelo, melody.

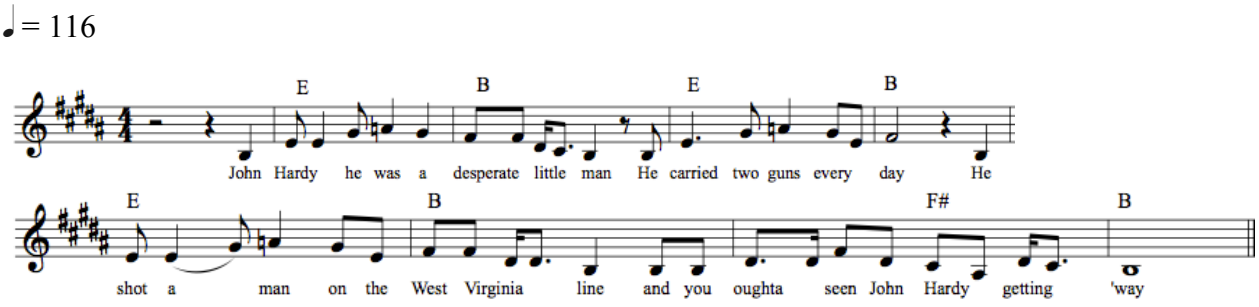

Figure 2.4: "John Hardy Was a Desperate Little Man," The Carter Family, melody.

The Carter Family performs seven stanzas of the song, while Uncle Tupelo reduces the song to four. The omitted stanzas describe friends and family visiting the imprisoned Hardy,

while the missing concluding stanza describes Hardy telling his wife he will see her in "that sweet by and by." These deletions result in a darker, bleaker narrative, and a completely hopeless outlook for the protagonist of the song.

Uncle Tupelo's version of "John Hardy" presents a blending of styles, influences, and signifiers that was described as a completely new approach to country music. As previously discussed, bands and artists of previous decades had referenced country, rock, folk, and punk in a variety of ways, yet Uncle Tupelo's work served as a convenient referent for the "origin story" of a "new" genre. As Diane Pecknold argues, alt.country was institutionalized quickly and in a similar manner as mainstream country in the 1950s. A key moment in this process was the establishment of a chart tracking format radio airplay. Created in January 1995 and identified as the "Americana" chart in the trade magazine *Gavin*, this publication, along with *No Depression*, served to define and shape the new genre of alt.country.

The Gavin Report

In January of 1995, trade magazine *The Gavin Report* released its first Americana chart. Bill Gavin was a pioneering radio host of a countdown show in the 1950s, and eventually produced an industry newsletter, which helped radio programmers in the formative years of the Top 40 format.[65] This San Francisco-based newsletter became *The Gavin Report*, which Gavin founded in 1958, and the publication eventually monitored airplay for Top 40 records, and later expanded to other categories.[66] The publication was also responsible for running the Gavin Seminar, a convention for radio industry members.[67]

[65] Ben Fong-Torres, Radio Waves, *San Francisco Chronicle*, http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Radio-Waves-3196419.php (accessed August 20, 2013).
[66] "Bill Gavin, the Founder in '58 Of List on Air Play of Records," New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/

In the table of contents of the January 1995 issue, the preview for an article entitled "Americana Moves to Another Country," describes the new chart "for country-based artists to the left of the mainstream" and cites Emmylou Harris as an exemplar of the format. Based on fourteen reporting stations or shows, the initial reports came primarily from west coast. Of these stations, only one was an east coast station, while Texas and California both had three, and Oregon, two.[68] Considering Texas and California's history of alternative or non-mainstream country music, these initial results are not surprising.

Acknowledging the "boom" in mainstream country music, the editors and authors of *Gavin* work to distinguish "Americana " from its mainstream counterpart, stating, "From the dust of what was once heralded as progressive, renegade, eclectic, Western Beat, or alternative, it all comes down to American roots music steeped with a history, heritage and ongoing influence. Stylistically, it's got a musical bone called country."[69] One contributor continues, "As mainstream country has boomed over the last few years, catering proudly to a disenfranchised rock listener, we've witnessed a growing segment of disenfranchised country listeners."[70] This author acknowledges the move toward mainstream rock in country music, likely referencing both the sound of the music and the stadium rock performance practices of artists such as Garth Brooks, and continues with a critique of such trends, "It's steel guitars, mandolins and acoustics rather than synthesizers and line dance mixes." The article continues to note how mainstream country had neglected its legends, such as Johnny Cash, George Jones, Waylon Jennings, Merle Haggard, and even Emmylou Harris, as it notes, "Gavin's Americana album chart will explore

1985/01/30/arts/bill-gavin-the-founder-in-58-of-list-on-air-play-of-records.html (accessed Tuesday, August 20, 2013).
[67] "Gavin Report Range," http://www.americanradiohistory.com/Gavin-Report-Page-Range-Guide.htm (accessed August 20, 2013).
[68] Rob Bleetstein, ed., "Gavin Welcomes Our Initial Panel of Americana Reporters," *Gavin* (January 20, 1995).
[69] Bleetstein, ed., "Gavin Welcomes Our Initial Panel of Americana Reporters."
[70] Rob Bleetstein, ed., "Americana Moves to Another Country," *Gavin* (January 20, 1995).

and develop not only those beyond the mainstream but those who create traditional music within it."[71] This continued emphasis on mainstream country music reinforces the commercial power of that radio format at that time, and in a trade magazine devoted to radio programming, a connection to the successful format, even an oppositional connection, served to assure radio managers that this new format would draw in listeners and ultimately, revenue.

The magazine emphasizes the financial benefits of this new radio format, and the benefit of this new chart to artists is also highlighted,

> Hungry listeners are out there, supporting these critically acclaimed artists, both at the cash register and at concert venues. Americana artists exist within almost every major and independent label catering to the country marketplace, and now the window of exposure will open to those who have paid their dues.[72]

This reference to the concert venue draws connections to the regional nature of Americana's roots, along with the smaller scale of these Americana artists, as compared to mainstream country's stadium and arena performances.

In a feature called "Inside Americana," the chart is described as "a healthy mix of indies, majors, knowns and soon to be knowns," and features "some of the artists who play prominent roles in Americana past, present, and future," including Robert Earl Keen, Lucinda Williams, Joe Ely, Emmylou Harris, and Jim Lauderdale.[73] The inaugural chart contained an eclectic mix of artists, including Merle Haggard, Waylon Jennings, and Lyle Lovett; artists who eventually became closely associated with *No Depression* and alt.country, such as Iris Dement, the Mavericks, and the Bottle Rockets; but also many artists with connections to folk, mainstream country, and other formats, such as Nancy Griffith, Mary Chapin Carpenter, Rodney Crowell, Nick Lowe, Shawn Colvin, Townes Van Zant, and Tom Petty.

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[71] Bleetstein, ed., "Americana Moves to Another Country."
[72] Bleetstein, ed., "Americana Moves to Another Country."
[73] Bleetstein, ed., "Inside Americana," *Gavin* (Janaury 20, 1995).

Musical eclecticism, including folk, country, progressive country, and rock, was representative of *Gavin*'s Americana chart early on, and generally, the chart characterized "Americana" broadly. The first few months of this chart saw overlap between the country chart, the adult contemporary chart, and the Americana chart. In contrast to *Gavin*'s initial approach to the genre, *No Depression* provided a narrower focus for alt.country, emphasizing older country music stars and artists and musicians performing in smaller, independent clubs. By the end of 1995, the chart had more artists in common with the college chart and *No Depression*'s coverage of alternative country.

No Depression

The publication *No Depression*, frequently referred to as the alt.country *Rolling Stone*, launched in 1995 as a quarterly print magazine covering alternative country music, and established itself as the institutional voice of alt.country. Founded by Peter Blackstock and Grant Alden, joined by Kyla Fairchild as a co-editor shortly thereafter, the magazine was famous for its subtitle, "The Alternative Country (Whatever That Is) Bi-monthly." *No Depression* was in print from September of 1995 until June of 2008, when it switched to an online presence only for financial reasons, becoming "The Roots Music Authority."[74] The print version, now archived entirely online, documented the development and history of alt.country. Further, two "best-of" anthologies, 1996's *No Depression: An Introduction to Alternative Country Music, Whatever That Is* and 2005's *The Best of No Depression: Writing About American Music*, reprint 35 and 25

[74] *No Depression*, "The Story of *No Depression*," http://www.nodepression.com/page/the-story-of-no-depression (accessed April 19, 2011).

feature stories and interviews from the magazine respectively, with some overlap, and serve to canonize the roster of important alt.country artists.[75]

The original tagline of the publication that became alt.country's primary magazine, *No Depression*, stated that it was the "alternative country quarterly" in its debut in Fall 1995, but eventually became "the bi-month alternative country magazine, whatever that is."[76] In its first issues, *No Depression*'s editors Peter Blackstock and Grant Alden described its musical focus as "a hard-to-define yet distinctive core of songs, albums and artists that branched out widely from the [Uncle] Tupelo base."[77] Similarly, a closer examination of these historical artifacts now provides a catalogue of who (and what) were considered to be alt.country.

Using the covers of *No Depression* in its first two years as a sample, the magazine featured bands such as Son Volt and Wilco (both split from the band Uncle Tupelo) that incorporated punk, rock, and country into their music. Also country music legends were featured, such Dolly Parton, Loretta Lynn, and Merle Haggard; and bluegrass stars Ricky Skaggs and Ralph Stanley. These artists, often venerated by the country music establishment, were not commercially viable during the "boom" of commercial country music in the 1990s.[78] By claiming these artists, *No Depression* established a direct connection to country music history and tradition, while also authenticating its own project, just as the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band and Uncle Tupelo had benefited from an association with the Carter Family on their projects. In addition to established country artists, the first two issues of *No Depression* featured many lesser-known bands on a smaller touring circuit, with overlap with college and indie rock bands,

[75] Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock, eds., *No Depression: An Introduction to Alternative Country Music, Whatever That Is* (Nashville: Dowling Press, 1998) and *The Best of No Depression: Writing About American Music* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005). *An Introduction* also includes a discography of 101 influential alt.country albums.
[76] Issue No. 4 in Summer of 1996, the subtitle for the magazine was "The Alternative Country (Whatever That Is) Quarterly. The magazine switched to a bi-monthly publication schedule with Issue No. 5 in September–October 1996.
[77] Peter Blackstock and Grant Alden, "Hello Stranger – Editor's Note," *No Depression*, Fall 1995.
[78] Joli Jensen, "Taking Country Music Seriously: Coverage of the 1990s Boom," 183–201.

and several Seattle and west coast bands. In this case, the magazine builds on its claims of taste established with its association with legitimate country artists to define and construct the generic boundaries of alternative country.

In 1998, *No Depression* editors Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock published an anthology of features from the magazine. In the preface to *No Depression: An Introduction to Alternative Country Music (Whatever That Is)*, Alden and Blackstock write, "The phrase "No Depression" is now tossed around by many of the same hands that dealt "grunge" when we started the magazine. This book, and the magazine we still lovingly labor to produce, are as much definition as we're prepared to offer."[79] While the editors state a reluctance in defining "alternative country," the handpicked collection of essays serves as a published statement of their definition of alternative country.

Emphasizing the broad nature of this music, Alden and Blackstock continue, "The book is intended as a primer, as an introduction to permutations of traditional American music for which there is no radio format (Americana comes closest), almost no television coverage and modest distribution. And yet the musicians persevere, writing amazing songs and touring clubs across the country to slowly increasing crowds."[80] This statement highlights the grassroots nature of this music, emphasizing songwriting and touring, while also implying the select nature of the audiences who would see these persevering musicians on tour. Further, the statement speaks to ideas of authenticity associated with rock and the importance of touring and playing live shows, while also touching on one of country music's traditional constructions of authenticity, the working-class musician.

[79] Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock, "Preface," in *No Depression: An Introduction to Alternative Country Music (Whatever That Is)*, eds. Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock (Nashville: Dowling Press, 1998), 8.
[80] Alden and Blackstock, "Preface," 8.

Finally, the editors describe the anthology as "incomplete," but one that attempts "to strike a balance that is representative both of the music and of the magazine," and notes that the reader "will discover an assortment of artists who are either too old, too loud or too eccentric for country radio. Out there in the margins, that's where some of the most rewarding music is to be found."[81] The anthology contains thirty-seven feature articles taken from the pages of *No Depression* the magazine. Several artists that appear are associated with Texas, and/or older country music stars from a past era. Acoustic and old-time groups are also featured, along with several bands known for blending country and rock; of course, the two bands that resulted from Uncle Tupelo's split, Wilco and Son Volt, are present.[82]

As a representative of three years of the magazine's work, this particular collection reinforces and solidifies a canon of artists, despite the editors' disclaimers. However, the included discography of 101 albums expands the roster. This larger list of artists contains a heavy dose of classic country music, featuring historic albums dating back to the origins of recorded country music, including the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Indeed, approximately sixty percent of the list is historic with a strong representation of country music legends, along with many albums from alternative country music artists of past decades.

In 1999, *Exposed Roots: The Best of alt.country* (K-tel 6428-2, 1999) was released.[83] Although the album was not an official *No Depression* album, *No Depression* editors Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock provided the liner notes, which features twenty-four tracks and

[81] Alden and Blackstock, "Preface," 8.
[82] Alden and Blackstock, "Preface," in *No Depression: An Introduction to Alternative Country Music (Whatever That Is)*, 8.
[83] K-tel released this double disc album. Formed in 1966, K-tel was the original "As seen on TV" company, selling items ranging from non-stick frying pans to knives. The company also sold compilation albums featuring "various artists," by theme, genre, or concept. See Philip Kives, "About the Founder," http://www.ktel.com/about.php (accessed September 26, 2014); and Michael Catalano, "K-Tel Records – The Spotify of the 70s," http://www.forbes.com/sites/michelecatalano/2013/02/20/k-tel-records-the-spotify-of-the-70s/ (accessed September 26, 2014).

artists who demonstrate that "country music is a strong old tree, [with] each new generation seeking to plant its fruit in fresh and fertile soil."[84] Nine artists overlap with the *No Depression* anthology, and nearly all artists on the album appear on the discography. This compilation continues the magazine's efforts to historicize alt.country with its continual references to music history (Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn, the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers), yet also identifying the genre's connections to punk ("country music's distant cousin, punk rock).[85] Alden and Blackstock provide a description and justification of each track, further solidifying the sonic boundaries of *No Depression*'s alt.country. Nearly half of the artists on this album appeared on a previous compilation, indicating the success and importance of regional compilations in constituting the genre. Both Johnny Cash and Gram Parsons receive patron saint status, as the former is described as "influencing the fundamental spirit of alt.country" more than another other artist, "with the possible exception of Willie Nelson," and Parsons is lauded for his "musical legacy that would multiply in significance over the decades to come."[86]

Although *No Depression* promoted a broad definition of alt.country with its epigram "whatever that is," the anthology and compilation album served to intensify the canonization of contemporary alt.country artists begun in the pages of the magazine. These projects also identify with particular musicians associated with country music history, along with key contributors to alternative country music history, staking a claim as the true heirs of country music's legacy, as opposed to Nashville's version of country music. Finally, these projects reinforced alt.country's identification with punk rock through direct claims and statements and by emphasizing various artists' punk backgrounds or approaches aligned with punk.

[84] Grant Alden and Peter Blackstock, liner notes to *Exposed Roots: The Best of alt.country* (K-tel 6428-2, 1999).
[85] Alden and Blackstock, liner notes to *Exposed Roots*.
[86] Alden and Blackstock, liner notes to *Exposed Roots*.

Both *No Depression* and *Gavin* framed alt.country as separate from mainstream country, while working to associate the new genre with older, traditional, more "authentic" forms of country music. *Gavin* emphasized the importance of live music and touring as a financial benefit from a marketing perspective, while *No Depression* used this consideration to draw connections to the emerging genre's aesthetic and ideological values, particularly a DIY ethos associated with punk and indie rock. In addition to *No Depression*'s references to punk, alt.country's relationship with punk rock or post-punk has been reinforced in journalistic and academic discourse. In *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide & Directory*, David Goodman cites Uncle Tupelo's importance in leading the 1990s alt.country movement, and further recognizes their "contemporary punk influences" and their eclectic sound that drew on many sources, including punk.[87] In *Country Music, U.S.A.*, country music historian Bill Malone alludes to the "edge and vitality" associated with alt.country music, while listing several alt.country artists' punk influences.[88] Following a brief discussion of punk and its legacy, including punk and post-punk, alternative, grunge, and indie rock, I examine such claims regarding alt.country's punk influences and identity and clarify them, suggesting alt.country followed these genres in aesthetics, political ideology, and modes of production and consumption more than in musical style.

Punk, DIY, and Indie Rock

Like alt.country, punk refers to both an historical movement and also a particular style of rock music. Acknowledging the difficulties of putting boundaries upon punk, Richard Sabin defines it as "a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic

[87] Goodman, *Modern Twang,* 215.
[88] Bill Malone, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 451.

statement…[with] its primary manifestation in music."[89] Its origins are generally considered to be in the 1970s in both the United States and Britain, and is frequently discussed in terms of emerging in opposition to some form of mainstream rock, such as disco or progressive rock. The British punk movement began in London with Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols in the late 1970s, and the US version finding its roots in 1960s garage rock, with several bands playing what was essentially the musical style of punk rock before there was a term or classification for it.[90] Sabin also notes "identifiable attitudes" associated with punk, including "an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with a stress on 'workingclass credibility'); and a belief in spontaneity and 'doing it yourself'."[91]

Musically, punk is characterized by simple chord structures and challenging and confrontational lyrics, as evidenced by bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones. Emphasizing the DIY spirit of punk music-making, this simplicity is evident in the oft-cited punk fanzine from late 1970s England, showing pictures of three guitar chords, stating, "This is a chord, this is another chord, this is a third, NOW FORM A BAND."[92] Songs were short with aggressive, high-speed guitar playing, often partly-yelled vocals, and confrontational lyrics and performance.[93] Visually, punks were marked by a particular style and fashion, and eventually

[89] Roger Sabin, "Introduction" in *Punk Rock: So What?*, ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.
[90] Richard Middleton, et al., "Pop," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6:535-7; William Ruhlmann, "Malcolm McLaren, biography," *allmusic.com*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/malcolm-mclaren-mn0000667020/biography (accessed October 1, 2013).
[91] Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What?*, 2–3.
[92] Angela Rodel, "Extreme Noise Terror: Punk Rock and the Aesthetics of Badness" in *Bad Music*, ed. Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno (New York: Routledge, 2004), 238. This zine is referenced in nearly any historical account of punk.
[93] Rodel, "Extreme Noise Terror; Richard Middleton, et al., "Pop," 6:535–7.

items such as ripped clothing, tattoos, piercings, and metal-studded accessories, occasionally accompanied by a mohawk and/or non-conventional hair color came to signify punk.[94]

The year 1979 is often noted as punk's ending date, but punk's legacy continued into the 1980s.[95] Punk's musical style was continually employed, often referred to as post-punk. Post-punk music enjoyed limited commercial success, yet it persisted through the 1980s as the strand of music that eventually became marketed as ''alternative'' music, forging its way into the mainstream in the 1990s, becoming highly influential on popular music's aesthetic.[96] Further, punk's revolutionary impact on the music industry was providing a new model of production and consumption, as punk's do-it-yourself aesthetic motivated independent record labels to challenge major labels' hegemonic control of the music industry.[97] Indeed, DIY and opposition to mainstream corporate institutions stand out as the primary lasting values of punk that persisted in indie rock.

The term "indie rock" was first used around 1980 in the United Kingdom in relation to the first charts for independent artists. A somewhat vague genre, its practitioners are generally characterized by some degree of separation from the large corporations operating major labels. Indie rock contains many subgenres that embrace aspects of pop, rock and other divergent styles equally.[98] What is now called "indie rock" in the U.S. grew out the "alternative" or "college rock" scenes of the 1980s, as bands such as R.E.M. and Soul Asylum, categorized as

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[94] Charles M. Young, "Rock Is Sick and Living in London," *Rolling Stone*, October 20, 1977; Bradford Martin, "'… And You Voted For That Guy': 1980s Post-Punk and Oppositional Politics," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Vol. 16 Issue 2 (August 2004), 150; See also Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Taylor & Francis e-Library ed. (London: Routledge, 2012).
[95] Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What?*, 3. Allan F. Moore notes that by 1977, "punk had been stylistically co-opted into the New Wave." Allan F. Moore, "Punk," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6:648–50.
[96] Bradford Martin, "… And You Voted For That Guy," 143.
[97] Moore, "Punk," 6:648–50.
[98] Vincent J. Novara and Stephen Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock (1980–2005)." *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 65, no. 4 (June 2009): 816.

"alternative" or "alternative rock" became mainstream. Similarly, grunge, a subgenre of 1990s alternative rock, originally described underground Seattle band the Melvins, who played a slow, punk metal musical style, but came to refer to any band that blended heavy metal and punk. Many of these early grunge bands were based in Seattle and were associated with that city's Sub Pop independent record label, although bands in other cities were also soon categorized as grunge. Grunge's musical style came to be characterized by distorted guitar sounds and the intensity of heavy metal and punk, yet generally avoided heavy metal's guitar solos and other signifiers of virtuosity.[99] The style came to national and international attention when Seattle band Nirvana's album *Nevermind* was released in 1991 and achieved enormous commercial success.[100]

Formed in 1987, Nirvana was one of Seattle's most popular underground bands, and the band's debut album, *Bleach* (1989) released on Sub Pop, following a lo-fi aesthetic was recorded for hundreds of dollars.[101] After a successful tour with the New York punk/noise rock band Sonic Youth as a supporting act, Nirvana eventually signed with DGC Records, a subsidiary of Geffen Records, and released, *Nevermind*, in 1991. The album's first single and music video for "Smells Like Teen Spirit" exceeded the record label's expectations and was a hit.[102] *Nevermind* sold 3.5 million copies in the last four months of 1991 alone and reached the top of Billboard's sales charts by early 1992.[103]

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[99] Robert Walser, "Grunge," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3:628; "Grunge," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/style/grunge-ma0000002626 (accessed October 1, 2013).
[100] Walser, "Grunge," 3:628; "Grunge," *Allmusic*.
[101] Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-fi Culture* (New York: Marion Boyar, 2005), 273. Ryan Moore. "Nirvana," *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6:135.
[102] R. Moore, "Nirvana," 6:135.
[103] Martin, "…And You Voted for That Guy," 164.

As grunge broke into the mainstream, the music industry embraced formerly underground bands, mainstream fashion promoted clothing and styles once associated with underground and indie music, and "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was proclaimed as a generational anthem by popular press.[104] Underground scenes and participants, generally opposed to mainstream music on principle, were faced with issues of "selling out," commercialism, and authenticity, as elements of punk were appropriated by dominant culture. As Duncombe notes, in this cultural moment, the great dilemma facing the underground was the question: "[Was] it preferable to proselytize the good news - even via the commercial culture industry - or to stay small and pure and avoid "selling out?"[105] As grunge became categorized more broadly as "alternative," the underground certainly had to question "what it was meant to be an alternative to."[106] Nirvana became a potent symbol within local, underground, scenes, representing the mainstreaming of punk and post-punk that followed the band's success and *Nevermind*'s wake.[107]

Guitar-driven grunge and alternative rock became the sound of mainstream rock, and indie rock came to describe music based upon experimentation and, also somewhat ironically, straight-ahead pop sensibilities. Novara and Henry note the emergence of a distinct indie rock sound that includes "the careful balancing of pop accessibility with noise, playfulness in manipulating pop music formulae, sensitive lyrics masked by tonal abrasiveness and ironic posturing, a concern with "authenticity," and the cultivation of a "regular guy" (or girl) image," while also acknowledging indie rock's connection to punk. They clarify,

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[104] Dave Markey, *1991: The Year Punk Broke* (Santa Monica, CA: Geffen Records, 1992), DVD. This documentary film chronicles the Nirvana/Sonic Youth tour of 1991. The title references punk breaking into the mainstream, but also plays on the other sense of the word "broke," indicating "malfunction," and represents "the general anxiety about co-optation, and fear of compromising artistic integrity that accompanied mainstream success." Martin, "… And You Voted For That Guy," 164.
[105] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso Press, 1997), 163.
[106] Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-fi Culture*, 275.
[107] For more on Nirvana, see Michael Azerrad, *Come As You Are: the Story of Nirvana* (Three Rivers Press: New York, 1993) and Everett True, *Nirvana: the Biography* (Da Capo Press: New York, 2007).

> The sound also results from indie rock's appropriation of punk rock's DIY aesthetic, which features a range of tropes including resistance to commercialism, the glorification of amateurism, and the use of vintage instruments and recording equipment. What generally distinguishes indie rock from punk is that where the latter favors an aggressive, frequently offensive, in-your-face quality, the former is commonly less overtly confrontational and challenging, and is often characterized rather by withdrawal and irony."[108]

This ironic embrace of simplistic pop music follows what scholar Emily I. Dolan identifies as kitsch in indie rock. In defining kitsch in relation to popular music, Dolan notes the importance of temporality, stating, "[I]t can arise out of a kind of aesthetic distance. It crops up when old forms that were once steeped with meaning are reused out of their primary context; the original force and meaning are thus drained away and replaced with ossified stereotypes."[109] She continues,

> In other words, kitsch arises from kind of aesthetic time travel, when past art forms are resuscitated, but brought back to life in a new context where they have no place or function…. [M]usic can manifest kitsch formally – instances where composers employ older forms or topoi as referents to the past (neo-classicism, for instance, might sometimes be called kitsch). Within popular music especially, kitsch can be evoked not just through use of 'decontextualised forms', but also through vocal timbre, instrumentation, arrangement and production values.[110]

A successful deployment of kitsch involves a certain self-awareness and an amount of insider knowledge; without prior knowledge of past art forms and what is signified, kitsch is ineffective. Arguably, kitsch is most apparent in indie rock's preference for a "lo-fi" sound, and the use of old technologies and odd, outdated instruments. However, this can also apply to the use of "disliked" instruments, such as accordion or banjo, or the adoption of a marginalized, "unpopular" genre, such as country music.

[108] Novara and Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock," 816–17.
[109] Emily I. Dolan, "'... This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth': Indie Pop and Kitsch Authenticity," *Popular Music* 29 no. 3 (October 2010): 463.
[110] Dolan, "'... This Little Ukulele Tells the Truth'," 463–4.

Local Scenes and Compilation Albums

Indie rock became associated with "a more-or-less self-sustaining network of communities, or "scenes," of artists that coalesced most frequently in major cities or small college towns," and alternative and grunge eventually became a mainstream radio format, often referred to as "modern rock."[111] Reaching maturity in the mid-to-late 1990s, the American indie rock community became relatively established, having developed its own commercial infrastructure.[112] This infrastructure originated primarily in association with college music scenes, with the growth of college radio and the development of college charts in publications such as *Rolling Stone*, but grew to include a trade paper, *CMJ*, and its associated music festival, local alternative weekly newspapers and magazines, low-budget fanzines (also called 'zines), and independent record labels.[113] David Hesmonhalgh highlights this aspect, referring to indie's connections to "the form of industrial organization behind it," and notes that as a genre, indie "claimed itself to be superior to other genres not only because it was more relevant or authentic to the youth who produced and consumed it (which was what rock had claimed) but also because it was based on new relationships between creativity and commerce."[114] He also notes that punk activists took the idea of "independence" and politicized it, while indie companies "saw independents as a means of reconciling the commercial nature of pop with the goal of artistic

[111] Novara and Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock," 818; Steven Hyden, "Indie Rock's Tuneful Death Rattle," *Grantland*, http://www.grantland.com/story/_/id/9750765/haim-days-gone-indie-rock-death-rattle (accessed October 2, 2013). Hyden notes that alternative had a different meaning in the 1990s, and that it was used to describe bands and artists "who were perceived to be, at least in spirit, non-mainstream. From the beginning, the term was problematic…. It was a classification based more on aesthetics and posturing than music."
[112] Novara and Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock," 818; See also Holly Kruse, "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture," *Popular Music* Vol. 12 No. 1 (Jan. 1993), 33–41.
[113] Kruse, "Subcultural Identity in Alternative Music Culture," 33.
[114] David Hesmondhalgh, "Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," *Cultural Studies* 13:1 (1999), 34. The author refers specifically to British punk, post-punk, and indie; however, the discussion is applicable to United States counterparts.

autonomy for musicians… and [recognized that] independent ownership of production and distribution was the most effective route towards democratization of the industry."[115]

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, forms of country music began to appear in various music scenes across the country. Often following indie rock's proclivity for kitsch and irony, bands donned western wear and sang hokey and humorous country songs, while others embraced the genre's tradition and musical styles. As this surge of country music caught on, festivals and compilation albums promoted various regional scenes, while independent record labels promoted local bands. Following the infrastructure of indie rock, alt.country gained traction throughout the 1990s. Along with these local scenes, several compilation albums proved to be highly influential on alt.country's grassroots development. Following California's continued role in alternative country music, one of the earliest of these compilations emerged from Los Angeles. Titled *A Town South of Bakersfield* and filled with country and roots music, this series consisted of three volumes released in 1986, 1988, and 1993. These albums feature alternative country artists associated with California, Texas, and beyond, such as Rosie Flores and Dale Watson, while also introducing newer artists at that time, including Dwight Yoakam and Lucinda Williams.

Historian David Goodman notes an ironic "interest in "redneck"/"white trash" culture that generated a number of musical acts and events celebrating and/or exploiting this stereotype," and compilations from New York and Washington D.C. were forerunners with their series, Rig Rock and the Big D.C. Jamboree, respectively. Jeremy Tepper founded Diesel Only 1990 "with the exclusive purpose of pressing 45s meant for truck stop jukeboxes."[116] Eventually, Diesel Only released three volumes, *Rig Rock Juke Box* (1992), *Rig Rock Truck Stop* (1993), and *Rig Rock Deluxe: A Musical Salute to the American Truck Driver* (1996). Tepper, a member of the

[115] Hesmondhalgh, "Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," 34–7.
[116] Johnny Loftus, review of Rig Rock Juke Box, *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/album/rig-rock-jukebox-mw0000080873 (accessed January 25, 2014).

band World Famous Bluejays who appear multiple times on the compilations, collected singles from New York area alt.country bands for the first two albums, while the third album features alternative country regulars from across the country, including BR5-45, Steve Earle, the Bottle Rockets, Don Walser, and Kelly Willis.[117]

By the mid-90s, other compilations appeared representing scenes from Atlanta, North Carolina's Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill), Austin, Texas, and beyond. According to Atlanta musician Slim Chance (the stage name for James Kelly), Atlanta's Redneck Underground was "a consortium of bands and musical acts that played music influenced in some way by Southern culture, or more specifically, country music," including Slim Chance and the Convicts and the Diggers.[118] Consisting primarily of the Austin Avenue Buffet in Inman Park, an "archetypal redneck dive bar," in the late 1980s, and the Star Bar in Little Five Points by the early 1990s, the Redneck Underground eventually hosted an annual music festival called Bubbapalooza in 1993.[119]

Bubbapalooza was the brainchild of musician Greg Smalley, and featured a collection of bands that aligned with the attitude and style of the Redneck Underground. Eventually, Smalley compiled an album of Bubbapalooza bands, and in 1995 Atlanta label Sky Records released *Bubbapalooza Volume One: Chronicle of the Redneck Underground*. The liner notes of this album echo Kelly's description of the Redneck Underground, noting "an affinity for old-time country music, a disdain for the hyper-glitz of the contemporary Nashville scene, and an attitude

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[117] Goodman, *Modern Twang,* 240.
[118] James Kelly, "What It Was, Was Country: A Memoir of the Atlanta Redneck Underground," *Georgia Music Magazine* (Spring 2006), http://georgiamusicmag.com/what-it-was-was-country-a-memoir-of-the-atlanta-redneck-underground/ (accessed January 24, 2014). See this article for a detailed history of the Redneck Underground.
[119] James Kelly, "What It Was, Was Country." The music festival Bubbapalooza took its name as a play on the popular "Lollapalooza" tour that had begun in 1991, featuring alternative rock, post-punk, and rap, along with performance and visual art, created by Jane's Addiction singer Perry Farrell.For more information on the music festival Lollapalooza, see Bradford Martin, ""…And You Voted For That Guy": 1980s Post-Punk and Oppositional Politics," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* (August 2004), Vol. 16, No. 2, 167.

that's part sardonic hee haw, part serious rebel yell," while also being "preoccupied with classic American character and themes: truckers and strippers, the lovelorn and the lawless, Saturday night sock-hopping and drowning in your beer."[120] The album features several live tracks, and includes a range of rockabilly tunes, honky-tonk, and country rock, with a fare amount of humor throughout. [121]

Although the Redneck Underground was established in Atlanta, other bands from North Georgia made appearances at Redneck Underground events, such as the Star Bar's "Trailer Trash Night" and Bubbapalooza. The Athens, Georgia bar scene, known for alternative bands R.E.M. and the B-52s hosted a fair amount of country and southern rock throughout the 1990s, including Redneck GReece Delux, the Star Room Boys and the Drive-by Truckers, and was generally included broadly was part of the Redneck Underground.[122]

In *Modern Twang: An Alternative Country Music Guide and Directory*, David Goodman's appendix of "Compilations/Soundtracks" includes nearly one hundred albums with dates from 1987 to 1998, including international albums from locations as far away as the United Kingdom and Sweden.[123] While no compilations emerged from "the heartland," cities like Minneapolis, Columbus, Ohio, and Belleville, Illinois produced key bands that became important contributors to alt.country, including the Jayhawks and Uncle Tupelo, along with Chicago's Bloodshot Records.

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[120] Gregory Dean Smalley, liner notes to *Bubbapalooza Volume One: Chronicle of the Redneck Underground* (SKY 3105-2, 1995).
[121] Kelly, "What It Was, Was Country." Following Smalley's death in 1996, a second compilation was released in 1998 on Athens-based Ghostmeat Records, titled *Bubbapalooza Volume Two: A Tribute To Gregory Dean Smalley* (GDS01).
[122] Sydney Dechert and George H. Lewis, "The Drive-by Truckers and the Redneck Underground: A Subcultural Analysis" in *Country Music Annual 2002,* eds. Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson (Lexingtin, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 130–50.
[123] Goodman, *Modern Twang*, 236–42.

Conclusion

Following punk's legacy, alt.country was a manifestation of indie rock with its scene-based approach to DIY music making, adherence to oppositional politics, and embrace of irony. Beginning as a grassroots local endeavor in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alt.country sprang up in locations across North America, with compilation albums often produced by independent record labels representing these scenes. These scenes and infrastructure followed and even overlapped with the "self-sustaining network of communities" of indie rock, and bands and artists took advantage of infrastructure associated with college rock and alternative musics.[124] Alt.country employed a model of small-scale production and consumption that originated with punk and its DIY ethos, resulting in an infrastructure that flourished "underground," outside of the realm of major record labels and corporate radio.

As noted earlier, one of punk's "identifiable attitudes" was a class-based politics, in some cases ranging from leftist to radical.[125] In considering post-punk's lack of activism and public expressions of radical politics, Bradford Martin argues,

> [P]ost-punk empowered its audiences by enabling communities of fans to explore identities in opposition to mainstream social and political mores… Opposition resided at the core of the identities fans of post-punk explored, opposition to mainstream culture, values, and politics. While an oppositional identity did not necessarily produce oppositional activism, post-punk helped its fans maintain attitudes of resistance in their everyday lives that constituted an important critique of the mainstream."[126]

Similarly, alt.country fans and practitioners explored and enacted oppositional identities through an expression of taste, and by extension, consumption. Fox and Ching note, "[T]he refusal to automatically accept mainstream music also connects alt.country to a critique of majority politics, particularly since September 11, 2001," when mainstream country rose to the cultural

[124] Novara and Henry, "A Guide to Essential American Indie Rock," 818; Kruse, "Subcultural Identity," 33.
[125] Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What?* 4.
[126] Martin, "…And You Voted for That Guy," 144–5.

fore, notably expressing conservative sentiment. They further suggest that liberal politics is often articulated as a question of taste, and identify a connection between alt.country and alt.politics. The alt.country practitioner and fan, then are set apart as sophisticated and intellectual, in opposition to a lowbrow, mainstream country fan who is backward and disenfranchised.[127]

The enactment of an oppositional identity via consumption and taste presents an irony that pervades alt.country, as it strived to promote itself as "a commodified version of authenticity."[128] Fox and Ching suggest an ironic approach to the conflict between commodification and authenticity in alt.country, viewing irony in this case as a means "to both recognize and refuse the dictates of advanced capitalism."[129] Approaching country music from a self-conscious position, those who produced and promoted alt.country claimed authenticity as a means to evade the contaminating effect of commercialism. By evoking discourses of art and tradition, alt.country music can be distinguished from "the mere products of the mainstream industry."[130]

Finally, just as indie rock favors irony and kitsch, alt.country employed both to varying degrees. Defining kitsch as a resuscitation of past art forms and bringing them back to life in a new context where they have no place or function, the revivalist nature of alt.country can be understood as kitsch, with an adherence to styles of country music from the 1940s and '50s. Further, the embrace of a traditionally rural, lowbrow, and marginalized form of popular music,

[127] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes,* 12–13. The power of alt.country's association with liberal politics can be seen when mainstream country group, the Dixie Chicks, were embraced by alt.country following lead singer Natalie Maines' denunciation of then President George W. Bush. Mainstream country fans boycotted the group.
[128] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes,* 4.
[129] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes,* 4
[130] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes,* 8.

particularly its most abject characteristics, by urban, middle class youth can be read as kitsch, while arguably reinforcing the hierarchical power of the dominant class.[131]

Alt.country can be understood as the 1990s version of alternative country, following similar hybrid styles, such as country rock, progressive country, and cowpunk. Indeed, the genre's two key publications, *No Depression* and the *Gavin* Americana chart, framed alt.country as a form of country music, connecting alt.country to country music history. The genre was also characterized by its connections to punk as a musical style, but also because many bands and artists' had backgrounds in punk and independent music. However, alt.country's relationship to punk went beyond these connections, as alt.country functioned within the model of indie rock, both ideologically and in practice. It is in this context that Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warshaw formed Bloodshot Records, and why Miller proclaims his record label as an indie rock label.[132]

[131] Fox and Ching, *Old Roots, New Routes,* 3–5. See Barbara Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) for a discussion of the abject in country music.
[132] Rob Miller, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 16, 2011.

CHAPTER THREE

"A GREAT MUSIC TOWN": CHICAGO EXCEPTIONALISM, LIVE MUSIC, AND BLOODSHOT RECORDS' CHICAGO SOUND

Bloodshot Records' co-owners, Rob Miller and Nan Warshaw, insist that their record label could not exist in any city other than Chicago. They attribute much of Bloodshot's continued success to various characteristics of the city's music culture that are tied to the city's punk and indie rock scene, such as an established infrastructure, the absence of major record labels, collaboration among musicians, and supportive musical communities. Miller and Warshaw also acknowledge the importance of geography, space, and place as a part of and constructing the record label's identity, and these factors, along with Chicago's music culture, have influenced Bloodshot Records' business and musical practices.

In this chapter, I examine the claims made by Bloodshot's founders regarding Chicago's music culture and its exceptionalism, which are echoed by others associated with the music scene and the record label. I also consider Bloodshot's connections to Chicago's live music scene, and examine how these claims are related to the idea of a uniquely Chicago musical identity, characterized by a commitment to live performances and liveness, community, historical continuity, and separation from mainstream popular culture. The record label's origins were firmly established in Chicago and key albums in Bloodshot's formative history reveal the importance of the city in the record label's sonic identity. I draw connections between this sonic identity, the notion of a "Chicago sound," and the persona and work of recording engineer, Steve

Albini. Whether or not the music scene in Chicago is unique in ways described and proclaimed by its participants, Bloodshot Records has both enacted and reinforced this Chicago identity through its business and musical practices and its sonic identity.

Chicago Exceptionalism

In my interviews with Bloodshot's current co-owners, Rob Miller and Nan Warshaw, they unapologetically identifid with the city of Chicago. They claimed the city as part of their record label's identity, emphasizing the absence of major record labels, the city's geographical location, and the city's musical infrastructure as unique attributes. Both Miller and Warshaw acknowledge a hard working, supportive, and cooperative musical community as a hallmark of Chicago music, a reputation that developed and flourished in the city's punk and indie rock scenes, and both co-owners view this as an important model for Bloodshot's business and musical practices.

Describing the city's imprint on Bloodshot's identity, Nan Warshaw told me,

> I would say Chicago is our home, and Bloodshot could not have come out of any other city and be anything similar. I mean, we exist because we are a part of the Chicago alternative underground music scene… [T]here was certainly this attitude in Chicago, a very DIY attitude that you could just do what you wanted to do yourself, and it followed the whole punk rock attitude also, where you just do it and figure out how to do while you're doing, and that's how it should be and you don't have to follow someone else's rules.[1]

She addressed familiar values associated with punk and underground rock music scenes generally, but attributed a particular DIY work-oriented approach specifically to Chicago. She continued,

> I think partly because the major labels never got a stronghold in Chicago, and that we've always had all the pieces for a great live music scene… [S]ince the late '80s, early '90s, there's always been supportive live music venues that treated the bands fairly and were

[1] Nan Warshaw, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 28, 2011.

> there for the right reasons. There's been supportive press that writes about the local scene, and then there's been good college radio and community, public radio, and even commercial radio, as good as that gets. And then there's also been independent record stores. And having all of those pieces in place makes it possible for a scene to thrive. And if you think of the thriving scenes from other cities, they have all those pieces.[2]

Highlighting modes of production and infrastructure, Warshaw implied that major record labels and the mainstream model of music production and distribution are the antithesis of a "great live music scene." She attributed the scene's success, and ultimately Bloodshot's success, to community and social networks, and more broadly to positive characteristics of the city of Chicago.

Co-founder Rob Miller reiterated the idea of a supportive and collaborative community, placing great importance on these social networks. In an interview with me, he stated, "[W]e never would have thrived anywhere else… [T]here's always new talent coming through. There's always all these people who are going to these shows, and being exposed to different influences… All the labels that cropped up around the same time [as Bloodshot] – Drag City, Thrill Jockey, Touch and Go… We all survived non-competitively."[3] He described how various artists, including Jon Langford and Neko Case, recorded for various labels and many projects, and how Bloodshot as a label promoted this sort of collaboration. He continued, "We weren't sitting in our office going no, you can't record for them. It was all this organic swelling of creativity. [N]ot competitive, you know the club's aren't like you can play here if you pay us… I honestly can say, I don't think there's a better [music town]… it's a great music town."[4]

Miller also elaborated on Chicago-specific characteristics in relation to the live music scene, including practical concerns of geography and cost of living.

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[2] Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011
[3] Rob Miller, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 16, 2011.
[4] Miller, June 16, 2011.

> Chicago's a great music town, it's always been a great music town for a lot of the same things that led to this being a great indie rock [town]… same things that made this a center for blues [and country]… it makes sense: it's the middle of the country, everyone who has to tour, tours through here, a lot of people came here for jobs, a lot of people came, certainly in the 90's, a lot of people from Louisville, Lexington, Detroit, St. Louis, all these other cities… a lot of people from the Midwest and all points beyond, who didn't want to be in the industry in New York or LA, came here, 'cause it was a cheap place to live… [T]he infrastructure is great: loads of clubs run by people who love music. Lots of opportunities, and when I moved here from Detroit… I would pick up the [*Chicago*] *Reader* every week, and I couldn't believe how many different shows were going on every night.[5]

Miller contrasted "the industry" and an implied corporate approach to music, with local, grassroots efforts, while also recognizing practical concerns such as cost of living and geography.

For Warshaw and Miller, the Chicago infrastructure played a critical role in Bloodshot's existence and continued success, and their view of Chicago exceptionalism was shared by others associated with Bloodshot and the live music scene. Whether they were native to the city or simply claimed it, the belief remained that Chicago is different from other large cities in significant and meaningful ways. According to Tim Tuten, owner of music venue the Hideout, Chicago possesses a unique work ethic that has been ingrained in the city's inhabitants from its earliest days, noting the city's history of immigrants coming to the city for work.[6] Such a sentiment emphasizes Chicago's blue-collar workers and immigrant populations, including the Irish and eastern Europeans from decades past, but also resonates with the idea of a DIY approach to music-making.[7]

Warshaw echoed Tuten's identification of a Chicago work ethic, but also highlighted the practices of collaboration and information sharing,

[5] Miller, interview, June 16, 2011.
[6] Tim Tuten, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 28, 2011.
[7] Tuten, June 28, 2011; Thomas Geoghegan, "Chicago, Pride of the Rustbelt," *The New Republic*, March 25, 1985.

> Chicago has a very strong work ethic, and so it's about hard work. But I think the good thing about the 'old boys network' that's still there is that those people shared information. And it was about you share information with your peers and that's how you all do better. Maybe that's part of it.[8]

Warshaw's mention of the "old boys network" points to the insider nature of this type of collaboration and information sharing, as well as the relatively small group of individuals who were key players in this music scene. For example, Tuten recalled having a meeting with long-time club owner Bill FitzGerald. FitzGerald's Nightclub, located in a suburb of Chicago, has long been the place for country and roots-influenced bands to play.[9] Tuten shared this story with me,

> I was at Fitzgerald's one night and I asked some musicians, I'm like, "Hey, I got a bar, would you wanna play there?" And Bill FitzGerald, the owner of Fitzgerald's, was like "Hey man, who are you and what are you doing?" And I [said], "I'm Tim Tuten, I have this bar. It's called the Hideout, and I'm really influenced by you… I want it to be like, kinda like a cross between the Lounge Ax and Fitzgerald's," thinking it was like a flattering thing to tell [him] how he influenced me, while I was stealing his bands. He was like I appreciate that, but let's talk. So we need to figure this out… He asked me to come out one day and we spent a couple of hours talking… and he just told me, "Good job, you guys got a bar, and you're gonna have country bands. And that's great, and let's figure this out because a lot of these bands, they play at my bar…" He just gave me a great conversation and a great discussion about how we could work together. And that's another example, another kind of element of the Chicago music scene…when we're talking about raising bars, building the bar together.[10]

As a new business owner, Tuten's approach to booking shows was DIY and "figuring it out as he went." In the process, he broke unspoken rules about poaching talent and infringing upon another local business with similar practices and goals. While FitzGerald could have responded to Tuten with hostility, he instead chose to cooperate with him, mentoring him in the practices of booking shows and running a local music venue.

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[8] Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011.
[9] See Appendix A for a map of locations and venues discussed in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.
[10] Tuten, interview, June 28, 2011.

In an interview with musician and artist Jon Langford, he highlighted this supportive musical community in Chicago,

> I did find that here in Chicago, a really strong music community…that was really supportive of artists. It was the one place that stood out to us on [early] tours… and it was just a place where the club scene could be run by people who were enthusiasts, rather than New York and LA…[where] there were obviously places that [were] showcase clubs, embedded in the music industry structure, and then here it seemed much more kinda casual, and there was a group of friends and radio stations [and clubs].[11]

Langford identified the interpersonal and tight-knit nature of the music scene in Chicago, comprised of "a group of friends." Further, he noted the presence of music fans and enthusiasts as being a part of the infrastructure that comprised the scene, as opposed to clubs that were simply extensions of the mainstream industry concerned primarily with financial gain rather than supporting music and musicians.

Bloodshot benefited from its association with Langford, who is most well known as a member of the British punk band, the Mekons. Due to regular touring with this band and other projects, he became a regular part of the Chicago music scene in the 1980s and early '90s. Upon relocating to Chicago from Leeds, he continued participating in local music production. He produced a variety of musical projects, and collaborated with numerous Chicago musicians, including a band called Wreck for the independent Chicago record label Wax Trax!, a band called Killer Shrews with Tony Maimone from the band Pere Ubu at KingSize Sound Labs (a Chicago studio), and others, including individuals who would eventually be in the Bloodshot band, the Waco Brothers.[12] Due to his gregariousness, generosity with his time and talents, and his association with the Mekons, Langford's professional and social network includes individuals from many musical genres throughout the city and also many in the art community.

[11] Jon Langford, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 22, 2011.
[12] Langford, June 22, 2011.

All of Langford's early Bloodshot projects were collaborations with musicians associated with other projects or record labels, including the Waco Brothers and the Pine Valley Cosmonauts. Bloodshot's benefited from Langford's collaborations with the addition of recognized Chicago personnel, but also in building its reputation as a record label whose musical and business practices followed those of Chicago's musical community. Bloodshot Records identified specifically with the city and its exceptional attributes, but also enacted those attributes through its business practices beyond Jon Langford's collaborations, whether in supporting their artists to collaborate with others or in promoting albums and artists that are not part of their roster. For example, Bloodshot devotes a section of their website to "Drinking Buddies," which serves as "an avenue for artists and albums that, while we didn't release them, we love them just the same."[13] This practice reinforces Bloodshot's claims of a unique Chicago musical community, and affirms the record label's identity within that community.

Hard work, collaboration, and supportive musical communities are identified as hallmarks of the Chicago music scene. Due in part to the absence of major record labels and the city's location, the city's musical infrastructure thrived with venues, bars, radio stations, record stores, and record labels. However, the most integral component of the city's music scene was individuals who were invested in the music, rather than corporate concerns or financial gain. The unique values and practices attributed to Chicago by Bloodshot's founders, and others associated with the scene and record label, are viewed as a superior and more authentic approach to the business of music, as opposed to the dealings of an impersonal, detached, and market-driven mainstream music industry. Such practices align generally with punk scenes, and constructions

[13] Bloodshot Records, "Bloodshot Drinking Buddies," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/artist/bloodshot-drinking-buddies (accessed February 12, 2014).

of authenticity within such scenes, and views of Chicago's exceptionalism can be traced to the city's punk and underground music scene.

Bloodshot's Roots in the Chicago Live Music Scene

Just as Bloodshot Records' co-owners associated their record label with the city of Chicago, the record label's origins were in the city's punk and underground rock scene in the 1980s and early 1990s, which was comprised of bars, clubs, and music venues where like-minded music enthusiasts socialized, attended shows, and performed.[14] Bloodshot's three founders, Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warshaw were each involved in various aspects of Chicago's music infrastructure, and were also supporters of and participants in the punk scene, In identifying with this scene, Bloodshot's founders emphasized an opposition to the mainstream, the importance of small-scale production and consumption of music, and a related but equally important concern of a community of like-minded individuals.

Although all three founders were involved in this scene, Nan Warshaw was associated with important venues in the punk scene, including Club Dreamerz and Crash Palace. She described her involvement in this scene, beginning with her employment at a bar and music venue called Club Dreamerz, "the first punk bar in Wicker Park." She stated, "[W]hen I talk about Club Dreamerz being the first punk bar in Wicker Park, there were other punk bars in other neighborhoods before that but...in the '90s, Wicker Park became ground zero for alternative rock in Chicago, and Billboard called it 'Ground Zero,' that intersection of North Avenue, Milwaukee, and Damen where the Double Door is."[15] In addition to bartending or working the

[14] Andrew Bennett, "'Going Down the Pub!': The Pub Rock Scene As a Resource For the Consumption of Popular Music," *Popular Music* Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 1997): 97–108.
[15] Warshaw, interview, June 27, 2012. Wicker Park is a neighborhood in Chicago. Originally an immigrant neighborhood and centrally located, the neighborhood was known for its crime and poverty. Due to construction and

door, Warshaw also DJed various nights and booked bands for Dreamerz, and eventually took on some management responsibilities at the bar/venue.

Warshaw remembered how important Dreamerz' was to the punk and underground scene, noting it was where Nirvana played its first two shows in Chicago in 1986. Using this legendary band's history to explain the scene's history, she stated,

> [T]he first [Nirvana] show, there were like twenty of us there; and the second show, there were like forty or fifty people there; and the next time they came back, they played [large music venue] Metro...to a thousand people. And so I think it's that kind of difference when there were fifty of us seeing a band...in '86 [or] '87... At that point in Chicago, the punk scene was really small and everyone knew each other. And even if you didn't really like each other, you knew the people… I grew up with [the punk scene], so I saw [it] starting in Chicago in the late 70s and early 80s, and I'd say it was small and tight in the early to mid '80s, but then once what started as punk became commercial music then it was no longer a small underground scene."[16]

Warshaw noted the exclusive nature of both the venue and highlights the intimacy and community inherent in the smaller scene. She also recalled the value of "twenty of us" in attendance to see Nirvana before the band achieved widespread fame and commercial success, reinforcing the disdain with which punks generally viewed the band's trajectory. This view emphasizes the binary of punk and commercial music, attributing this tight-knit community's decline to the latter.

Founder Rob Miller also shares these views. He recalled a sense of dissatisfaction at the commodification of items associated with punk, alluding to the underground idea of "selling out." He stated, "I was starting to see Gap ads featuring torn up flannel on the sides of buses…and going 'This? This is what has happened? This great cultural paradigmatic shift, this

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other government interventions, the area underwent a great deal of change, gentrification, and urban renewal. See Ben Joravsky, "New Lines in an Old Battle: The Gentrification of Wicker Park," http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/new-lines-in-an-old-battle-the-gentrification-of-wicker-park/Content?oid=872550 (accessed September 26, 2014).

[16] Warshaw, interview, June 27, 2012.

is what we were quote/unquote fighting for?"[17] In referring to a "cultural paradigmatic shift," he indicated the promise of punk and DIY as alternative modes of cultural production and consumption in opposition to "global capitalism's hegemony" that eventually was co-opted by capitalism.[18] Further, he viewed a mainstream commercial clothing store, such as the Gap, using signs of a subculture to be especially insulting, particularly a subculture with which he identified. Thus, Gap using "torn up flannel" in this instance indicates the power of capitalism's hegemony by appropriating oppositional symbols into the mainstream, an appropriation that, according to underground values, is particularly inauthentic.

Beyond Club Dreamerz, several other venues played an important role in Bloodshot Records history. In explaining the connection between Chicago's punk and underground scene and the origins of Bloodshot Records, Warshaw pointed to another punk bar called Crash Palace, which later became Delilah's. She told me, "[If] you wanna talk about Bloodshot's origins related to [the punk and underground scene], Rob and I were DJing at Crash Palace (what turned into Delilah's)."[19] Although Warshaw had DJed at Dreamerz, she recalled "not [being] able to get away with" playing any traditional or country tracks for the punk crowds, but when a friend opened Crash Palace in the late '80s, she began DJing a country night on Wednesdays at that venue by the early 1990s.[20] Various individuals hosted the Wednesday night event at Crash Palace, including Al Jourgensen (of Chicago industrial metal band Ministry), Jon Langford, and Rob Miller.

[17] Miller, interview, June 16, 2011.
[18] Kevin Dunn, "'If It Ain't Cheap, It Ain't Punk': Walter Benjamin's Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Labels," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* Vol. 24, Issue 2, 217–18.
[19] Dunn, "If It Ain't Cheap," 217–18.
[20] Dunn, "If It Ain't Cheap," 217–18; Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011.

In the 1990s, the cornerstone of the indie or alternative live music scene was a bar and venue called Lounge Ax, and this location was also important in Bloodshot's early history. Julia Adams founded Lounge Ax in 1987, and in 1989, talent buyer and booking agent Sue Miller bought into the venue. Due to Miller's connections and reputation, Lounge Ax quickly rose to indie-rock prominence. Miller had managed and booked bars and venues in Chicago for many years prior, most notably at the Cubby Bear and the West End. Her connections and experience brought in bands that would otherwise have passed on Chicago, hosting bands such as the Replacements, the Minutemen and Uncle Tupelo. Lounge Ax was also an ardent supporter of local music, ranging from hardcore to experimental to bluegrass and roots. However, as reviews of the venue note, Lounge Ax "always hosted cutting-edge indie-rock."[21] The venue had a reputation of treating musicians fairly and with respect, whether famous or playing for the first time; and it was a regular hang out for local musicians.[22]

Due to the gentrification of the Lincoln Park neighborhood and rising rent costs, noise complaints from neighbors, and extreme difficulties with the city's liquor commission, Lounge Ax closed its doors on January 15, 2000.[23] Many musicians lamented the loss, noting the sense of community associated with the venue, and unique relationships with owners.[24] Jon Langford, who was a regular at Lounge Ax, reflected on the relationship between the owners and musicians, "[I]t's the personal touch; there's no difference between the club owners and the bands there. They're the same people." Local singer-songwriter Chris Mills affirmed, "Sue and Julia's respect and consideration for the bands, and their love of bands in general, radiates

[21] Anders Smith Lindall, "Last Days at Lounge Ax," *No Depression* 26 (March–April, 2000).
[22] Lindall, "Last Days at Lounge Ax;" Neal Pollack, "Lounge Axed," *Salon.com* (January 19, 2000), http://www.salon.com/2000/01/19/loungeax/singleton (accessed April 19, 2012).
[23] Sheila Burt, "Recasting the Lounge Ax," *Gapers Block* (December 21, 2009), http://gapersblock .com/transmission/2009/12/21/recasting_the_lounge_ax/ (accessed April 19, 2012).
[24] Sheila Burt, "Recasting the Lounge Ax."

through everyone who works there. Their friendship and support is why bands keep coming back."[25]

In addition to Lounge Ax, the Empty Bottle, another punk and indie rock venue, regularly booked Bloodshot bands that had a country influence, or played country music. Warshaw noted how significant this was,

> Certainly the bar to see the bands at was the Lounge Ax… I remember thinking it was some great coup to get Old 97s playing at Lounge Ax. And the Empty Bottle… I remember loving the Empty Bottle early on and spending a lot of time there and having a lot of shows there. In terms of live music clubs, Lounge Ax was kind of the be all and end all, because it was the ideal punk club to play in… They were the ones that first had some of the roots bands play there, [rather] all of the roots bands played there first. They embraced that music and that's where you first saw it live."[26]

Many of these "roots bands" that Warshaw mentioned were bands that ended up on Bloodshot's earliest albums. As Miller told me, "[T]hey gave us a chance—Sue [Miller, owner and booking agent] at Lounge Ax, Bruce [Finkelman, owner] at Empty Bottle, all these other places would just let our bands play."[27] Indeed, Bloodshot Records hosted two CD release parties featuring bands from its first album; one was held at Lounge Ax, and the other was at the Empty Bottle.

When Lounge Ax closed, much of the clientele and a many of the gigs, including country influenced bands, landed at the Hideout, and other venues such as Schuba's, Empty Bottle, and Double Door.[28] The style of music was not the primary concern at these venues, but rather an emphasis on live music, including non-mainstream music, older forms of country music, or hybrid forms that blended aspects of country, punk, and rock. Bloodshot adopted these styles and bands on their early albums, and as alt.country gained momentum and larger audiences, the

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[25] Anders Smith Lindall, "Last Days at Lounge Ax."
[26] Warshaw, interview, June 27, 2012.
[27] Miller, interview, June 16, 2011.
[28] Monica Kendrick, "The Hideout's Hiatus," *Chicago Reader* (November 16, 2000), http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-hideouts-hiatus/Content?oid=903924 (accessed May 21, 2013); Greg Kot, ""Twang And Shout," *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1996, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1996-01-25/features/9601250315_1_garth-brooks-mainstream-country-fans-commercial-country (accessed February 19, 2014).

record label also became associated with the tradition of live country music in Chicago, particularly through the band the Sundowners.

Chicago Country Music

According to Chicago music journalist Dave Hoekstra, "The Sundowners are the patron saints of Chicago's insurgent country movement."[29] With this claim, Hoekstra positions Bloodshot Records within the tradition and lineage of live country music in Chicago, which dates back to the 1920s. With its first album, *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country* (1994), Bloodshot affirmed its connection to Chicago country music by including tracks from the Sundowners. The record label conflated the traditions of punk and country with the addition of other artists and bands associated with country (and not punk) on their early albums, emphasizing shared characteristics of each, such as live performance, small-scale production and consumption, and authentic musical practices.

Chicago has been an important site in the history of country music, beginning with WLS's *National Barn Dance* in 1924. The *National Barn Dance* is often cited as a precursor to the *Grand Ole Opry*, yet the show was significant in its own right, broadcasting for over thirty-five years, and eventually in syndication on NBC for regional and national distribution in 1932; it was nationally televised on ABC for several years beginning in 1949. The Sears-Roebuck station WLS (World's Largest Store) went on the air in 1924, and broadcast a show featuring "hillbilly" music within its first week. The show's humble beginnings in a small downtown hotel featured country fiddle tunes, square dances, and a popular dance band. Sold to the bi-weekly

[29] Mark Deming, "The Sundowners," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-sundowners-mn0001434197/biography (accessed September 26, 2014).

publication the Prairie Farmer in 1928, this show became the National Barn Dance, and remained on air in some form until 1968.

The Sundowners were a Chicago country music institution for over thirty years. Comprised of lead guitarist Don Walls, rhythm guitarist and lead vocalist Bob Boyd, and steel guitarist and bass guitarist Curt Delaney, the band never had a hit. Although the band did not play outside of the city much, they performed every week four nights a week from 1959 to 1989 at a club called the Double R Ranch in the Chicago loop. Known for their matching, flashy country and western outfits, the band was a honky tonk band, playing electric instruments and performing mostly upbeat country songs meant for dancing. In the tradition of western swing, the Sundowners performed an extensive and eclectic repertory of songs that included popular songs, jazz standards, and folk tunes, in addition to country songs and country originals; and also incorporated improvised, jazz-influenced guitar solos. The Sundowners' trademark sound also featured close, three-part harmonies reminiscent of cowboy songs of the Sons of the Pioneers.[30]

The band earned a loyal cult following during their many years playing in downtown Chicago at the Double R, and many celebrity fans always made a point to see them while in Chicago, such as country stars Faron Young and Webb Pierce and baseball legend Mickey Mantle.[31] The Sundowners also served as the house band on a local television series, "American Swingaround," and appeared on the *Barn Dance* when it moved to WGN in its later years, but they made their reputation by performing live throughout their extended career. The band played a few shows throughout the 90s, but Curt Delaney died following a stroke in 1997, and Bob

[30] For more on the Sons of the Pioneers, see Douglas B. Green, "The Sons of the Pioneers," *The Southern Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1984): 52–65; and Ken Griffis, *Hear My Song: The Story of the Celebrated Sons of the Pioneers,* JEMF Special Series 5, reprint ed. (Los Angeles: The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1977).
[31] Dave Hoekstra, "The Three Decade Night of the Sundowners," *Journal of Country Music* 20 (1): 30.

Boyd succumbed to cancer in 1999. Don Walls passed away in July of 2011.[32] The Sundowners recorded a few 45s and two albums. Their self-titled album of 1980 contained western classics and was produced by Lloyd Maines, and *Chicago Country* (1988) consisted of originals written by Chicago songwriters.[33]

Warshaw acknowledged that the founders of Bloodshot were not particularly knowledgeable about the city's country music history. She shared with me,

> One thing that was interesting to me is that Rob and I were completely oblivious to the history of Chicago country music when started Bloodshot, and we learned about it as we went along. And I learned *a lot*. Eventually we put out a Sundowners record, Bloodshot revival, but when we came into this we knew very little, and I wonder how much of that influenced us indirectly.[34]

The Sundowners appear twice on the first compilation, and the Sundowners' full-length album, *Chicago Country Legends* (BS 809), was released on Bloodshot in 2003, featuring a collection of recordings from their live shows taken from primarily 1960 to 1971.[35]

Rob Miller saw the band at the Double R. This experience influenced him greatly, as he recalled his first encounter with the band, "[W]e walked in there and it was like walking into *home*, and the Sundowners were playing, and they played all night… it was all…leather and Texas, and I thought I gotta move here."[36] Jon Langford had a similar experience, and noted how meaningful his first encounter with the band was. He and some bandmates were taken to the Double R after a show they had played in Chicago in the late 1980s, and soon found themselves on stage with the Sundowners. He described the evening,

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[32] Hoekstra, "Sundowners," 35.
[33] Hoekstra, "Sundowners," 35.
[34] Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011.
[35] This album is part of the Bloodshot Revival/Soundies series, featuring vintage recordings of older country artists. Other than the Sundowners, these recordings come from acetate transcription discs of radio shows in the 1940s. The series includes nine releases, including artists such as Hank Thompson and Spade Cooley, in addition to the Sundowners. Soundies, Inc., founded by Kevin Parks in 1998, is a licensing and distribution company that deals primarily with sound recordings from the 1940s. Kevin Parks, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, July 5, 2012. For a complete listing of the albums in this series, see Appendix Two.
[36] Miller, interview, June 29, 2011.

> Those guys got us up on stage with them. They were like… we got a band here, you guys wanna come up and play… and we got up and played, and [we were] terrible… [Y]ou could tell it was a crowd of regulars, the bar, the waitresses immediately were our chums, they were coming over and getting us drinks. It was really welcoming. We went, we gotta come back here. So the next time I came back I was determined we would have learned some songs that would appeal to that Saturday night crowd… We worked the parts out, and we went in there and did three songs… They were like, whoa, you guys have improved! From that, every time I came to Chicago, I would go down there.[37]

Once Langford relocated to the city permanently, his relationship with the band grew. The Sundowners played his wedding; Bob Boyd sang on several of Langford's projects, and after Curt Delaney passed away, Langford became close friends with Curt's widow. Langford again recounted the significance of his "discovery" of the band and what they meant to him, "It was kinda like finding the Sundowners was… a little bit of luck, these guys, they never had any [commercial] success whatsoever, but it was actually… a little fragment of what I imagined America would be like… I was very proud of that connection."[38] Langford viewed the Sundowners as a representation of an idealized America, with implications of authenticity outside of the realm of commercialism and mainstream success.

Much of the narrative surrounding the Sundowners involves a workaday approach to music making, the importance of live performance, and the lack of commercial and financial reward. While the Sundowners were not at all associated with the punk and underground scene in Chicago prior to the band's encounter with Jon Langford and Bloodshot Records, this band and the tradition associated with Chicago country music were appropriated by the record label under the umbrella of "insurgent country." An emphasis on country music's historical importance in Chicago and the authenticity associated with the Sundowners complement the ideas and values associated with Chicago exceptionalism and championed by Bloodshot Records.

[37] Langford, interview, June, 22, 2011.
[38] Langford, interview, June, 22, 2011.

In addition to the Sundowners, a small community of country musicians persisted throughout the city's history, and some of these musicians and bands took advantage of the renewed interest in country music in the 1990s and became associated with "insurgent country" and Bloodshot Records, including Robbie Fulks and duo the Texas Rubies.[39] The Pennsylvania-born Robbie Fulks grew up in North Carolina and Virginia, and attended Columbia University for two years before pursuing a music career full-time.[40] After touring with Grammy-nominated bluegrass band Special Consensus as a vocalist and guitarist, Fulks left this group in 1990 to focus on writing, performing, and recording his own music. He taught at Chicago's Old Town School of Folk Music, and also hosted a monthly variety show at the venue Déjà Vu. Lasting nearly three years, this show, titled the Trailer Trash Revue, featured country music performances described by Fulks as a "theatrical…twangy rock group" with dancers.[41]

Fulks continued to play regular gigs in the city, and also assembled a band, but his country songwriting proved to be the catalyst for his career. At a time when Fulks had a day job as a paralegal in downtown Chicago, he began frequenting the Double R Ranch, and would occasionally sit in with the house band. The Sundowners played and recorded Fulks' song "Cigarette State," and considered putting the song on the first Bloodshot compilation album.[42] When Nan Warshaw contacted Fulks' about the song, he suggested his own recording of the

[39] Both of these artists, along with Bloodshot band, Moonshine Willy, appeared on a locally produced country variety show, *Jellystone's Heart of the Country*, broadcast on public access. Created and produced by Kevin Parks (also the creator and owner of Soundies, Inc.), the show was filmed before a live studio audience and featured live musical performances, storytelling, and interviews, with Parks as host "Jelly," and co-host, Wendell Gibson, as "Cheese." The set featured haybales, and western props, and the hosts dressed as stylized cowboys. Performers and audience members regularly donned cowboy hats and boots, or other markers of "country and western." Six episodes were produced over the span of approximately two years. On one of the last episodes from 1994, Nan Warshaw is noted as a guest in the audience, and information is shared regarding Bloodshot's first compilation album. Kevin Parks, July 5, 2012; Kevin Parks, *Jellystone's Heart of the Country,* episodes 1–6 (Jelly and Cheese Productions, 1992-94), VHS.

[40] Peter Applebome, "It's Off the Map, but It's His Country, Right or Wrong," *New York Times*, October 15, 2000; Robbie Fulks, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, July 7, 2011.

[41] Peter Margasak, "He's a Little Bit Country," *Chicago Reader*, October 2, 1997; Shannon Brown, "A Chat with Robbie Fulks: Country's Kingpin of Clever," *Outlaw Magazine*, June 24, 2012.

[42] Peter Margasak, "Robbie Fulks: Country Without Borders," *The Journal of Country Music* 21, no. 3 (2000): 7.

song for the album that he had done with friend and recording engineer Steve Albini. Warshaw and the Bloodshot founders agreed, and Fulks' recording of "Cigarette State" is the sixth track on *For a Life of Sin*.[43] Fulks appears on the second compilation, *Hell-bent*, and eventually released his full-length debut album on Bloodshot in 1996.

Kelly Kessler, a native Kentuckian, is another musician with a background in country music. When she relocated to Chicago in the 1980s, she connected with other displaced individuals from the Appalachian region (specifically Kentucky and West Virginia), including Jane Baxter Miller. This group would often meet up for meals that would end up in music making, eventually resulting in Kessler and Baxter Miller forming a duo called the Texas Rubies. Singing Appalachian tunes, old-time, and older country tunes, they began busking in the subway, which eventually led to gigs at various clubs and venues in the early 1990s, performing regularly at Club Lower Links, a bar/coffeehouse known for poetry, performance art, and cabaret performances.[44]

In an interview with me, Kessler discussed how the Texas Rubies began playing gigs out. Kessler recalled that live country music was not a regular occurrence in the city, "At that time, you could still find little blue collar bars that still had great country juke boxes. But they were quickly evaporating; there were only a couple, three places on the north side where you could hear live country music. It's hard to overstate how unfashionable it was. It was wildly unfashionable."[45] As live country music gained popularity in the city, Kessler became acquainted with individuals associated with Bloodshot through live music events and art shows in the city,

[43] Fulks knew of Warshaw through country music and her weekly DJ gig at Crash Palace. He recalled, "[S]he played country music every Wednesday night, and so I'd go down and hear it sometimes. And maybe my world was just too provincial, but for me at that time to be able to go into a bar and hear a Hank Thompson or Louvin Brothers songs at like 1,000 decibels in a bar in a big city on Lincoln Avenue was really thrilling for me." Robbie Fulks, interview, July 7, 2011.
[44] Kelly Kessler, interview by the author, Nashville, TN, October 27, 2012.
[45] Kessler, October 27, 2012.

and the Texas Rubies appear on two of Bloodshot's compilations. The Texas Rubies disbanded in the mid-90s, and although the duo did not record a full-length album on Bloodshot, Kessler recalled that the record label helped to provide more opportunities for live country music in the city.[46]

Live country music in Chicago experienced a resurgence in the mid to late 1990s, due in large part to Bloodshot Records. Lawrence Peters is a Chicago musician and was an employee and booking assistant at the Lounge Ax in the late 1990s, and worked at the Hideout in the early 2000s. He told me,

> [L]ooking back on '90s Chicago... in some ways, the music scene felt like the old west... [with] everybody making it up as they went... I felt [Bloodshot] collated that. They saw this scene that was developing, and thought you know, we love country music, and we love punk, and we love rock, and we love garage music, and we love all that kind of stuff, and wow, there seems to be this whole generation of musicians that have some influence of country music, but are making this other thing that's not quite that. It's a hybrid that acknowledges the roots but it's its own animal.[47]

As Kessler and Peters both suggested, Bloodshot Records served as a catalyst that mobilized this "insurgent country" scene by bringing artists and musicians together from varying musical backgrounds. Bloodshot's owners argued that Chicago has a supportive musical community, and the new record label benefited from artists and musicians who knew one another or knew of one another, and were willing to collaborate and perform together.

Liveness

Live music and performances were the foundation of Chicago's punk and underground music scene. While these events were crucial to the experience of this scene, the sonic implications of live music carried over to recordings of these performing bands, as aspects of

[46] Kessler, interview, October 27, 2012.
[47] Lawrence Peters, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, July 3, 2012.

musical performance were transferred to other musical contexts.[48] This construction of "liveness" was especially evident in the work of Chicago-based recording engineer Steve Albini. Albini, known for his work with bands such as Nirvana, the Pixies, and PJ Harvey, has recorded thousands of albums, many from Chicago. A recognized "Chicago sound," both discursively constructed and sonically heard, is also associated with Albini, and involves musical and structural components. This sound is characterized by Albini's persona as a musician, engineer, and vocal critic of the mainstream music industry, and also his commitment to punk and DIY. Bloodshot's early contributions to the Chicago music scene were primarily recordings, but these albums are not associated with the Chicago sound. However, aspects of both the discursive and sonic components of the Chicago sound are present in Bloodshot's early albums, as the record label worked to align itself with the punk and underground scene and maintain separation from the mainstream music industry.

Bloodshot's approach to a sonic identity involves the idea of "liveness." According to musicologist Paul Sanden, "liveness is a flexible concept,"[49] and he defines it as "a concept based in the perception of performance, and the exact articulation of this concept in any given situation and for any given musicker depends on the specific ways in which he or she perceives performance within that experience."[50] Performance is an important characteristic of rock authenticity, and "offers a rock audience the opportunity to verify the credibility of a rock act's recordings and to determine whether the musicians on stage truly possess the skill and talent seemingly promised by their studio creations."[51] Acknowledging commonly held assumptions that pop is "inauthentic" and rock is "authentic," Sanden notes, "Pop music is accepted as music

[48] Paul Sanden, *Liveness in Modern Music: Musicians, Technology, and the Perception of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.
[49] Sanden, *Liveness*, 6.
[50] Sanden, *Liveness*, 31.
[51] Sanden, *Liveness*, 71–2.

created in the studio, whereas rock's authenticity derives from its performance in relation to the studio product."[52]

Sanden notes three characteristics of liveness. First, "The concept of liveness derives from the concept of music as performed;" second, liveness is concerned with the perception of performance, and not necessarily an actual performance. Finally, liveness involves "tensions inherent between this perception and the perceived encroachment of electionic technologies into the terrain of fully human performance."[53] Sanden identifies seven categories of liveness: temporality, spatial proximity, fidelity, spontaneity, corporeality, interactivity, and virtuality; noting that liveness is a discursive concept "marked not only by its fluidity and complexity but also by its emergence from particular social environments and historical moments for particular ideological purposes."[54] These categories of liveness often overlap, reinforcing various concepts of liveness, "reflect[ing] the valuation of a different quality or combination of qualities thought to reflect a traditional (live) performance paradigm."[55]

Several of these categories are relevant for this discussion, including temporal and spatial liveness, liveness of fidelity, and liveness of spontaneity:

- Temporal and spatial liveness are the most common perceptions of liveness, and generally what is meant by the phrase "live performance," meaning "we have witnessed a performance at the time of its occurrence (temporal liveness) and in the physical presence of the performer(s) (spatial liveness)."[56]

- Liveness of fidelity involves music that is "perceived as faithful to its initial utterance, its unmediated (or less mediated) origins, or an imagined unmediated ideal."[57] This fidelity refers to both the idea of a performer (or performers) skill (as opposed to studio interventions, overdubs, or tape splicing, etc.); and also the more

[52] Sanden, *Liveness,* 71–2.
[53] Sanden, *Liveness*, 6–7.
[54] Sanden, *Liveness*, 32.
[55] Sanden, *Liveness*, 32.
[56] Sanden, *Liveness*, 33.
[57] Sanden, *Liveness*, 11.

conventional use of the term regarding recording technologies' ability to capture and reproduce sound.[58]

- Finally, liveness of spontaneity demonstrates "the spontaneity and unpredictability of human performance,"[59] although according to Sanden, this type of liveness "is virtually eradicated in repeated encounters with individual recordings."[60]

Bloodshot's identification with particular beliefs regarding Chicago's music culture and its direct involvement with the local music scene followed specific constructions of authenticity related to punk and rock music, including community and populism, a continuity with the past, ideas of liveness, and a separation from the mainstream. In producing country music, the record label reinforced these ideas of authenticity in its continued identity formation, and these constructs have shaped and influenced Bloodshot Records' sonic identity.

Steve Albini and the "Chicago Sound"

An important figure in the Chicago music scene, recording engineer Steve Albini has proclaimed ideas of Chicago exceptionalism and championed the city's punk and indie rock scene. One of the most widely known producers of alternative and indie rock, Albini is famous for his work with bands such as Nirvana, the Pixies, PJ Harvey, and the Jesus Lizard. Although not originally from Chicago, he has lived in the city for several decades and claims it as his home. Attending Northwestern University as a journalism student, he formed the cult punk/industrial rock band Big Black in 1981.[61] Arguably one of the most influential bands in the Chicago underground, Big Black achieved moderate success and recognition, but disbanded in

[58] Sanden, *Liveness*, 36.
[59] Sanden, *Liveness*, 11.
[60] Sanden, *Liveness*, 37.
[61] Faris, "'That Chicago Sound': Playing with (Local) Identity in Underground Rock," *Popular Music and Society* 27, No. 4 (2004), 431.

1987.[62] Albini's second band, Rapeman, was short-lived, and he formed the trio Shellac in the early 1990s.[63] However, beyond these bands, it is his work as a recording engineer that has earned him a reputation as one of the most important figures in 1990s alternative rock and grunge, and currently in indie rock.[64] Indeed, he recorded hundreds of underground rock bands in the late '80s and early '90s, and has recorded nearly 2,000 albums total.[65]

According to journalist Paul Tingen, Albini insists on describing himself as an engineer, viewing his work as technical, rather than artistic. Emphasizing the technical aspects of his work and suggesting that his contributions to an album end once an album is recorded, he takes no royalties on albums he records, and "he will work with anyone who calls, regardless of musical style or ability, and would rather not see his name appear on record sleeves."[66] As musicologist Marc Faris argues, such an approach aligns with Albini's "workingman persona," as constructed by his own published writing, interviews, and general public reputation in the city.[67] Albini thus approaches his work with "a blue-collar sensibility and work ethic" that also aligns with the trope of a strong work ethic associated with the city of Chicago.[68]

Albini has been an outspoken critic of the music industry, and as Faris summarizes, he is a "widely quoted arbiter of underground ideologies, mercilessly railing against major-label music business practices, and his confrontational rhetoric and acerbic criticism of the "industry" have

[62] Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Sotrie from the American Indie Undergournd 1981–1991* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 312–45.
[63] John Bush, "Artist Biography: Steve Albini," *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/steve-albini-mn0000023358/biography (accessed February 10, 2014).
[64] Paul Tingen, "Steve Albini: Sound Engineer Extraordinaire," *Sound on Sound* (September 2005), http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/sep05/articles/albini.htm (accessed February 10, 2014).
[65] Tingen, "Steve Albini: Sound Engineer Extraordinaire;" Ed Decker, "Steve Albini Biography," Musician Biographies, http://www.musicianguide.com/ biographies/1608001481/Steve-Albini.html#ixzz2szfcrP8e (accessed February 10, 2014).
[66] Tingen, "Steve Albini: Sound Engineer Extraordinaire."
[67] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 432–3.
[68] Faris, "That Chicago Sound,"433–4.

become the stuff of legend."[69] For example, his oft-cited article, "The Problem with Music," originally appeared in an issue of punk zine *Maximum Rocknroll*, and recounts in a detailed and graphic fashion the many ways a record company can exploit a band. He describes "a faceless industry lackey…holding a fountain pen and a contract waiting to be signed" convincing a band to swim through "a trench… filled with runny, decaying shit" in order to sign the contract.[70] This statement, along with other such critiques and diatribes against the music industry and major record labels, came to represent "the defining values of [alternative] rock -- a fierce sense of independence and complete refusal to be affected by major labels or album sales."[71] Although such views represented alternative rock broadly, they also became strongly associated with Chicago, based on Albini's reputation and connection to the city and Chicago bands, and reflect commonly held beliefs within the underground music scene in the city.

In dialogue with and reinforcing Albini's identity as both a confrontational critic of the music industry and hard-working, blue-collar Chicagoan, the Chicago sound refers "to a musical style and to a system of recording strategies," such as album artwork and liner notes.[72] Although the Chicago sound is primarily associated with Albini, its origins can be attributed to recording engineer and producer Iain Burgess (1953–2010).[73] Albini's mentor, Burgess was a key figure in the 1980s Chicago and Midwestern punk scene, recording several important Chicago punk bands, such as Albini's Big Black, Naked Raygun, Ministry, and many others. A native of Weymouth, England, Burgess moved to Chicago in the 1970s, and was regularly the sound engineer for live punk shows. He also recorded punk bands at Chicago Recording Company, the

[69] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 431.
[70] Tingen, "Steve Albini: Sound Engineer Extraordinaire."
[71] Bush, "Artist Biography: Steve Albini," *Allmusic*.
[72] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 429.
[73] Although Faris does not cite Burgess in association with the Chicago sound, Albini claims Burgess as a mentor, and I argue that his approach greatly influenced Albini's work and the Chicago sound.

largest independent recording studio in the Midwest. At the time, many Chicago-area punk bands could not afford any studio time at the state-of-the-art complex of Chicago Recording Company. Burgess arranged a deal with CRC to use the studio and equipment on the weekends when the space was unused, and as such, was able to work on a very low budget. He was known for a big, drum-centered sound, and was a proponent of a "live-centered recording approach" that became characteristic of punk records and greatly influenced Albini's recording practices.[74]

Burgess worked with Albini on several projects, and served as the engineer for Big Black's full-length debut, *Atomizer* (1986). The fourth track on this album, "Kerosene," is the band's most well known song and serves as an example of both Burgess and Albini's musical and recording approaches, and exemplifies characteristics that Faris identifies as the "Chicago sound." The song features Steve Albini on electric guitar and vocals, Santiago Durango on electric guitar, and Dave Riley on bass. One of Big Black's most defining features is the absence of a human drummer, and all drumming is provided by a Roland drum machine, programmed by Albini. The prominence and insistence of the drum machine in Big Black's work points to an important characteristic of the Chicago sound: the idea that "rhythm, much more than harmony or melody, is of prime importance," often employing complex cross rhythms and metric ambiguity.[75] "Kersoene" is a song about small town boredom and the temporary distractions of sex and arson, and the possibility of combining the two. Albini speaks the lyrics of the song throughout, and the vocal is obscured by the extremely distorted electric guitars, insistent bass, and drum machine, until the climax of the song when Albini repeatedly yells "set me on fire." "Kerosene" begins with a trebly, synthesizer-like electric guitar riff, alternating between three

[74] Jim Derogatis, "R.I.P., Iain Burgess, a Key Architect of the Chicago Punk Sound," *Chicago Sun Times* (February 12, 2010), http://blogs.suntimes.com/music/2010/02/rip_iain_burgess_a_key_archite.html (accessed March 25, 2014); and Rob Warmowski, "Burgess: Accident Prone," *THIS*, http://warmowski.wordpress.com/2010/02/15/1989-interview-with-record-producer-iain-burgess/ (accessed March 25, 2014).
[75] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 440.

and two division of the beat, as seen in Figure 3.1. After eight measures of the riff, when the drum machine enters, it follows four divisions of the beat.

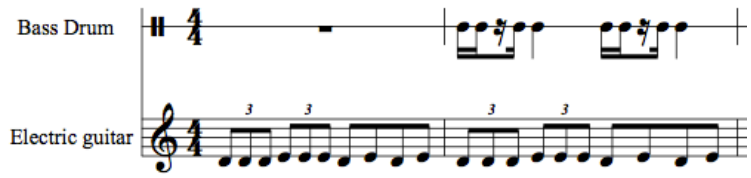

Figure 3.1: "Kerosene," Big Black, intro.

In addition to an emphasis on rhythm, Faris notes that through-composed song structure is a structural characteristic of the Chicago sound, as demonstrated by the song "Nosferatu Man" by the band Slint. Although Slint is from Louisville, Kentucky, the band had a strong relationship with Albini, and regularly performanced in Chicago.[76] As shown in Figure 3.2, "Nosferatu Man" is sectional, but does not follow the traditional song structure of rock songs with a verse-chorus form, and most notably, it lacks a return of opening material.[77] The song references a Dracula-like vampire, with allusions to a failed relationship and destructive tendencies.

Albini's recording strategies are an important component of the Chicago sound. According to Athens, Georgia-based recording engineer and producer David Barbe,

> Steve Albini's approach as an engineer is that he views himself as a documentarian rather than someone who should have creative input in the process… He wants to make as pristine and accurate recording of the people playing the music as he can; his studios are

[76] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 436. American studies scholar Cotton Seiler argues that Louisville, Kentucky's underground (or indie) rock scene produced a particular aesthetic, which he calls the "Louisville Sound," and bears some similarity to the Chicago Sound. Seiler includes Slint as part of the Louisville Sound, but recounts how former Slint band member Ethan Buckler left the band after Slint recorded with Albini. Buckler believed working with Albini changed Slint's sound, and perceived this change as the band "leaving Louisville." See Cotton Seiler, "'Have You Ever Been to the Pleasure Inn?': The Transformation of Indie Rock in Louisville, Kentucky," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13 (2001): 189–205.
[77] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 436.

> set up in a way that are designed for live music to be played by multiple people at the same time.[78]

Further, Albini's recording approach was and remains remarkably analog in an age of digital technology. If overdubbing and digital recording were typical practices in recording studios, Albini has always preferred recording on tape and valuing vinyl for sonic fidelity, and striving for a "live sound" on all of his albums. He states, "I prefer to record as much of the band in one live take as possible. If you do it any other way, the band is forced into an unnatural situation from the very beginning of the process. They play together in the rehearsal room and on stage, so it seems normal to me that they also play together when they come into the studio."[79] This commitment to the live sound also entails less manipulation of the audio, and often few effects, such as reverb or delay, added to tracks in post-production.[80]

A	A'	B	A''	B'
Intro/ Instr. Hook -el. guitar -full band	**Verse** -vocal, spoken -full band	**Instr. Hook**	**Verse** -vocal, spoken -full band	**Instr. Hook**	**Chorus** -vocal, sung/ yelled/ spoken -full band	**Instr. Hook** Variaton	**Verse** -vocal, spoken -full band	**Instr. Hook**	**Chorus 2** -vocal (new lyrics), yelled sung spoken -full band

C	D	C	D'	
Extended Instrumental -full band	**Verse Variation** -vocal spoken -full band -new chord progression	**Extended Instrumental** -full band	**Verse Variation** -vocal spoken -full band -new chord progression	**Coda/Outro** -full band

Figure 3.2: Slint, "Nosferatu Man," form.[81]

[78] David Barbe, interview by the author, Athens, Georgia, March 7, 2014.
[79] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014.
[80] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014.
[81] Slint, *Spiderland,* Touch and Go Records (TG64, 1991). This chart follows Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 436.

Albini emphasizes the "liveness" of a band playing together for a recording project, and this philosophy is oppositional to mainstream recording and production practices.[82] As discussed earlier, Sanden defines liveness as "a concept based in the perception of performance, and the exact articulation of this concept in any given situation and for any given musicker depends on the specific ways in which he or she perceives performance within that experience."[83] Following this definition, mediated or recorded sounds and performances can be perceived or understood as "live," because they are "faithful to [an] initial utterance…, unmediated (or less mediated) origins, or an imagined unmediated ideal."[84] For example, a recording of a performer's skill without studio interventions or overdubs can be understood as live.[85] Similarly, a recording or recreation of a performance that includes "the spontaneity and unpredictability of human performance" can also be perceived as live.[86] Such additions on recordings incorporate stage banter or spoken word between tracks, audience noise and response, along with album inserts of photographs, memorabilia, or representations of the event.[87] Thus, Steve Albini's strongly held beliefs that a highly mediated sound is less desirable, inauthentic, and of inferior quality aligns with Sanden's definitions of liveness, while also reiterating a commitment to live music making and reinforcing a non-mainstream approach.

Bloodshot's "Chicago Sound" and Recording "Liveness"

Many of the bands associated with the Chicago sound can be described broadly as punk, industrial, post-rock, or experimental rock. As such, the songs of these bands were relatively free

[82] Travis Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys and New Hicks: The Countercultural Sounds of Austin's Progressive Country Music Scene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 79.
[83] Sanden, *Liveness*, 31.
[84] Sanden, *Liveness*, 11.
[85] Sanden, *Liveness*, 36.
[86] Sanden, *Liveness*, 11.
[87] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 443; Stimeling, *Cosmic Cowboys*, 79.

from generic restraints, often characterized by experimentation or improvisatory practices. As a result, songs were often through-composed or in non-sectional forms. Bloodshot Records, however, initially produced country music, a genre that is characterized by sectional forms, repeated material, and straightforward rhythms, and is musically outside of the structural expectations and sound palette of the Chicago sound. As Bloodshot's founders established a particular Chicago identity for the record label, Bloodshot's approach to a "Chicago sound" on their early albums was most evident in recording practices rather than distinct musical or structural characteristics. With roots in the live music scene, Bloodshot privileged a re-creation or approximation of "liveness" on its recordings, and albums exhibited variations of liveness as the record label expanded its roster and established its sonic identity. An examination of recordings and recording practices from the record label's early history reveals a commitment to punk and DIY values and aesthetics that the founders associated with the city of Chicago and positioned the record label apart from the mainstream.

Just one year following Bloodshot's initial release, the record label had resources to provide a small amount of funding to put bands in the studio to record full-length albums. However, Bloodshot could not afford famous or well-known engineers at the time, and Nan Warshaw recalled that they sought out an individual that shared a similar aesthetic and was affordable, and they hired Chuck Uchida to record the Old 97s.

> Chuck was just an affordable local good option. So when we had recording that had to be done in Chicago we were gonna pay for. He definitely was our go-to. There certainly other options but they were much more expensive… [H]is recording aesthetic was, he was great at capturing a live feel. And if you have a great live band, that's what you want. Chuck's recording style, he comes from like the Iain Burgess style of recording, and we couldn't have afforded Iain… I mean we knew Albini was around and he was much more expensive… [H]e was also in a bunch of bands…we just ran in some of the same circles. The punk bands I knew, if you asked someone where to record affordably, there were only a few options. And to us, what we were doing didn't seem like the recording would

> be that different from recording a punk record, cause you're just capturing a great live sound.[88]

She acknowledged Bloodshot's aesthetic preferences as aligning with Albini, and his mentor, punk and post-punk Chicago producer and engineer, Iain Burgess, yet the fledgling record label could not afford these engineers at the time. Uchida maintained a similar aesthetic in "capturing a live feel" or "a great live sound," and was within Bloodshot's price range.

The Old 97's recorded their Bloodshot debut *Wreck Your Life* (BS 009, 1995) at Attica Studios, engineered by Chuck Uchida. Attica Studios was the attic of an apartment building in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood. Designer Markus Greiner lived in the building, and had used the attic as a storage space for musical equipment and gear and as a de facto recording studio. In an interview with me, he described the building as "a dumpy little place, but it had this big attic that we converted half of into a makeshift studio…for the band I was in. So we accumulated some gear, we hooked up with this producer, this guy who had done some good local work, Chuck Uchida."[89]

Greiner was familiar with Nan Warshaw from frequenting Club Dreamerz, and was recruited to assist with the design and layout for the album art of Bloodshot's first albums. Since those early albums, he has had some involvement with nearly every album Bloodshot has produced. He recalled,

> [I]t was a one off thing [his involvement with Bloodshot]. And then it wasn't. And then it was a band putting out a single…and then it led to talking to Rob and Nan about recording in our attic for some guys from Arizona, Grievous Angels… So that led to Neko Case and the Sadies coming in for a single. Then the Old 97s came in…these young guys from Dallas. So I gave them the apartment, and said they can record a single, and at the same time or shortly thereafter the decision was made to do the album there. That was my studio…in my attic. So when they did the album, I just stayed with my girlfriend three blocks away. They [the band] just lived there… We had a four track

[88] Warshaw, interview, June 27, 2012.
[89] Markus Greiner, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 26, 2012.

> cassette recorder and I said well…[Chuck] knows what he's doing. [S]o everything just kind of came together really quickly.[90]

Greiner acknowledged that in Bloodshot's early days, the participants of the punk and underground music scene were comprised of a relatively small social circle. Further, he noted the organic nature of projects happening at Attica, with projects building on one another, and how things "came together" due to social connections.

Greiner reinforced the aesthetic and practical nature of Attica and Uchida's relationship with Bloodshot, saying,

> [W]e were pushing this limited equipment as far as we could… I think Bloodshot like the idea that they were recording in a really kind of [lo-fi situation]…breaking some rules, and it wasn't being done the way it was supposed to be done. And I think that first stuff was recorded on a cassette recorder, which was really, um, charming. And then things snowballed and we moved up to a half-inch recorder, and ended up with a digital recorder.[91]

He also noted the usage of older recording technologies as an appealing aspect for the record label. Greiner's assessment of this older equipment as "charming" perhaps indicated an opinion regarding the quality of recordings on this equipment, while also acknowledging it served its purpose at the time.

Wreck Your Life features twelve tracks, and various aspects of this album indicate liveness, such as the opening track "Victoria" beginning with presumably Uchida saying "Rolling" and someone responding, "Okay," or Jon Langford yelling "asshole" in the middle of his song "Over the Cliff." Finally, the album concludes with some spoken banter from the band. The song "Big Brown Eyes" is the fifth track, and features a verse-chorus form, beginning with two verses followed by a chorus, and extended guitar solo, and a verse and chorus to close the song. Both tracks also open with two measures of an acoustic guitar intro.

[90] Greiner, interview, June 26, 2012.
[91] Greiner, interview, June 26, 2012.

The production on this track is open with not highly processed, with little overall compression and added reverb. The mix is uneven, characteristic of a low-budget project, with the kick drum "sticking out" or sounding separate from the mix when it enters at the beginning of the first verse.[92] The acoustic guitar and electric guitar are panned left and right respectively, featuring little distortion and a round, smooth sound with little added reverb.[93] The electric guitar sounds with a clear, undistorted tone and few added effects. This track has not been digitally manipulated with audio compression to "normalize" the range of audio frequencies, and as such, the mix is dynamic, signifying a sense of liveness with various parts coming forward throughout the recording.[94] This type of loose and imprecise mix is often associated with "raw" punk recordings taken from shows or live performances.[95]

While the recording quality of *Wreck Your Life* can be attributed to resources and funding, the resulting lo-fi project is certainly the result of philosophical and aesthetic preferences. Bloodshot's connections to Chicago's punk scene, which privileged DIY and lo-fi aesthetics, certainly influenced the sound of this album. Markers of liveness, including spoken word and banter on some tracks on the album, an uneven mix between instruments on the track, and little mediation and processing of the audio, signify both DIY and lo-fi. Further, the setting of Attica provided yet another layer of signification aligning with punk values. Whether or not Bloodshot would have used another studio or engineer had it had the resources, using this studio provided a layer of punk and DIY authenticity for the young record label.[96]

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[92] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014. According to Barbe, the track sounds like "it wasn't mixed in an environment where you could hear the bottom end clearly enough, or the kick wouldn't be sticking out that much. That to me sounds like it was mixed on small speakers."
[93] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014.
[94] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014.
[95] Faris, "That Chicago Sound," 443.
[96] The Old 97s signed with major record label Elektra in 1996, and released a version of "Big Brown Eyes" on *Too Far to Care* (1997). Although the band's ensemble is tighter on this later recording, presumably due to two years of touring and performing extensively, the primary difference between these two versions is in the production and mix.

Robbie Fulks' full-length debut album on Bloodshot, *Country Love Songs* (BS 011, 1996) was recorded by Steve Albini. Although the record label still could not afford Albini at this time in its history, Fulks and Albini were friends, and made arrangements for Albini to record the album. As discussed previously, Fulks did not have a background in punk or the underground rock scene, but he was familiar with Bloodshot's founders. In an interview, he shared with me about his experience of recording his album *Country Love Songs* with Albini and working with Bloodshot, stating,

> I knew that [punk] was probably where [Bloodshot's founders] were coming from. And…I didn't have that much of an interest in that kind of thing, you know. I mean my interest in that is basically that I owned some punk records…and that I was friends with Steve... And I think the overlap was…just based on the fact that Steve was recording it, and Steve brought his kind of aesthetic to the recording of that first record… So him and the fact that my knowledge that [Bloodshot's founders] were…like punks and that they were into that kind of music, I think encouraged me…embolden[ed] me to write a certain kind of lyric for those early records because I knew it would go over -- I knew that like "White Man's Bourbon" and that maybe the Scrapple song, I don't know, and a couple other goofier, outsider, envelope-pushing songs that I had written lyrically would be received well by those guys.[97]

Although Fulks did not identify with punk, he stated that his awareness of Bloodshot's positioning and connections to punk motivated him to use Albini for the project and allowed him greater creative freedom. Further, he understood that his humorous, or even offensive songs, along with his ironic take on traditional songs would be accepted by Bloodshot.

The first track of *Country Love Songs*, titled "Every Kind of Music but Country," is a humorous song featuring a narrative that tells of a woman who likes everything about a man except for the fact that he plays country music. The song opens with fiddle, drums, and bass;

The overall mix of this track sounds more professional, featuring audio compression, added reverb, and various effects added to each part. Whereas the kick drum was prominent on the *Wreck Your Life* version, on this track, the kick drum has been compressed to control the sound, and consequently the instrument is less prominent and is back in the mix. The guitars feature distortion and reverb, and the vocal are forward in the mix, also with reverb, and doubled harmonies. The overall mix is tight and characteristic of a professional studio recording.

[97] Fulks, interview, July 7, 2011.

steel and acoustic guitar enter at the chorus. Fulks' nasal tenor is relaxed, singing the melody comprised primarily of skips and leaps.[98] According to Barbe, the overall production on the track "sounds very natural…[and] very open in the room;" and neither the drums nor vocals are "in your face," or extremely prominent in the mix, as is typical of studio recordings.[99] Further, the track has not been digitally manipulated via audio compression to "normalize" the range of audio frequencies.[100]

Conclusion

In numerous interviews with Bloodshot's owners and members of the Chicago musical community, they each proclaimed and reinforced a particular Chicago identity and strong beliefs regarding the city's music scene. This Chicago exceptionalism is characterized by a strong work ethic, and a supportive, and cooperative musical community, while the music scene is noted for its emphasis on live performances and liveness, community, historical continuity, and separation from mainstream popular culture. Bloodshot Records origins were in this music scene, and albums from the label's early days served to establish Bloodshot's sonic identity. This sonic

[98] The bass on this sound can be described as "tic-tac bass," which is an acoustic bass doubled by an electric instrument. This technique was popular in 1950s country music, and served to bring out the bass on recordings.
[99] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014.
[100] Barbe, interview, March 7, 2014. After two albums with Bloodshot, Fulks signed a major record deal with Geffen in 1998. Fulks' first and only album with Geffen, *Let's Kill Saturday Night* contains a mix of country and rock tracks, and features a collection of guest artists, including Lucinda Williams and mandolinist Sam Bush. Overall, the album sounds quite different than Country Love Songs, and was recorded with typical professional studio techniques. The title track, "Let's Kill Saturday Night," is a country rock anthem about taking advantage of the weekend following a long workweek. The opening instrumental hook features effects-laden electric guitars with full drums and bass. Fulks's vocal sounds more tense than in previous tracks, approaching yelling towards the end of the song. The melodic contour of the song features steps, and the range of the verse is lower, contrasted by a higher range in the chorus. The track has been digitally processed using compression to control the dynamic range, resulting in consistent audio levels for the entire duration of the song. Further, the mix of the song is expansive and full, and each instrument has an added layer of processing evident in the prominent reverb, particularly the snare drum that sounds like a typical studio snare with a clear hit followed by a ringing reverb, a sound that is only possible through digital manipulation. See Albin Zak, "Getting Sounds: The Art of Sound Engineering," in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook, Erick Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, and John Rink (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69–70.

identity can be connected to the "Chicago sound" in use of lo-fi recording practices and the re-creation of "liveness" on its recordings. Bloodshot Records' identity has been constructed as a Chicago identity through its business and musical practices.

CHAPTER FOUR

"MUSIC TO DRINK BEER TO": BLOODSHOT RECORDS' BRANDING AND IDENTITY FORMATION

In 2009, Bloodshot Records celebrated its fifteenth anniversary at Chicago venue and bar, the Hideout, and soon thereafter released a live album of that celebration featuring eleven artists and bands. On its website, the record label describes this project as a "sonic scrapbook" of the day's events.[1] This description recalls founder Nan Warshaw's account of Bloodshot's first album in 1994 as a "snapshot" of the underground music scene in Chicago at the time. Both of these accounts reference the record label's view of itself as a curator of live music, a position that hearkens back to Bloodshot's founders, Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warshaw, participation in and contributions to Chicago's live music scene. Certainly, Bloodshot Records has changed since its founders planned that first "snapshot of the scene" on bar napkins, but these three founders constructed an identity for their record label based upon their own experiences within the Chicago music scene, and much of Bloodshot Records' identity and reputation established in its early years persists, even as the record label celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 2014.

This chapter examines Bloodshot Records' identity formation and branding, considering what the record label claimed about itself and its first two full-length albums in press releases, CD liner notes and artwork, the music on these first two albums, and the critical reception of these early albums. Bloodshot Records' identity was directly tied to the founders participation in

[1] This event is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

the local underground music scene rooted in punk and this scene's DIY approach to music, but the label quickly became associated with country music history and tradition, both locally and nationally. The record label was recognized as an important contributor to alt.country with its earliest insurgent country albums, but soon worked to distance itself from this association, embraced a diverse roster of artists representing a broader generic range. The founders drew from the histories and legacies of punk and country, and their respective musical styles and practices in establishing their record label, and consequently, Bloodshot Records was positioned in opposition to mainstream culture, claimed itself as a more authentic version of country music than what mainstream country offered, and maintained strong ties to the local community.

Insurgent Country

The title of Bloodshot Records' first album, *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country* (BS 001, 1994), revealed its connection to the city of Chicago, but also specified a particular community within the city's music scene. Although the record label did not have a marketing plan, the founders established a brand and identity for Bloodshot Records and its music through press materials, interviews, and album liner notes. The title of the first album provided a unique descriptor for the music on the album, as "Insurgent Country" distinguished the music on the album from "country music" generally, and particularly from the historical and cultural moment of "hot new country" that was experiencing widespread commercial success on country radio with artists such as Garth Brooks and Shania Twain. As co-founder and co-owner Rob Miller noted in an interview with me, "We came up with the name [insurgent] because at the time in '93 or '94, there was no critical language around what we were doing. And the c-word

[country] carried a huge stigma, and all our bands at that point were playing punk clubs, and we were appealing to punk scenes."[2]

Miller acknowledged the social and cultural stigma attached to country music generally, referencing the genre's historical class, regional, and race-based associations, and negative stereotypes of the white, rural, working class. However, Miller (and his fellow founders) also opposed mainstream, popular music in general, and were skeptical of any version of mass marketed music, be it country or otherwise. The fact that country music artists of this era were beginning to perform in and sell out performances in arenas only served to make mainstream country more distasteful to Bloodshot's founders. Thus, while the bands on *For a Life of Sin* were playing country music, attaching the descriptor "insurgent" to "country" provided needed discursive distance from "the c-word," but also served to proclaim the record label's alternative stance.

Artist and musician Jon Langford greatly contributed to Bloodshot's alternative positioning, due in large part to his work with British punk band the Mekons. A Welsh-born musician and visual artist, Langford has been heavily involved with Bloodshot, evidenced by the fact that he makes more appearances on Bloodshot's compilations than any other artist. In addition to his band the Waco Brothers' releases on the record label, Langford has numerous albums on Bloodshot, including several EPs and singles, several solo albums, and appearances on many others. Langford, whose "Over the Cliff" is the second track on *For a Life of Sin*, moved to Chicago in the early 1990s. According to Bloodshot's artist page for Langford,

> [H]e's created lots of cover art, produced lots of records, lent his ham-fisted guitar stylings to recordings by [many Bloodshot artists], draws a comic strip, plays in the long running art/punk collective the Mekons, written a book, appeared as the backing band on

[2] Rob Miller, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June 16, 2011.

> *This American Life* and acts as a reeling papa bear figure to many of Chicago's musicians looking for direction and reassurance in this vicious racket we call the music industry.[3]

Although he has been a part of many bands and musical projects, Langford's longest affiliation has been with the Brit punk band, the Mekons, which was formed in the late 1970s. The personnel of the Mekons' has changed over the years, but Langford and multimedia artist and musician Tom Greenhalgh are original members.[4] The band's albums have been wildly eclectic covering a range of styles, though always political and intellectual, with a wild sense of humor.[5] Several of the band's albums reveal a country and roots interest. Speaking about the Mekons album *Fear and Whiskey* (1985) with me, Langford noted,

> [For some fans and writers, this album was] when the Mekons changed from being a punk band into being a country band of some sort, or some people have even "accused" us of inventing alternative country with that album. I would dispute that to some degree, but it's strange, there was some kind of realization on our part at that time that country music was something really important rather than just right-wing music for old people.[6]

Langford emphasized how seriously they were taking country music, as opposed to a mocking or satiric interest in the music. He stated, "There was a movement in England around the same time in the mid-80s called cowpunk where lots of English kids dressed up in kind of straw hats and blacked their teeth out and went 'Yee-haw,' and they thought it was really funny to kind of make fun of American country music."[7] In contrast, he insisted that country music artists such as Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, and Merle Haggard were huge influences and "cultural beacons" for the band, resulting in the Mekons' aforementioned *Fear and Whiskey* (1985), but

[3] Bloodshot Records, "Jon Langford," http://www.bloodshotrecords.com/artist/jon-langford (accessed April 19, 2009).
[4] John Dougan, "The Mekons," allmusic, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:0ifixqe5ldfe~T1 (accessed April 23, 2009).
[5] John Dougan, "The Mekons."
[6] Jon Langford, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 22, 2011.
[7] Langford, interview, June 22, 2011.

also the country-influenced albums, *The Edge of the World* (1986), and *The Mekons Honky Tonkin'* (1987).[8]

In addition to his work as a musician, Langford studied art at Leeds University and is known for folk art portraits of famous country musicians, some of which eventually appeared on Bloodshot albums. His art provides commentary on country music history, while at times representing the disappointment he experienced upon discovering the state of country music in the United States. He recalled,

> [W]hen we came to the States…we came searching for kind [of a] mythical honky-tonk world that had long been paved over. A lot of my work with the paintings and the [band] Pine Valley Cosmonauts… I think of a lot of my work as being still a reaction to that disappointment when I first came here… being shocked – shocked that…Bob Wills wasn't a national hero, that…when you mentioned Ernest Tubb to people they had no idea what you're talking about.

There is a certain amount of irony in a Welshman championing country music history in the United States, yet Langford provides a critique of the country that has not embraced these "national heroes." According to journalist Paul Verna,

> His multi-layered paintings take imagery from old country music publicity photos and sheet music and envelope them in a haze of ironic nostalgia. His use of the iconography of the country music artist depicts a conflict between the authenticity of intent and the demands of corporate entertainment.[9]

Langford's art depicting country music subjects often presents a negative view of the music industry. For example, The artwork on the front of the CD insert for *Hell-bent* is Jon Langford's "Hank Shot Through With Arrows," an image of Hank Williams as Saint Sebastian, with several arrows piercing through his emaciated body and head. Such a depiction represents Langford's (and by extension Bloodshot Records') stance on mainstream country's treatment of this musical legend's legacy.

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[8] Langford, interview, June 22, 2011.
[9] Paul Verna, "Possessed by the Demon of Rock'n'Roll, Haunted by the Ghosts of Old Country Music." *Billboard* (April 23, 2005).

Langford continued to pursue his interest in country music after relocating to Chicago in the early 1990s. He began DJing a country night at punk bar Crash Palace, and playing country tunes in punk bars with Chicago guitarist Dean Schlabowske.[10] This project with Schlabowske eventually became the band the Waco Brothers, a project that Langford claims was formed as an excuse to perform live country music in Chicago.[11] The band was originally comprised of several fellow British expatriates, including drummer Steve Goulding (who plays with The Mekons), bassist Alan Doughty, steel guitarist Marc Durante, and mandolinist Tracy Dear, with guitarist Dean Schlabowske (Deano) serving as the group's token Yankee. Prior to the Waco Brothers, each of these members was associated with other bands or groups, none of them country.[12]

The Waco Brothers released their debut album on Bloodshot in 1995, *To the Last Dead Cowboy*, and their sound is "a blend of country, punk, and politics…with the hardest of hardcore country and radically political statements."[13] Just as Langford's band the Mekons have never taken themselves too seriously, this is also true of the Waco Brothers, as Bloodshot Records' website describes the band, "Subtlety is for the weak, so they've chosen the path of optimum mayhem and tomfoolery. In their rollicking career, they have been called everything from the flagship act of the alternative country 'movement' to pure butchery. Both are likely to be correct."[14] The Waco Brothers appear on nearly every Bloodshot compilation album, and have released eight more albums on Bloodshot since their debut.

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[10] Langford, interview, June 22, 2011.
[11] Jason Ankeny and Mark Deming, "The Waco Brothers," allmusic, http://www.allmusic.com/cg/amg.dll?p=amg&sql=11:fvfqxq8gldse (accessed April 23, 2009).
[12] Ankeny and Deming, "The Waco Brothers."
[13] Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011; Langford, interview, June 22, 2011; Linda Ray, "Beer & Whiskey in the Land of Milk & Honey," *No Depression* No. 7 (Jan.–Feb. 1997), http://archives.nodepression.com/1997/01/beer-whiskey-in-the-land-of-milk-honey/ (accessed January 10, 2013); Goodman, *Modern Twang*, 138.
[14] Bloodshot Records, "Waco Brothers," http://www.bloodshotrecords.com/artist/waco-brothers (accessed April 19, 2009).

Since relocating to Chicago, Jon Langford has become a champion and supporter of country music and the Chicago music scene generally. In addition to his appreciation of country music and country music history, he espouses the ideals of punk generally, and he makes his leftist politics clear in conversations, in interviews, in his art, and in his music.[15] Generous with his time and talents, it is not surprising that he agreed to be a part of Bloodshot's compilation when Nan Warshaw approached him in 1994. According to co-founder Eric Babcock, "It's important to note how magnanimous Jon [was] to us. He invited me over, offered me beer, and then let me choose from his paintings what we wanted for the cover [of *For a Life of Sin*]… The label wouldn't exist if Jon Langford hadn't lent his credibility."[16] His contributions to *For a Life Sin* provided the project with a much higher level of name recognition, and an association with Jon Langford greatly benefited the newly formed record label.

The first publicity Bloodshot Records received was a feature article in the *Chicago Tribune* titled "Fledgling Country Label Opts for 'Life of Sin'," published on June 3, 1994. The piece features quotes from the founders, and presents key aspects of the record label's identity, which have continued to be referenced and repeated. The *Tribune* feature described Bloodshot's origin story and the first album, including quotes from the three founders, and highlighting artists and songs from the album. In a quote about the project, Warshaw noted the project's origins in the underground scene, stating, "It's country-influenced music that appeals to an alternative, rock-based audience... It's underground as opposed to underexposed." Warshaw proclaims the scene's independence from the mainstream by describing it as "underground," implying the use of alternative modes of production and consumption of this music, as influenced by a DIY,

[15] Stephen Haag, "Jon Langford and Skull Orchard: *Old Devils*," *Popmatters.com*, http://www.popmatters.com/review/129871-jon-langford-skull-orchard-old-devils/ (accessed April 15, 2014).
[16] Eric Babcock, interview by the author, Nashville, TN, October 27, 2012; Linda Ray, "Beer & Whiskey in the Land of Milk & Honey."

grassroots, punk model. This music was not sold by national chain retailers, nor was it widely accessible via Top 40 mainstream radio stations; however, it was thriving within a local community in connection with the city's musical infrastructure.

The article also emphasized Jon Langford's involvement, but also mentioned several other popular Chicago-area bands. Regarding the alternative country scene or "Chicago's subterranean country scene," Warshaw stated, "I think this record will give the scene an identity it didn't have," and Babcock noted, "It's been going on a long time without people knowing it." Warshaw's quote sets the "country scene" apart from the underground rock scene, providing another point of opposition for the project, and ultimately the record label. In sum, the feature presented Bloodshot Records as organic, emerging from the local scene, while also characterizing it as "underground," thus identifying the founders as "insiders" with specialized knowledge and credibility. Finally, label's association with Jon Langford legitimized both the punk and country components of "insurgent country," based upon his punk and country musical credentials.

Bloodshot's first press release reinforced information presented in the newspaper feature, including the connection to the underground music scene and highlighting particular artists on the album. The tone of the press release set a precedent for the record label's published communication, at times irreverent and humorous, but also a populist message in presenting the record label as a hard-working group of "everyday" folks. The three co-founders, working from Warshaw's basement, described *For a Life of Sin* in Bloodshot's first press release stating,

> From deep in the heart of Chicago comes a new record of hip-swayin', roots-rockin' shit-kickin' alternative country from 16 of the Windy City's best independent artists… You won't get any songs about big hair, high friends, low places, or love building bridges. You *will* get a series of honest, time-proven themes fearlessly re-fashioned by a passel of talented renegades.[17]

[17] Bloodshot Records, press release for *For a Life of Sin* (June 22, 1994).

The release mockingly referenced chart-topping mainstream country music hits, as "high friends, low places" alludes to Garth Brooks' hit bar anthem "Friends in Low Places" from 1990, while "love building bridges" refers to a ballad by The Judds from the same year.[18] Claiming authenticity by reinforcing the local, organic nature of the project ("heart of Chicago") and also identifying the artists on the project as independent, the press release invokes a type of negationism associated with punk, i.e., being opposed to all commercial endeavors that are antithetical to "true" artistry.[19] The release champions sincerity with the use of "honest" to describe Bloodshot's artists, again in contrast to mainstream artists, implying that commercial endeavors are insincere and dishonest. Finally, the use of "renegades" and "fearlessly" frame the record label and its artists as challenging a status quo for the sake of authentic music, regardless of financial reward.

In 1995, Bloodshot released *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Volume 2* (BS 004, 1995). Bloodshot made several bold, attention-grabbing claims in a promotional piece for the album,

> As American as apple pie and revolution. Being staunch defenders of the Hard Country faith, we resent what the greedy corporations have done to an American music form. "Country", in the minds of too damn many, has come to mean little more than big hats and bad haircuts. We find this situation intolerable. Personally, what we at Bloodshot Records would really like to do is ride whooping and screaming into Nashville and throw all the ugly shirts and wind machines right into the river, a Music City version of our ancestors' famous response to the distasteful policy of taxation without representation. We pause here to point out that that historical event was not called the Boston Tea *Symposium* or the Boston Tea *Confab*, but the Boston Tea **Party** (emphasis in original). We hereby submit *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country Volume 2* for consideration as the official soundtrack to the new party.[20]

[18] Jocelyn Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 386–7; Thom Jurek, review of *Love Can Build a Bridge*, by the Judds, *AllMusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/album/love-can-build-a-bridge-mw0000208127 (accessed January 10, 2014).
[19] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (New York: Verso Press, 1997), 141–2.
[20] Bloodshot Records, promotional materials for *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Volume 2* (1995).

This statement plays on the "insurgent" descriptor of Bloodshot's music, while presenting a populist message likening fans and enthusiasts of "real" country music to American colonists during the American Revolution. Highlighting traditional patriotic themes and historical events, this irreverent statement conflates "bad" country music and taxation without representation, identifying them as "intolerable" and "distasteful." The statement's hyperbole continues with Nashville/Music City representing "greedy corporations," and making clear the record label's anti-corporate stance and continued claims of authenticity.

Hell-bent features artists who appeared on the first compilation, including Moonshine Willy, the Waco Brothers, The Riptones, and Robbie Fulks, but in a press release, the album is described with an emphasis on the broader geographic representation of artists,

> For this volume, we beat the national bushes to turn out cuts from upstarts coast to coast…. Expanding our revolutionary bases to the far reaches of the USA are artists from Texas (Old 97's, The Cartwrights, (Cornell Hurd), Missouri (Bottle Rockets, The Starkweathers, Eleanor Roosevelt), Arizona (Grievous Angels, The Inbreds), California (Tarnation, Richard Buckner), Detroit (The Volebeats), NYC (World Famous Blue Jays), and Nashville (Gwil Owen). We put them all together on one disc to create a powerhouse line-up to be reckoned with--the musical equivalent of Murderer's Row. It's time, brothers and sisters, to step up to the plate. Line-dancing fans should be aware of the high, inside fastball. More scary cover art from Jon Langford.[21]

This statement was consistent with the record label's message, including a dismissive reference to the line-dancing craze that was dominating mainstream country at the time and a reference to revolution. The press release also notes Jon Langford's new "Hard Country supergroup the Waco Brothers" and the Bottle Rockets "currently garnering rave reviews for their latest Americana-charting record".[22] The release concludes, "Reverberating with twang and bristling with attitude, these insurgent country renegades never betray their deep and abiding love for the time-honored tenets of true country music - fatalism, humor, and sensuality. Revel with them in these 17 prime

[21] Bloodshot Records, "Hellbent," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/hell-bent (accessed September 26, 2014).
[22] Bloodshot Records, press release for *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Volume 2* (BS 004, 1995), undated.

cuts of death, laughs, and sex... to be played at top volume."[23] The release builds upon Jon Langford's work and reputation, while presenting authenticating material in noting national recognition for the Bottle Rockets, with bold language connecting the project to "true" country music.

From a business perspective, the consistency of the record label's publicity and press releases might indicate that the Bloodshot had developed an approach to its branding and a marketing plan. However, according to Warshaw, Bloodshot's earliest public relations plan was greatly influenced by their lack of capital starting out. She recalled,

> It was a combination of knowing…that to get attention without spending a lot of money on advertising, we had to create an identity and make it interesting through all our public image stuff, our press releases, and get that out there. I mean, we didn't spend money on advertising for the first few years at all. And then only slowly did we do any advertising. So we put all our energy into publicity because our thought was that was free advertising, and even more valuable because it was 'objective,' theoretically at least. And so having Rob, who is such a great writer crafting the image in that way, I think made a huge difference.[24]

Bloodshot Records did not follow traditional methods branding by using paid advertising and promotion as part of a highly structured marketing plan. Instead, it used grassroots promotion, press releases, and local publications to advertise its first release. By using bold language and consistent themes and signifiers, along with varying amounts of impertinence and humor,

[23] Bloodshot Records, press release for *Hell-bent*.
[24] Warshaw, interview, June 28, 2011. Although Warshaw distinguishes between advertising and publicity, musicologist Samples describes branding, marketing, and advertising as distinct but related processes, "Branding is the process of defining certain characteristics, impressions, or values as core to a company, product line, or individual product. Marketing can be described as the specific and comprehensive plan of communication from a company to its constituents, including both consumers and shareholders. Advertisements, press releases, media events, new stories, and product placements are all avenues of marketing that allow a company to communicate its core brand values and attributes to the consumer. Advertising is the process by which a company creates and publishes discrete documents (advertisements) with the intent of persuading a target market to patronize a company's products and services." In this interpretation, Bloodshot's press releases serve as a form of advertising. See Mark Christopher Samples, "A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries" (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2011), 15.

Bloodshot established its identity as a new independent record label, and such low-capital practices only served to reinforce the identity they created.

The messages of Bloodshot's early publicity proclaimed the record label as a DIY record label originating from the local scene, based upon punk attitudes, including opposition to mainstream culture and the music industry, a collective workingclass identity, and an emphasis on community. In describing the musical legacy of punk generally, historian Bradford Martin uses the term "post-punk" to describe punk music and practices in the 1980s. He identifies the legacy of 1970s punk as follows:

> [A] do-it-yourself production ethos emphasizing artistic control and a ''low-fidelity'' sound rather than technological ''perfection''; music featuring dissonant aural sounds that consciously challenged mainstream popular music; transgressive subject matter in the music's lyrics and in the visual images (such as cover or poster art) associated with the music; and live performances that attempted to bridge the physical and psychic ''distance'' between the performers and audience.[25]

The production practices of Bloodshot Records followed punk's legacy and certain characteristics of Martin's post-punk, such as a lo-fi sound and an emphasis on live performance. However, the music on Bloodshot Records' first two compilation albums, *For a Life of Sin* and *Hell-bent*, was country music. Working in conjunction with Bloodshot's discursive identity, the record label's sonic identity can be seen by examining its first two full-length albums.

Bloodshot Records' Insurgent Sound

The sound of insurgent country was primarily lo-fi country of an earlier era. The songs on Bloodshot's early albums followed the styles of honky tonk and string band or bluegrass, while

[25] Bradford Martin, "'…And You Voted For That Guy': 1980s Post-Punk and Oppositional Politics," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* Vol. 16, Issue 2 (August, 2004), 147.

also falling under the broader category of "hard country."[26] In addition to the use of older styles of music, several tracks on Bloodshot's first two compilations challenge structural expectations, while other tracks are sonically unusual or bizarre, often with markers of liveness. Thematically, the songs tend toward dark subject matter, including songs about death and dying; while several songs ironically embrace "white trash" culture with references to trucks, truck driving, and a distinct lack of upward mobility.

Jocelyn Neal identifies historical trends in mainstream country music related to song structure and form, and argues that song form "is an integral part of country music's identity...and evolution."[27] She considers various forms and their use in country music history, noting which song forms were popular in certain eras, and others that have fallen in and out of favor along the way. Neal notes that "verse-chorus forms have been the staple of more traditional country music," and have been employed in "revivals," such as the neotraditionalist movement in the 1980s and also the "roots revival" leading up to the 2000s, including alt.country. In contrast, the more contemporary verse-chorus-bridge form is employed in the 1990s and beyond, particularly in pop "crossover" songs, or country songs marketed to non-country audiences. Also, pre-choruses, short sections that lead in to a chorus, serving to link the verse and chorus, began to appear regularly in 1980s countrypolitan songs, and also 1990s mainstream country.
All but one of *For a Life of Sin*'s seventeen tracks are in a verse-chorus format, and the one exception is an AABA standard song form, which Neal associates with country music from the 1950s and 1960s. None of these songs include a bridge or a pre-chorus. While these formal

[26] According to sociologist Richard A. Peterson "hard country" is characterized by the use of a Southern or Southwestern accent and the use of "Southernisms" in speech and lyrics, and informal grammatical constructions; an untrained singing voice with a nasal tone, rough or imprecise harmonies, the perspective of personal experience, and stringed instruments, including guitar, banjo, dobro, and fiddle. Musically, hard country references earlier country styles, such as string band, western swing, honky-tonk, "classic" country, or country rock. Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 151–2.
[27] Neal, *Country Music*, 477–85.

strategies align these albums with traditional country music practice, as opposed to mainstream country music, other characteristics of songs on these albums are outstanding. An examination of several tracks from this album reveals the use of extended instrumental sections and unexpected turns of harmony, meter, or timbre, or some combination of the three, reinforcing the difference between standardized formats of mainstream songs and Bloodshot's insurgent country.

The opening track on *For a Life of Sin* is "Way Out West" by Moonshine Willy, and the song follows a verse-chorus form. The title of the song alludes to traditional country music themes, and the upbeat track features a slightly non-sensical narrative of a working class woman "way out west" with a great deal of work to accomplish. The introduction follows a 12-bar blues pattern played by an acoustic guitar, double bass and electric guitar, and after the opening verse, sections of the song alternate between instrumental solos, verses, and choruses, as seen in Figures 4.1 and 4.2). The verses are each ten measures long, and the first two lines of each verse are spoken over four measures while the last three lines of the verses are sung over six measures, referencing a practice used in country music for story songs or ballads, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. One other notable feature of this song is the final instrumental break (see Figure 4.3). Throughout the song, the acoustic guitar, upright bass, and drums provide a full texture with each instrument playing a steady rhythm continuously. Harmonically, the verses remain on E major, while the chorus follows the progression of E – A – E – B –G –E. At the final instrumental break, the texture shifts and the rhythmic pattern and harmonic progression changes. The acoustic guitar strums only on the second half of each beat alternating between E major and C major, punctuated by the upright bass and snare drum, while the electric guitar plays melodic riffs and lead lines, in the background of the mix. This rhythmic and textural shift is surprising as

it halts the perpetual forward motion of the song. After these eight measures, the instrumental resumes the original rhythm, texture, and harmony, and concludes with a final chorus and outro.

Intro	**Hook**	**Verse 1**	**Hook**	**Verse 2**	**Hook**	**Chorus**	**Solo**
4m	10m	10m	4m	10m	2m	9m	8m
Acoustic guitar	Electric guitar Acoustic guitar Upright bass Drums	Spoken / Sung Full band	Electric guitar Full band	Spoken / Sung Full band	Electric guitar Full band	Sung Full band	Electric guitar Full band

Hook	**Verse 3**	**Chorus**	**Hook**	**Instrumental**	**Hook**	**Chorus**	**Tag**	**Hook**
4m	10m	9m	2m	8m	2m	9m	6m	2m
Electric guitar Full band	Spoken / Sung Full band	Sung Full band	Electric guitar	Acoustic guitar Drums Electric guitar	Electric guitar	Sung, full band	Sung Full band	Electric guitar

Figure 4.1: "Way Out West," Moonshine Willy, form.

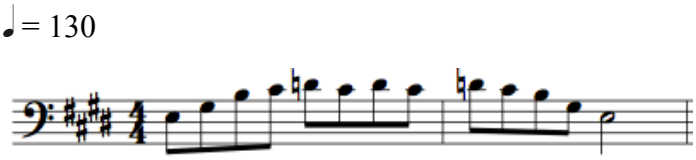

Figure 4.2: "Way Out West," Moonshine Willy, lead guitar hook.

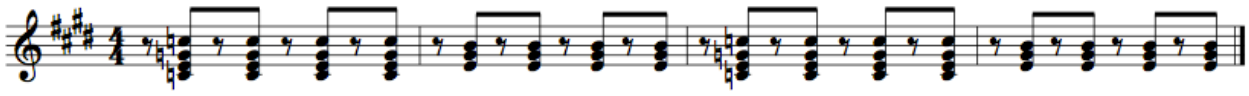

Figure 4.3: "Way Out West," Moonshine Willy, final instrumental break rhythm (played by acoustic guitar, upright bass, drums).

The Handsome Family's song "Moving Furniture Around" follows and AABA form, and is sung by Brett Sparks with a southern accent and a nasal tone, accompanied by an electric

guitar, bass guitar, and drums. The tone of the electric guitar is clean, and is primarily strummed with accents on beat one and the "and" of beat three, seen in Figure 4.4.

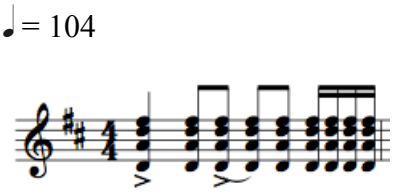

Figure 4.4: “Moving Furniture Around,” Handsome Family, strum pattern of A sections.

Throughout the verse, this strumming pattern is filled in with single notes stepwise motion between chord changes. In addition to the song’s uncommon form, the B section is surprising due to the addition of massive distortion on the electric guitar. Playing power chords and strumming straight eighth notes through this section, the texture and volume of the guitar obscures the vocal. The volume and distortion disappear as quickly as it appeared, and the clean tone and previous strumming pattern return for the remainder of the song.

“Rockin’ Spot” is one of two tracks by the Sundowners on *For a Life of Sin*. An early track from the group, this recording was remastered from a 45rpm record, likely originally recorded decades prior. Sonically, “Rockin’ Spot” stands apart from the other tracks sonically, as its distinguishing feature is the quality of the recording with characteristic scratchy noise from the low fidelity of the original record. With it opening vocal “oohs” and “aahs” and background vocals throughout, the song is an exemplar of 1950s era rock and roll with a title that alludes to Bill Haley’s legendary song “Rock Around the Clock.”

All but two of the tracks on *Hell-bent* are in a verse-chorus form; one song is strophic, and another is an instrumental track. Again, all the songs on the album reference an earlier form of country music, particularly string band or bluegrass, western swing, and classic country.

Structurally, there are fewer surprises on this album, but the subject matter of songs on this second compilation is notable. Following the title of the album, there are several songs whose subject matter deals with death, dying, murder, or suicide. As noted earlier, transgressive subject matter in songs is a musical characteristic of punk, and the treatment of death in these tracks challenges a mainstream pop or country music sensibility. For example, two songs treat suicide in contrasting approaches: Robbie Fulks' track "She Took a Lot of Pills and Died" regards a starlet's suicide in a humorous manner, while the song "22" by Richard Buckner details the protaganist committing suicide by slitting his wrists in a bathtub. "She Took a Lot of Pills and Died" is an upbeat classic country song with Fulks' nasal tenor accompanied by acoustic guitar, electric guitar, steel guitar, fiddle, and drums. In the key of A major, the song follows a typical verse-chorus format with an instrumental break for guitar solos.[28] In contrast, "22" centers on E minor and involves very little harmonic change, moving only to D major for cadences. The guitar, banjo, and fiddle take turns doubling the vocal melody or doubling the melody (Figure 4.5) and adding a pedal tone on B, while a shaker and other percussion instruments contribute to the pacing of the song.

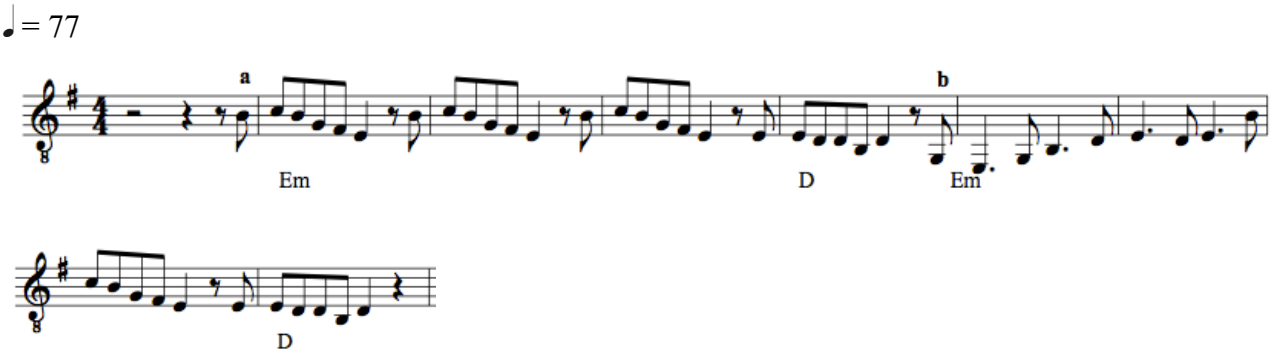

Figure 4.5: "22," Richard Buckner, melody.[29]

[28] For more information on Robbie Fulks and this song, see Chapter Three.
[29] The instrumental begins with the second phrase (labeled b), and the melody begins as written.

The motivation of the suicide in this narrative is an unreturned phone call, however, as the protagonist loses consciousness in a tub full of bloody water, the phone rings. The song builds to a climax with an instrumental verse, which briefly substitutes a G major harmony for E minor, alternating between the two chords, and a steadier rhythm from the percussion. Following this climax, Buckner sings the last lines, "I was falling asleep / You see I felt a little weak / I closed my eyes and thought of you as the phone let out a ring." The tempo slows dramatically from approximately 77 to 57 beats per minute as he sings, and the final statements of the instrumental melody are played with a ritardando to the end of the song.

"Bad Times Are Comin' Round" by the Waco Brothers is notable because of Jon Langford's clear British accent as he sings (as is the case on his track "Over the Cliff" on *For a Life of Sin*), but also due to the subject matter of the song. Indicating leftist politics and described in the press release as a "spirited even jaunty take on social injustices," the song references crooked politicians, lynchings, and the loss of civil liberties, among other issues.[30] The acoustic guitar provides consistent rhythm for the song, strumming a slightly swung combination of quarter and eighth notes; the bass bounces between the root and fifth of chords, and the drums accent beats two and four on the snare. While Langford's accent does not indicate country music, several aspects of his singing style reference older forms of country music, including his use of falsetto at the end of the second line of the verse and in the chorus, sliding from an A up to an F-sharp in falsetto, a common vocal gesture associated with Jimmie Rodgers.[31] Further, Langford interjects spoken word throughout the song in the style of Bob Wills, yelling "Aw, come on, Deano" before Dean Schlabowske's electric guitar solo, and adding "ah-ha" throughout the solo.

[30] Bloodshot Records, liner notes for *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Vol. 2* (BS 006, 1995).
[31] See Jocelyn Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Each of the tracks on these albums taken together represents an initial construction of Bloodshot's sonic identity. While the compilation format obscures a consistent sound for the record label, conclusions can be drawn from the variety of the tracks. Representing multiple styles of country music, every track references an older version of country music, and distinguishes the album clearly from mainstream country music. However, with references to historic musical forms, the albums are not a nostalgic re-creation or revival in that many tracks are transgressive in some way, whether it is the inclusion of a track from the 1950s, the surprising addition of heavy guitar distortion, or challenging subject matter. In addition to establishing the sonic identity of Bloodshot Records, these two albums were produced in an era of compact discs. As such, each album is also a material artifact and can be read as an additional text that communicated specific messages and ideas about the record label.

Album Artwork and Packaging

Produced in an era of compact discs, the packaging and liner notes were an important feature of this album. As musicologist Mark Samples notes, "Not only can [the packaging] have an influence at the point of sale, persuading a record buyer to choose one product over another, it can act as a longer-term influence once the record has been taken home."[32] *For a Life of Sin*'s distinctive artwork on the disc and liner notes serve as a physical artifact that clearly presents the co-founders' message, earlier stated in the press release and the *Tribune* feature. Here the packaging provides a visual and textual component to accompany the music, and is as a form of direct communication between the producer of the album and the consumer to convey the record label's values and identity.[33]

[32] Samples, "A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries" 101.
[33] Samples, "A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries" 101.

Bloodshot utilized the services of designer Markus Greiner to design and lay out the album artwork and inserts.[34] Babcock acknowledged how valuable graphic designer Markus Greiner's contributions were in an era of compact discs. He stated,

> [We were] trying to do it well… To me, that was an important part of being involved in it… Markus [Greiner] gave it…from the beginning, a really professional look… I had worked at Independence [Records] where they used the excuse of minimal resources to put out records that just looked shitty… So I think that paid off in certain ways because our records didn't look like [that]… Having Markus as the designer consistently right through meant there was that strong visual element that made it, that was part of it… It doesn't mean as much as it used to, or as much to some people, but to me that was a big part of it.[35]

In emphasizing the importance of the visual element, and the professional look that Greiner provided, Babcock noted that with this first album, although Bloodshot functioned as a DIY record label, which is typically characterized by amateurism, the record label was already taking steps toward more professional practices.

For a Life of Sin's trifold insert contains typical information, including the track listing and artists and credits and acknowledgements. In addition to these items, the insert features a lengthy quote from Jon Langford, along with a brief quote from Bob Boyd (of the Sundowners). Langford's quote recalls his introduction to "real hard country music" in Leeds and the impact this music had on him, and the Mekons first visit to the R and R Ranch in the Chicago Loop. Dressed in their "finest western wear," Bob Boyd of the Sundowners invited them on stage to do a few numbers.[36] He concludes, "In a hard city a million miles from the country, we're all exiles trying to keep our feet out of the corporate dog shit and forget the racism and totalitarianism that

[34] Greiner was a participant and contributor in the Chicago punk scene, and knew the founders socially and through mutual friends. For more information on his contributions to the music scene and his relationship with Bloodshot Records, see Chapter Three.
[35] Babcock, interview, October 27, 2012.
[36] Jon Langford, liner notes, *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country* (BS 001, 1994).

make this place so terrifying. Hard country ... music to drink beer to."[37] As a way to visually represent the narrative and to provide a sense of exile, the text is set over a photo of two men hanging from the gallows.

On the trifold page adjacent to this one, the credits are listed along with one passage (ca. 150 words) that provides a context for the compilation. It begins, "Country music has always had a place in Chicago," and continues to note the longevity and importance of the Sundowners.[38] It concludes, "[I]n later years, the [Double R] Ranch became renowned as an underground haunt for those seeking to mine a deeper musical vein, to lose themselves in resonant tales of disheartening fear and sodden joy. Here are a few more tales, as told by a few new tellers..."[39] This portion of the liner notes provides ample amounts of country music authenticity by placing the album directly in line with Chicago's musical past, and particularly Chicago's country music history. Further, the statement alludes to grave themes, following Langford's statements of despair and gloom, hinting at themes from the darker side of country music history.[40]

For a Life of Sin's track listing takes up the entirety of the three inside panels. This listing is kitschy and visually clean, clever and simple featuring blocks with a bold, capitalized font listing the track title, a smaller bold font with the artist, and credits listed below this information in regular font. Each block also contains a small clip-art style graphic that loosely and/or humorously relates to the track title, e.g., a wheelbarrow for the Handsome Family's "Moving

[37] Langford, liner notes, *For a Life of Sin*. All of the Sundowners were displaced southerners, and of course, Langford was not a native Chicagoan; but all embraced country music in this urban setting. Historian Bill Malone argues in *Country Music, U.S.A.* and elsewhere that country music's origins are distinctly southern, white, and working class. However, several authors emphasize the urban history of country music. See Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Wayne Daniels, *Pickin' on Peachtree: A History of Country Music in Atlanta, Georgia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); and Chad Berry, *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).
[38] Bloodshot Records, liner notes, *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country* (BS 001, 1994).
[39] Bloodshot Records, liner notes, *For a Life of Sin*.
[40] See Teresa Goddu, "Bloody Daggers and Lonesome Graveyards: The Gothic and Country Music," in *Reading Country Music: Steel Guitars, Opry Stars, and Honky Tonk Bars*, ed. Cecilia Tichi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

Furniture Around," or a rolling pin for Church Key's "Doghouse." Just as the founders have noted many times, these were little known Chicago bands (excluding Langford), and in the liner notes, much of the contact information lists a Chicago area address or post office box. Finally, the front of the insert, seen in Figure 4.6, features "Deck of Cards," original artwork by Langford featuring a collection of country music legends, including Bob Wills and Uncle Dave Macon. The artwork on the front of the CD insert for *Hell-bent* is Jon Langford's "Hank Shot Through With Arrows," as described previously. The text on the back of the insert begins, "We come to exhume Hank, not to canonize him. Unbury him not from the ground in which he achieves his final elusive rest, but from beneath the mounds of gutless swill which pass for his legacy, the suffocating spew of the Nashville hit factories."[41]

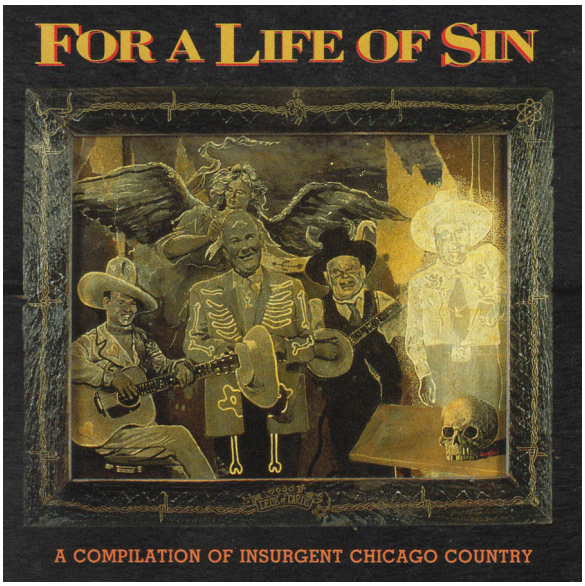

Figure 4.6: Album art for *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country*.

[41] Bloodshot Records, liner notes for *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Vol. 2* (BS 006, 1995).

Invoking the religious theme of the title, this text is overlaid on a photo credited as "Holiness Church." This photo features individuals smiling and singing; others appear to be praying. The woman in the foreground of this photo has her hands clasped and her head tilted backward with her eyes closed. Draped over her shoulders and down one arm is a snake, indicating the marginal religious practice of snake-handling.

Such bold statements and images are shocking and transgressive, but consistent with the renegade and anti-establishment identity Bloodshot clearly established with its first album. Further, the message of this CD liner and artwork is one of fervor and authenticity, and Bloodshot claims to follow in the legacy of Hank Williams, arguably country music's most authentic character, complete with a tragic, untimely death. In claiming authentic country music, the record label states that it is not simply re-creating Williams' music. The liner notes proclaim that in exhuming Williams' corpse, his remains can "properly decompose and begin to act as fertilizer to his spiritual spawn, his dust scattering and regerminating in new mutations from sea to shining sea."[42] The results can be found on albums produced by Bloodshot Records.

Critical Response to *For a Life of Sin*

Like the bands on the album, much of the initial coverage of *For a Life of Sin* (BS 001) was local, ranging from newspapers, to zines, to various alternative publications. Many early reviews of the album reflected information provided on the first press release or from the *Tribune* feature, and were overwhelmingly positive. Not surprisingly, these local reviews focus on the Chicago-ness of the project, highlighting the city's long tradition of live country music, and particularly the Sundowners two tracks. Beyond the local nature of the reviews, many reiterate the common themes of the brand from the press release and liner notes, including Jon

[42] Bloodshot Records, liner notes for *Hell-bent*.

Langford's contributions, along with regular references to the mainstream country music "boom," noting Garth Brooks or format radio playing “hot new country” and the predominance of “hat acts.”

One of the first reviews of the album appeared in *Newcity*, an independent, free weekly Chicago newspaper that specializes in music, stage, film and art. This review begins with a quote from the press release, and describes "half of the acts spring[ing] from the rock scene" and positions the album within the "nationwide boom of so-called alternative country." The author highlights songs from Freakwater and the Texas Rubies, and remarkably does not mention Jon Langford.[43]

A review in the *Daily Southtown*, a newspaper covering and distributed on the south side of the city, begins with a reference to the current state of country music ("boot-scootin', Garth-lovin', hat-wearin' kickers"), and contrasts this scenario with Bloodshot's compilation "that proves that Chicago remains, decades after the WLS Barn Dance, a great place for all types of country music." Further, the review reiterates that the bands and music on this album "would be equally at home in a country honky tonk or an urban punk bar," and highlights Jon Langford, Freakwater, and some popular local bands, along with the contributions from the Sundowners. The review concludes with declaration of authenticity and sincerity, noting, "The performances are all natural, honest and fun. And that's more true to the country spirit than most of the ultra-slick stuff coming out of Nashville these days."[44]

Coverage outside the city of Chicago was largely the result of the founders reaching out to various publications and writers across the country. Co-founder Eric Babcock recalled,

> We had gotten this good local press, and we were really pleased with the degree to which that happened, and…I used something like the *Musicians Guide to Touring* [*and*

[43] Ben Kim, "Raw Material," *Newcity*, July 21, 1994.
[44] B. Scott Hersey, *Daily Southtown*, August 12, 1994.

> *Promotion*] to figure out where there might be other alternative weeklies or just writers… that just might get what we were doing. And [I] sent it around…to fifteen or twenty [writers nationally] and got some really positive response… One of my favorite responses was a writer…in Nashville, music editor for the [*Nashville*] *Scene* wrote it up. One day…this fax just showed up. I think maybe he had sent a tear sheet [preview of the article]… It was this review [by] Bill Friskics-Warren… He got stuff out of it that I didn't even know was in there…like referencing string band traditions. But that was kind of the basis for a relationship with a whole bunch of writers that came to be a really important part of [Bloodshot's] growth going forward.[45]

It is slightly ironic that a writer working in the city associated with mainstream country, Nashville, TN, provided a review that served as a catalyst for a Chicago alternative country record label's success. The review from this well-known writer in Nashville certainly provided broader exposure for the fledgling record label. Bill Friskics-Warren, author and music journalist for the *Nashville Scene* (Music City's alternative weekly newspaper), wrote a full page positive review of *For a Life of Sin*, and connected the album to country music history and to country music's roots. This coverage increased Bloodshot's exposure, and introduced the record label to new audiences beyond the outskirts of Chicago.

Friskics-Warren's review begins by citing the city of Chicago's history as home to the WLS Barn Dance in the 1920s and its more recent success as a 1990s indie rock "hotbed." He states, "The newly formed Bloodshot Records, a label that hopes to establish itself as a vital source for alternative country music, combines the best of both of these eras with its first release."[46] Friskics-Warren's extensive and positive review of *For a Life of Sin* placed the album within a particular tradition of country music by comparing various tracks on the album to other artists. The many artists the author references include the Carter Family and Webb Pierce, but also "*Exile*-era Stones" and Gram Parsons and the Fallen Angels; Friskics-Warren also references Austin country artist Jimmie Dale Gilmore and "performers inspired by Kitty [Wells]

[45] Babcock, interview, October 27, 2012.
[46] Bill Friskics-Warren, "City Twang," review of *For a Life of Sin: A Compilation of Insurgent Chicago Country*, *Nashville Scene*, January 19, 1995.

Lefty [Frizzell], and Buck [Owens]." He also highlights the Sundowners two tracks, referring to their presence as "historic credibility" for the album. By framing the album in terms of country music history, its legends, and some of alternative country's favorite country-rockers, Bill Friskics-Warren connected Bloodshot Records to a type of "historic credibility" in their own right. These connections built upon the type of authenticity that country music has constructed throughout its history, and thus provides the record label with a particularly robust kind of credibility; one that hearkens back to "authentic" country music, and touches on the type of rhetoric alternative country became known for.[47]

This review also acknowledged the importance of Jon Langford's contributions, and notes the artist's "hand all over [the album]," including producing one track, writing and performing another track, contributing liner notes, and providing the album art. He emphasizes Langford's work with the Mekons, interpreting the album art as a critique of "country music's current lack of vitality," while also noting the compilation's "statement of purpose." He cites a line from Langford's "Over the Cliff:" "Success on someone else's terms don't mean a fucking thing," and parallels this approach with the Mekons entire career of being at odds with the music industry. Further, the author refers Warshaw's original quote about the bands on the album as "underground - as opposed to underexposed," noting the punk origins of the record label. Finally, Friskics-Warren concluded the piece by drawing connections between the Mekons cover of Hank Williams' hit "Lost Highway" on *Fear and Whisky*, which he lauds, and the title of the Bloodshot compilation taken from this song.

As Babcock recounted, this review was notable at the time due to the reach and significance of the *Nashville Scene*, along with Bill Friskics-Warren's reputation as a music

[47] See Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

writer. However, what the review had to say was more significant. The review provided a sense of authority to the project and substantiated many of Bloodshot's bold claims regarding the album. The numerous references to country music legends, along with alternative country heroes might have simply been name-dropping on the part of the reviewer, however it also touched on constructions of authenticity for the record label that would be employed and reinforced for years to come. Friskics-Warren's review was published in January 1995, and a postscript notes that *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Volume 2* would released in the following month. Much of the coverage of the second compilation simply recounted information that had already been published, while also reiterating issues raised by Friskics-Warren.

Re-branding Bloodshot: Shifting Sonic Identity

Bloodshot's first two compilations, along with the Waco Brothers full-length album *To the Last Dead Cowboy* (BS 006) in 1995, resonated strongly with fans of alt.country, and these albums represented one of many flourishing regional scenes. However, with the addition key alt.country artists, Bloodshot expanded its roster and scope beyond a regional identity, including Whiskeytown, Neko Case, Alejandro Escovedo, and eventually a solo Ryan Adams. These artists were some of the most recognizable and successful alt.country artists of the late 1990s, and they reinforced Bloodshot's insurgent country music brand, positioning the record label as an important and influential presence in alt.country.

Bloodshot Records stands out among other such alt.country record labels that began in the mid-1990s in that it is still around today, nor has it partnered with or been subsumed by a major label. As label manager Scott Schaeffer claimed somewhat jokingly, "We were the best at

it."[48] Bloodshot radio and tour promoter Joe Swank explained, "The [albums] that knocked it out of the park [for us] in that era tended to be… [alt.country]," referencing Ryan Adams' *Heartbreaker* (BS 071, 2000); Neko Case's *Furnace Room Lullaby* (BS 050, 2000), the Waco Brothers' *Cowboy in Flames* (BS 015, 1997), and the Old 97's *Wreck Your Life* (BS 009, 1995).[49] Due in large part to the success of these artists, it is clear that the record label and its insurgent country had become identified with the larger phenomenon of alternative country music.

Rob Miller acknowledged the utility of the descriptors "alt.country" and "insurgent country," particularly as Bloodshot was just getting started. However, he also recalled recognizing very early that these labels would be limiting.

> Internally we haven't used that term [insurgent country] for like 10 years…because so much of our stuff doesn't [fit that now]… I go back again to BS 011, which is the first Robbie Fulks' record, [and it was] the first time I heard 'well that doesn't sound like a Bloodshot Record.' I knew that that insurgent country thing was going to bite us in the ass. And we started downplaying [it] already by that time [in November 1996], and within a year of forming, I knew it was gonna be something of a critical straightjacket.[50]

Within just two years of the label's first album, the record label had established its association with insurgent country so clearly that its audience and fans had clear expectations of Bloodshot Records projects. Miller acknowledged that the label's association with the term was directly related to the importance and success of their early work, yet he also stressed the need for Bloodshot to move beyond their association with only country music in order to succeed going forward.

Beyond the creative limitations of these terms, the historical moment of alt.country waned, and alt.country albums were simply not as commercially viable. Label manager

[48] Scott Schaeffer, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, December 7, 2012.
[49] Joe Swank, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, September 22, 2012.
[50] Miller, interview, June 16, 2011.

Schaeffer described an intentional business decision that influenced the music and artists produced and signed by the label,

> [A]s the shine started wearing off the alt.country peach, as it were… we used the term alt.country ghetto. We were being more and more marginalized. Even the artists themselves didn't want to have that moniker... So we definitely made a conscious effort through a period of years to align ourselves with artists who were well outside of that. We were very careful with our language, we got angry with distributors who would say hey you're the country piece, it's like no, no we don't wanna be that. We need you to help tell a different story.[51]

Being associated with alt.country had become a liability for the record label. Regardless of how successful their previous alt.country artists had been in the past, moving forward, Bloodshot had to expand its roster beyond the boundaries of country music and change its branding strategy.

The record label worked to distance itself from insurgent country and alt.country, and cast a wider net. Bloodshot currently describes itself in a document on its website entitled "Who We Are and What We Do" and proclaims both inclusivity and marked exclusivity:

> Since 1994, Bloodshot Records has championed the music that lurks between genres. We've always been drawn to the good stuff nestled in the dark, nebulous cracks where punk, country, soul, pop, bluegrass, blues and rock mix and mingle and mutate…. If you want unaffected rock and roll…old school honky tonk untarnished by the shit Nashville has chosen to promote for the last generation? We got it. Psychedelic-inflected roots or catchy pop gems…Deep, DEEP soul filtered through the prism of garage or surf? Yeah, baby. You want blistering fast psychobilly or thrash-grass? Yup, we got that, too. We've also got hundreds of sonic variations in between. Yes, a lot of it defies easy pigeonholing, but we think that's a strength, not a damnable quality or a marketing liability. The organic re-invention of music is what keeps music alive and we seek out like-minded artists.[52]

While a version of this statement dates back to the late 1990s, when it was called a "manifesto" that appeared on a mail order catalog, this statement both redoubles much of the early identity Bloodshot established, and also expands its musical scope. The disdain and judgment on

[51] Schaeffer, interview, December 7, 2012.
[52] Bloodshot Records, "Who We Are and What We Do?" http://www.bloodshotrecords.com/about-us (accessed March 16, 2009).

mainstream (country) music remains, but the record label also claims a broad and diverse catalog beyond country music.

Considering Bloodshot's expansion and shift away from country music as a new branding strategy, the record label emphasized brand values of authenticity and an anti-commercial stance over the branding of a particular genre or musical style. The "Who We Are" statement establishes that Bloodshot's purview is "the music that lurks between genres" and "hundreds of sonic variations in between," in which their initial output of country music was but a small representation. However, since the record label had become associated with a certain musical style as well as with certain artists, and because brand consciousness is not always the same from the perspective of the producer and consumers, it took concerted effort and time for Bloodshot to make the transformation effective.[53] As brands are inherently referential, Bloodshot's brand signified "ideas that [had] great emotional appeal" for its fans, audiences, and consumers, and as such, the record label struggled to successfully shift its branding strategy because its brand had come to mean something that sounded like a Bloodshot record.[54] As Bloodshot's brand came to signify a particular sound, an examination of its anniversary compilation albums, marking five, ten, and fifteen years of Bloodshot Records makes clear its intentional shifts in its sonic identity.

Live shows, parties and a host of publicity, marked Bloodshot Records' fifth anniversary, along its release of a two-disc compilation featuring forty new tracks, *Down to the Promised Land: 5 Years of Bloodshot Records* (BS 060, 2000). Coverage and reviews of *Down to the Promised Land* emphasize the record label's alt.country importance, as John Duffy notes for music website *allmusic*, "Chicago's Bloodshot Records has proven itself to be perhaps the most

[53] Astrid Kurad and Mike Friedrichsen, "Brand Marketing in the Music Industry: Record Labels as Brands - Opportunities Especially for Independents," in Conference Papers of the International Communication Association Annual Meeting (2006), 3; Samples, "A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries," 14.
[54] Samples, "A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries," 12.

important Americana-no Depression-alt-country heap… The label has always prided itself in merging punk and country in the most unholy of matrimonies, and *Down to the Promised Land* proves the marriage works."[55] Similarly, *No Depression* reviewer Linda Ray associates the record label with establishing country music boundaries and its longevity, stating,

> With its roster of critical darlings both vintage and fresh, [Bloodshot Records] has all but secured the perimeters of country music in five short years… While other record labels large and small dissipated in the late 1990s with restructuring, more restructuring and all the attendant attrition, Bloodshot's…fury [has] delivered the scrappy indie to something like durability.[56]

Both reviews note Bloodshot's importance within alt.country, and Ray seems to find it remarkable that the record label has attained a fifth anniversary, yet she also acknowledges the label's longetivity might not be a fluke.

Down to the Promised Land works as an extension of the label's first album *For a Life of Sin* in that all of its tracks can be connected to some form of country music. With its forty tracks, *Down to the Promised Land* features alt.country regulars, such as the Waco Brothers, Old 97's, Neko Case, Ryan Adams, and Alejandro Escovedo, but also extends the boundaries of the genre with tracks by the Yayhoos and Bare, Jr. Several surprising covers appear, including two classic rock anthems with The Waco Brothers covering The Who's "Baba O'Riley," and Red Star Belgrade's version of AC/DC's "Highway to Hell." Finally, Unholy Trio provides an ironic and somewhat humorous country cover of Public Enemy's track "Bring the Noise."

In addition to these unexpected tracks, what is even more significant about this expansive collection is the range of contrasting styles and approaches to country music. For example, The

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[55] John Duffy, review of *Down to the Promised Land: 5 Years of Bloodshot Records*, *allmusic by Rovi*, http://www.allmusic.com/album/down-to-the-promised-land-5-years-of-bloodshot-records-mw0000068311 (accessed January 18, 2013).

[56] Linda Ray, review of *Down to the Promised Land: 5 Years of Bloodshot Records*, *No Depression* No. 28 (July–August 2000), http://archives.nodepression.com/2000/07/various-artists-down-to-the-promised-land-five-years-of-bloodshot-records/ (accessed January 18, 2013).

Meat Purveyors' track titled "Sunshine" is an upbeat, bluegrass tune. Moving along at 179 beats per minute, the track begins with a banjo breakdown, before the acoustic guitar plays through the chord progression one time (A – D – E – A). As this progression is repeated, the rest of the band enters with upright bass, fiddle, and mandolin. The song is in a verse-chorus form, and continues the same chord progression throughout. The lead female vocal is sung by Jo Walston, and harmony is sung by Cherilyn DiMond, the upright bass player, on the choruses. Figure 4.7 details the song's closing featuring a typical bluegrass ending with the fiddle and mandolin playing the melody in unison, and the guitar and bass playing only on the down beats until the final cadence on beats two and three.

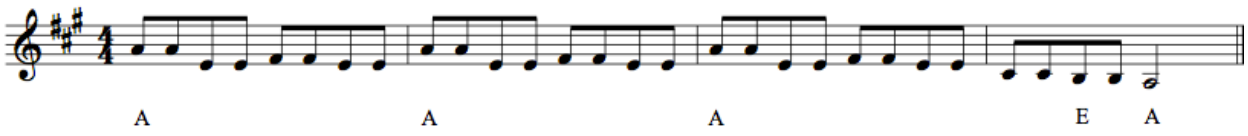

Figure 4.7: "Sunshine," The Meat Purveyors, closing material.

In contrast to this traditional acoustic song, The Yayhoos open the two-CD set with a song called "Oh! Chicago." This "supergroup" band features artists associated with various southern rock, alt.country, and rock projects. Led by Dan Baird, formerly of the Georgia Satellites, this track is a country rock/southern rock song in the vein of the Satellites hit, "Keep Your Hands to Yourself," as the song details the experiences of a "redneck girl" in Chicago chasing "high-class dreams." Riff-based blues guitar pervades the song, as Baird sings with a pronounced southern dialect and is accompanied by high tenor harmonies and background oh's throughout.

In the history of alt.country, Ryan Adams was best known as the somewhat volatile, unpredictable member and face of the band Whiskeytown. This band was a darling of alt.country

fans and the magazine *No Depression* alike, and the band's internal strife and rotating personnel were well publicized.[57] Adams' track on *Down to the Promised Land* was associated with the start of his solo career, as his solo album *Heartbreaker* (BS 071) was released months after the compilation album in 2000. "Monday Night" begins with characteristic Adams' clean, melodic acoustic guitar style, with a "dulcitar" playing a lead line, before Adams' vocal enters. The song remains acoustic guitar driven, but a full band with electric guitar, bass, and drums enters after two verses and choruses. Adams sings with a slight southern accent that is most evident in the bridge, as he sings of unrequited love. All of the melodic lead lines in the song include a hint of twang featuring bends and blue notes, but the distinctive timbre of the dulcitar is the most prevalent signifier of country music in the song.

In its twentieth year, Rob Miller emphasized Bloodshot's current interest in "people [that] play with all kinds of roots music," and this penchant was already clear on *For a Decade of Sin: 11 Years of Bloodshot Records* (BS 112, 2005).[58] If *Down to the Promised Land* stretched the record label's country boundaries, then *For a Decade of Sin* explored a new sonic identity. Although Bloodshot staples such as the Wacos and Old 97's are present, this album is more notable for the number of non-Bloodshot artists present. The booklet that accompanies the CD states, "What you hold before you is not a retrospective. Sure, there are a few skeletons from our closet, but our eye is on the future – we know where we've been, after all."[59] The appearance of longtime friends of the record label, such as Richard Buckner and the Handsome Family, on the album is not surprising. Further, Dr. Ralph Stanley, John Doe, and Hank III are established

[57] For example, Peter Blackstock's subtitle for a feature on Whiskeytown in 1997 states, "Poised to crash and burn on the wings of success, Whiskeytown decided to make a great record instead." See also Blacktock, "Falling Down, Standing Up," *No Depression* 10 (July–August 1997), http://archives.nodepression.com/1997/07/falling-down-standing-up/#sthash.NN60wW61.dpuf (accessed January 12, 2014).
[58] Miller, interview, June 16, 2001.
[59] Bloodshot Records, liner notes to *For a Decade of Sin* (BS 112, 2005).

artists with clear connections to country music. However, the label makes its intentions clearer with appearances by non-country indie rock artists, such as My Morning Jacket, Minus 5 (a pop collective featuring Seattle alt-rocker Scott McCaughey and R.E.M.'s Peter Buck), and Crooked Fingers (featuring the longtime frontman Eric Bachmann of North Carolina indie rock institution Archers of Loaf).

"Sputnik 57" performed by The Minus 5 opens with a reverb-drenched single electric guitar line that recurs throughout the song (see Figure 4.8). A surf rock song, the instrumentation of this track includes electric guitar, bass guitar, piano, and drums. McCaughey's vocals feature a great of reverb, as he sings and occasionally yells about hopes of a better life. Several guitarists take energetic solos, all accompanied by McCaughey's rowdy piano and the drums.

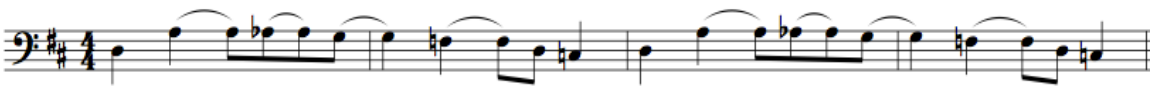

Figure 4.8: "Sputnik 57," The Minus 5, opening melody (played by lead guitar).

Crooked Fingers' track is a piano ballad titled "Ship to Spain." After Bachmann sings through one verse and chorus, a trumpet solo is accompanied by piano and bowed double bass. While these tracks are perhaps the exceptions on *For a Decade of Sin*, their presence is telling: they would not have had a place on earlier Bloodshot compilations.

This two-disc, forty-two track *For a Decade of Sin* received a record review in *Pitchfork*, the indie rock Internet publications, indicating that many of these artists were seen as falling in the category of indie rock rather than country. Critic Stephen M. Deusner notes, "Their aim is to show how the Bloodshot aesthetic has spread beyond the label's modest stable of artists into the

wider indie realm."[60] While this review later references Bloodshot's connections to alt.country, the emphasis is on record label's widening musical reach.

Bloodshot intentionally moved away from insurgent country as a branding strategy when the utility and profitability of its original brand ran its course. Additionally, the label also had to distance itself sonically from these categories and expand its musical offerings, and in the case of its tenth anniversary album, claimed artists clearly outside of the label's original brand of insurgent country. Bloodshot did not abandon the sounds of insurgent country, as examples of this remain on its tenth anniversary album, but rather expanded the scope of its sonic identity. Within the context of this broader sonic identity, Bloodshot's next compilation projects emphasized liveness and performance rather than a particular musical style or genre, an aspect of the record label's brand and identity dating back to its first album.

Conclusion

Bloodshot Records' founder were participants & contributors in the punk and underground music scene in Chicago, and they established their record label following the model of DIY punk record labels guided by the philosophies of punk and the practices of DIY punk record labels. However, the music on the record label's early albums was not punk, but rather country. Described as "insurgent" country, the songs on these albums follow traditional forms of country music, yet are transgressive in a variety of ways, challenging mainstream popular song forms and expectations and distinguishing the record label's product from mainstream country music. The record label became strongly identified with alt.country due to its earliest albums,

[60] Stephen M. Deusner, Record review of *For a Decade of Sin: 11 Years of Bloodshot Records*, *Pitchfork* (November 7, 2005), http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/2102-for-a-decade-of-sin-11-years-of-bloodshot-records/ (accessed January 20, 2013).

however this association soon became a liability, and Bloodshot worked to expand its generic offerings and distance itself from insurgent and/or alt.country.

Bloodshot did not follow the musical style of DIY punk record labels, but it did model these labels in practice. Scholar Alan O'Connor argues that the primary concern of DIY punk record labels is autonomy, or separation from major record labels, while Kevin Dunn emphasizes the importance of small-scale production and community building as key characteristics of such record labels.[61] Bloodshot Records' discursive identity was established and solidified relatively quickly following the release of its first two full-length albums, within the span of approximately one year. Bloodshot's strongly worded press releases presented the record label in opposition to mainstream country, emphasized the label a community-minded and DIY, and positioned itself as the champions of authentic country music, a message that was reiterated multiple times through press and publicity.

[61] Alan O'Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008); Kevin Dunn, "'If It Ain't Cheap, It Ain't Punk': Walter Benjamin's Progressive Cultural Production and DIY Punk Record Labels," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 2, 222.

CHAPTER FIVE

SONIC SCRAPBOOKING: BLOODSHOT RECORDS' USE OF THE COMPILATION FORMAT

The compilation format has served as a key component of Bloodshot Records' reputation and identity throughout its twenty-year history. In addition to the practice of promoting the artists on its roster, Bloodshot has used compilations, tribute albums, and samplers to construct its brand, business practices, and values. Beyond these material and sonic artifacts, the record label has replicated the compilation format at live events beginning with its initial CD release parties and continuing with its participation in music festivals and other live events, such as anniversary parties. Such performances have enhanced the record label's commitment to the live music scene, served to establish a sense of locality, and also provided a sense of "realness" to its roster. In addition to these official events, Bloodshot artists have been well-represented locally in performances and events in Chicago, also characterized by a compilation format.

In this chapter, I analyze Bloodshot's use of the compilation format throughout its history. I examine the label's anniversary compilation albums in light of the record label's discursive identity, and survey the role these albums play in establishing Bloodshot's sonic identity. Finally, I consider how the compilation format is performatively transferred to live settings at official Bloodshot events, and also at Chicago-area events featuring Bloodshot artists and musicians. I suggest that the compilation format follows an aesthetic that privileges juxtaposition and pastiche established with the practice of mix-taping, and this type of format has been important for

Bloodshot Records in establishing and enhancing the record label's branding and sonic identity. Live events and performances following this sort of juxtaposition, featuring multiple artists and bands, have also reinforced the record label's commitment to live music, and reveal Bloodshot's influence and presence within the local music scene in Chicago.

Mix Tapes

The practice of compilation has been part of Bloodshot Records' identity since its inception, as the label's first album was a compilation featuring Chicago-area artists and bands. Bloodshot's founders, Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warshaw, solicited and collected these audio tracks, selected which songs would be on the album, and sequenced them for the final product. Babcock, Miller, and Warshaw curated the album, using the audio tracks submitted by individual artists and bands. Such curation, along with the juxtaposition of bands and artists, recalls the practice of mix taping, and also followed the founders' experiences of regularly spinning records and DJing at local bars. While Bloodshot's compilations followed a mix tape's format of juxtaposition and pastiche, the record label also appropriated the political and cultural meanings associated with mix tapes, including a DIY model of cultural production and distribution and lo-fi aesthetics.

A mix tape is a non-commercial collection of songs compiled by a single individual, often specifically for another individual. This practice was made possible by technological advancements in recording equipment and the accessibility of cassette tapes, and flourished in the 1980s.[1] Musician Thurston Moore, known for his work with the band Sonic Youth, notes the social and personal nature of mix taping, recalling that tapes were made to give to friends or

[1] Rob Drew, "Mixed Blessings: The Commercial Mix and the Future of Music Aggregation," *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (October 2005), 535.

specifically for a significant other, as the sharing of mix tapes marked structural moments in one's life or relationships or served to educate friends.[2] Sociologist Paul V. Stock identifies several categories of mix tapes, including the letter tape, the mood/event tape, and the lesson tape. The letter tape reflects the taste and aesthetics of the user or receiver, "allow[ing] the maker to share his or her identity safely or show off the breadth of their musical taste."[3] The mood/event tape follows structural or meaningful moments, e.g., road trip, spring break, break ups, etc., or any number of themes reflecting an individual's personality, while the lesson tape serves to introduce the listener to new or unfamiliar music.[4]

As has been mythologized in Nick Hornsby's book *High Fidelity* and movie adaptation, the practice of mix taping involves particular aesthetics and "rules." The protagonist of the narrative, struggling record store owner Rob, notes, "You've got to kick it off with a corker, to hold the attention… and then you've got to up it a notch, or cool it a notch… and you can't have two tracks by the same artists side by side, unless you've done the whole thing in pairs, and… oh there are a lot of rules."[5] Regardless of the guidelines, the practice has historically involved careful curation, thought, time, and often unique and creative user-created artwork on the cassette cover. If the rise of the practice of mix taping was in response to a "discontentment with the inflexibility of music buying and listening options at the height of the single-artist album," the seemingly endless possibilities for mix tapes democratized music production and consumption.[6]

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[2] Thurston Moore, "Introduction," in *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, Thurston Moore, ed. (New York: Universe Publishing, 2004), 9–12.
[3] Paul V. Stock, "Sociology and the Mix Tape: A Metaphor of Creativity," *The American Sociologist*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (October 2010), 283–4.
[4] Stock, "Sociology and the Mix Tape: A Metaphor of Creativity," 283–4.
[5] Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity* (London: Riverhead Trade, 1995), quoted in Warren Henry, "The Art of the Mix(tape)," *The Federalist*, November 23, 2013, http://thefederalist.com/2013/11/23/the-art-of-the-mixtape/ (accessed August 30, 2014).
[6] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 535.

Mix tape practice evolved as CD technology supplanted cassettes, and eventually became a matter of "playlists" with the onset of digitalization.[7] Creating a mix tape no longer involved the time-intensive work of "syncing up two tape decks or waiting all day with your finger on the record button for the radio to play that perfect song."[8] Rather, as journalist David Gallagher notes, "Burning a mix CD involves arranging a playlist of songs in a program like Apple's iTunes, loading a blank disc and clicking on a button, a process that is far easier and faster than making a mix tape."[9] Yet even easier than burning CDs, online music services such as Spotify allow individuals, bands, record labels, and corporations to share and stream playlists.

Beyond the actual practices of compiling and sharing mix tapes, the symbolism of the cassette possessed political and cultural meaning. In an article celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the cassette tape, journalist James Paul associates the cassette tape and the culture of mix tapes with DIY and a punk ideology,

> By the late 1970s, the cassette was political. David Toop, the musician and writer, calls them "post-punk." "A lot of the music that came out of the DIY movement was only ever released on cassette. People believed in it in an ideological sense. You didn't need a lot of money. You didn't need a label. You didn't need the record industry at all."[10]

This sentiment identifies the importance of cassette technology in music sharing and distribution as a way to bypass the larger commercial structures of the music industry. Similarly, Peter Manuel notes in his book *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, cassette technology dramatically altered the popular music landscape of 1980s India, shifting

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[7] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 536; See also Patrik Wikström and Robert Burnett, "Same Songs, Different Wrapping: The Rise of the Compilation Album," *Popular Music and Society* 32, No. 4 (October 2009): 507–522.
[8] Michael Resnick, "The Digital "Mix Tape" Comes Of Age," *Burnlounge News* Issue 1, http://www.enewsbuilder.net/dmscholl/e_article000583218.cfm?x=b11,0,w (accessed February 17. 2014).
[9] David F. Gallagher, "For the Mix Tape, A Digital Upgrade And Notoriety," *New York Times*, January 30, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/30/technology/for-the-mix-tape-a-digital-upgrade-and-notoriety.html (accessed February 17, 2014).
[10] James Paul, "Last Night a Mix Tape Saved My Life," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2003, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2003/sep/26/2 (accessed February 17, 2014).

dissemination, and consumption of popular music from a monopolistic multinational LP manufacturer to local grassroots cassette producers.[11]

Finally, cassettes have come to signify lo-fi culture, and the physical cassette is now a nostalgic throwback to a previous era.[12] Gallagher notes, "For many music fans past their college years, the mere sight of a mix on cassette tape can be enough to bring back memories of old crushes and road trips."[13] The book *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture*, compiled and edited by Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore, also plays on the idea of the cassette and mix tape as nostalgic.[14] A collection of essays, artwork, and track listings of individual mix tapes from musicians, artists, and writers, this work employs a courier font that is smudged and inconsistent, evoking typewritten text, while many of the photos and images are grainy and low definition. This nostalgic presentation connects the practice of mix taping with lo-fi culture and DIY aesthetics.

Compilation Albums

Bloodshot Records did not release mix tapes, but the label's use of the compilation format followed the practice and aesthetics of mix-taping. Bloodshot's founders, Eric Babcock, Rob Miller, and Nan Warshaw, compiled, curated, and distributed this first album as a means to "educate" the community about the local bands on the album. A notable distinction between mix tapes and compilation albums is that the latter is typically a mass-produced commodity, lacking the personal and social nature of mix tapes. Thus, as a business endeavor, albeit small scale,

[11] Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
[12] See Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2005) and Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997).
[13] Gallagher, "For the Mix Tape."
[14] Thurston Moore, ed., *Mix Tape: The Art of Cassette Culture* (New York: Universe Pub., 2004).

Bloodshot's compilation albums cannot be categorized as mix tapes. However, Drew notes that the compilation album draws on the cultural meaning of mix tapes,

> What all [compilations] have in common is that they implicitly or explicitly capitalize on the trope of the mix tape… They often celebrate lesser-known gems over smash hits and there is an attention to flow and coherence in their selections and segues. With varying degrees of success, they aspire to the mix tape's quirkiness and edginess, its sense of character and taste, its temporal and relational meaningfulness.[15]

As Drew indicates, the producers of compilation albums play upon the cultural meaning and value of mix tapes, yet the success of such appropriation is always limited by the impersonal nature of typical compilation projects. That these projects are regularly produced by major record labels or corporations necessarily separates such albums from the personal, relational nature of mix tape practice.

Multi-artist compilation albums have existed as long as there have been albums, dating back to anthologies of reissued recordings aimed at audiophile markets, such as Harry Smith's *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1927-1932) and Lenny Kaye's "Nuggets" collections of garage rock from the 1960s.[17] More recently, various companies, such as Rhino, have followed Kaye's example in unearthing forgotten pop artists and genres.[18] More commonly, as Wikstrom and Burnett note, compilation albums usually follow a specific theme, recorded by the same artist, or by various artists. Examples include the career of a certain artist, a connection to a media brand not necessarily known for music, a genre, particular activities or moods, a time period (e.g. hits from the 1980s) or a specific season, a specific record label, or simply a collection of recent hits. A single-artist compilation can also be a collection of rare singles, B-

[15] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 537.
[17] Harry Smith Archives, "Bio," http://harrysmitharchives.com/1_bio/index.html (accessed November 19, 2013); Mark Deming, Review of Nuggets: Original Artyfacts from the First Psychedelic Era 1965-1968, *Allmusic*, http://www.allmusic.com/album/nuggets-original-artyfacts-from-the-first-psychedelic-era-1965-1968-mw0000599845 (accessed November 19, 2013).
[18] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 537.

sides, or radio sessions.[19] Similarly, sampler albums have become more common, and "a wide range of music and non-music publications have turned to CD samplers as vehicles for defining themselves and their audiences."[20] Such samplers associate a brand with particular artists or genres and "an audible equivalent to the magazine's lifestyle niche," yet also serve to promote the featured artists and bands on the sampler.[21] However, the "label sampler" is a compilation produced by a record label featuring its roster of artists, often used to promote the record label, publicize current artists, and introduce new artists.[22] Finally, the advent of online file sharing and music streaming services allows for the possibility of playlist sharing to stream or purchase through services such as iTunes, Spotify, and others.

Of Bloodshot Records' first one hundred releases, thirteen are EP's or singles, leaving 87 full-length albums.[24] Of these, nine are compilations, and five are tribute albums. Thus, from 1994 to 2002, nearly twenty percent of Bloodshot's albums involve multiple artists on one album, and/or various artists performing the work of other artists on one album.[25] As a notable portion of the label's output, these albums, along with various free and promotional samplers that the record label has offered on an annual and seasonal basis have had a great impact on the record label's identity and reputation. Such products provide greater exposure for the record label and its growing catalogue, while also reminding fans of the record label's community-minded approach.

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[19] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 509.
[20] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 540.
[21] Drew, "Mixed Blessings," 540.
[22] Patrik Wikström and Robert Burnett, "Same Songs, Different Wrapping: The Rise of the Compilation Album." *Popular Music and Society* 32, No. 4 (October 2009), 14.
[24] A single contains one or two songs, related to the 7" inch 45 rpm vinyl album. An EP (extended play) is an album that contains more songs than a single, but not enough tracks to merit the status of full-length album (typically ten or more tracks).
[25] Bloodshot Releases as of June 2011 provided by Joe Swank (BloodshotRelease062011.xls). Several of the 7" releases feature covers or are described as tributes.

Samplers and Digital Playlists

Bloodshot began releasing an annual sampler CD in 2001. These samplers are similar in format to compilation albums, and feature songs from new artists and upcoming albums, tracks from older albums, and "deep cuts," such as older tracks from early albums or B-sides of singles. Unlike the record label's compilation albums, the samplers are promotional and not for sale; they serve as a "gift with purchase" with online orders (or mail orders in the past), and are given away as party or event favors, or with CD or LP purchases at shows and live events such as anniversary parties or at South by Southwest. Generally the disc is in sparse packaging consisting of a printed cardboard sleeve with the track listing printed on the back of the sleeve, and no additional liner notes or details. Sampler sleeves have featured Langford's artwork, cartoon sketches, old photographs, and simple, solid color backgrounds (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1: Bloodshot Records Sampler 2014, cover art.[26]

[26] Bloodshot Records, "Bloodshot Records Sampler 2014," http://noisetrade.com/bshq/bloodshot-records-sampler-2014 (accessed September 1, 2014).

For example, Langford's piece, "Hank Shot Through," that serves as the album art for *Hell-bent: Insurgent Country, Vol. 2* is also the artwork for a cardboard sleeve for a sampler called **"**Finest-Kind Insurgent Country," as seen in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2: "Finest-Kind Insurgent Country," Bloodshot Records Sampler, cover art.[27]

In addition to the annual sampler, the record label has released similar free products for various occasions, such as a "Spring Cleaning Sampler," a South by Southwest Sampler, an "Indie-Pendants Sampler" (released near Independence Day), a "Summer 12-pack Sampler," and a Halloween Mix. Occasionally, these samplers are available on disc packaged like the annual samplers, but more recently, these specialty collections are available for free as digital downloads at sites such as Amazon, emusic, Noisetrade, or Spotify. For example, in the summer of 2013, the record label advertised its "Bloodshot Records Summer 12 Pack Sampler" as seen in Figure 5.3, with the following description, "Download cards will be included in all orders from

[27] Discogs, **"**Finest-Kind Insurgent Country" (2003), http://www.discogs.com/Various-Finest-Kind-Insurgent-Country-A-Bloodshot-Records-Sampler/release/4487319 (accessed September 27, 2014).

the Bloodshot online store this summer and passed along wherever Bloodshot minions be lurking."[28] The sampler was available to those in attendance at Bloodshot events, or by purchasing items on the label's website.

Figure 5.3: Bloodshot Summer 12 Pack Sampler 2013, cover art.[29]

Bloodshot's samplers are similar in format to its commercially released compilation albums, yet the samplers function in a slightly way than the compilation albums. Most notably, these label samplers are not for sale, and can be compared to the mood/event mix tape, often reflecting special occasions or themes, while including specially chosen songs to align with the event. According to Alan O'Connor, DIY punk-inspired labels distinguished themselves from and "mainstream" or "commercial" punk labels via modes of production and distribution with the former emphasizing small-scale cultural production with little emphasis on financial gain.[30] In

[28] Bloodshot Records, "Free Summer Sampler," July 25, 2013, https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/news/free-summer-sampler (accessed August 31, 2014).
[29] Bloodshot Records, "Free Summer Sampler."
[30] Alan O'Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Lexington: Plymouth, 2008).

this instance, Bloodshot Records, as a business, has found a small way to employ this mode of cultural production by providing its fans with free music via samplers or digital downloads. Certainly, these samplers are produced for a wide audience and also serve to promote the record label and its artists, but they also reinforce Bloodshot's connections to mix taping and DIY aesthetics via informal distribution, the inclusion of rare or older tracks from the catalogue, and the use of simple, unique album artwork and packaging. Bloodshot's practice of providing free music to its fans and customers aligns with an alternative mode of production and distribution, further distancing the record label from mainstream practices and major record labels.

Tribute Albums

In addition to compilations and samplers, five of Bloodshot's first one hundred albums are tribute albums, featuring multiple artists performing the work of other artists. Content on these albums can be categorized as cover songs.[31] As music theorist Jocelyn Neal notes, cover songs "are a staple of the country music genre and one of its most deeply entrenched musical practices," and as argued by country music historian Don Cusic and others, cover songs are profitable for the music industry. Artists perform cover songs to satisfy audiences and to prove his or her abilities with reliable and familiar material, and to establish a particular musical lineage. As Neal notes, "[T]he right musical lineage is an essential part of any country musician's credibility within a genre that is all about tradition and ritual."[32] While particular

[31] Cover song "occur when an artist performs a song, either live or on record, that belongs, culturally speaking, to another artist. Jocelyn Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 12-13. Neal notes that in popular music songs are often "associated in the popular memory not with their songwriters but with the artists who record them," and as such, performers gain "cultural ownership" of a song.
[32] Neal, *Jimmie Rodgers*, 12-13.

cover songs serve this purpose for artists, full-length tribute albums serve a record label in similar ways.

Bloodshot Records' tribute albums merged local identity with a broader national identity, presenting the record label as nationally accessible through particular versions of "authentic" country music, and establishing its "right" musical lineage. As such, these albums were significant for the layers of meaning they contributed to Bloodshot Records' branding and identity, considering the "star text" or star persona of the artists receiving tribute, but also the featured artists, the "original songs" and the covers.[33] By identifying with nationally and internationally known artists, Bloodshot expanded its brand and identity beyond a punk or Chicago record label, and these albums historicized and authenticated the record label's insurgent country offerings.

The record label's first five tribute albums pay homage to Bob Wills, Johnny Cash, Wanda Jackson, artists and songs from WLW's Boone County Jamboree, and the Knitters. With all of these tributes, the record label frames the projects as "authentic," noting either original members presence on the albums or approval from the artists and/or artists family members.[34] Yet, Bloodshot also notes the "outsider" narratives associated with each artist, for example, positioning Wanda Jackson as the forebear to riot grrl punks and psychobilly, and noting the controversy associated with Bob Wills' when he used drums on the *Grand Ole Opry*.[35]

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[33] Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), 37; Paul McDonald, *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* (London: Wallflower Publishing, Ltd., 2000), 6;

[34] Bloodshot Records, "Barn Dance Favorites," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/barn-dance-favorites (accessed September 20, 2014); "Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/salute-majesty-bob-wills (accessed September 20, 2014); "Poor Little Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/poor-little-knitter-road-tribute-knitters (accessed September 20, 2014).

[35] Bloodshot Records, "Hard-headed Woman: A Celebration of Wanda Jackson," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/hard-headed-woman-celebration-wanda-jackson (accessed September 29, 2014); Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music, U.S.A.*, 3rd rev. ed. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2010), 187.

Two of these tributes are attributed to the Pine Valley Cosmonauts: *Misery Loves Company: Songs of Johnny Cash* (BS033) and *The Pine Valley Cosmonauts Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills* (BS029). The Pine Valley Cosmonauts are one of Jon Langford's many projects, and includes drummer Steven Goulding and bassist Tom Ray, along with John Rice on guitar, banjo, fiddle, and mandolin, along with several guest vocalists.[36] Recorded in 1994, several tracks are reminiscent of the Mekons' 1980s albums with noisy guitar effects. For example, the track "I Got Stripes," involves reverb-laden, ethereal group vocals with accompanying yells and nearly yelled harmonies throughout, along with a reggae version of "I Still Miss Someone." However, several tracks foreshadow the rowdy and raucous take on songs that later became the purview of the Waco Brothers, including "Big River," a song regularly performed in the Waco's live shows.

The Pine Valley Cosmonauts Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills features an extensive roster of guest artists, with nearly every track highlight a different vocalist or instrumentalist. In addition to the aforementioned players, many Bloodshot regulars appear, including Kelly Hogan, Robbie Fulks, Neko Case, and Texan Alejandro Escovedo, but also Texas musicians Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Edith Frost, and Bob Boyd of the legendary Chicago band, the Sundowners. These nineteen tracks stay close to the original dance hall material, with numerous instrumental solos and imitations of Wills' famous "ah-hah," spoken cues, and interjections, as demonstrated by the song "Sweet Kind of Love." This song is the sixth track on the tribute album, and was originally recorded by Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys in 1947. Sung by Tommy Duncan on this recording with Wills providing vocal ad libs and commentary throughout, Duncan is

[36] Mark Deming, "The Pine Valley Cosmonauts, Biography" Allmusic, accessed December 9, 2013, http://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-pine-valley-cosmonauts-mn0000413199/biography. The album was originally released in Germany on Scout Records, but a limited American edition was issued by Bloodshot in 1998.

accompanied by piano, steel guitar, upright bass, and drums.[37] The form of the song on this recording is strophic, with its two main sections following a standard aaba song form.

As scholar George Plasketes notes, "Musical mirroring may not be as simple as it seems on the surface. In the best tributes, the covering artist steals a song from the original and makes it their own, while they keep, even exaggerate, its original spirit."[38] While the Pine Valley Cosmonauts' version of this song is very close to the original, the minor alterations are arguably in the song's "original spirit." The song is sung by Jon Langford and follows a similar form to Wills' version, but the middle, instrumental section is expanded, resulting in a small aba form, compared to the eight-measure instrumental from the Wills' recording, as compared in Figures 5.4 and 5.5. This extension recalls the original purpose of dance hall music: a longer instrumental section provided more music and time for dancers in a song. Melodically and harmonically, there are slight changes, but overall little is changed from the Wills' recording, as seen in Figures 5.6 and 5.7. Instrumentally, the addition of the clarinet references Wills' big band influences, and the presence of the fiddle pays homage to Wills' legendary playing. While *The Pine Valley Cosmonauts Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills* connects Bloodshot and its Chicago musicians to a broader historical narrative, Langford notes this project was also important for the Chicago music scene in that it brought musicians together who otherwise would not have met. He recalled,

> It was definitely an attempt to do a bit of archaeology. [It was] some music I loved… Having the Sundowners sing on a track with Neko Case, having John Rice who had been playing with the Sundowners become more involved with [the Pine Valley Cosmonauts].

[37] Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, "Sweet Kind of Love" (Columbia Records 20391, 1947). The B side of this album was "Cowboy Stomp," http://www.discogs.com/Bob-Wills-And-His-Texas-Playboys-Cowboy-Stomp-A-Sweet-Kind-Of-Love/release/2296523 (accessed April 8, 2014).
[38] George Plasketes, "Further Re-flections on "the Cover Age":A Collage and Chronicle," in *Play It Again: Covers Songs in Popular Music*, ed. George Plasketes (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 27.

> It definitely brought together a lot of things I thought were interesting in the Chicago scene [at that time].[39]

Langford emphasized the importance of collaboration and pulling together past and present musicians in the city who were interested in country and roots music, and the positive effect it had on the album, but also the music scene broadly.

With these tribute albums, Jon Langford extended his explorations in American country music beyond covers of Hank Williams with the Mekons in the 1980s. By extension, Bloodshot Records' tribute albums merged the record label's Chicago identity with a national one, reinforced the record label's identity as one associated with country music history, but clarifies and privileges a version of country music history outside of the standardized mainstream narrative.

Intro (a)	**Section 1 (aaba)**	**Section 2 (a)**	**Section 3 (aaba)**
8 measure Piano Steel Guitar Bass Drums	32 measures Vocal Full Band	8 measures Instrumental a – piano	32 measures Vocal Full Band

Figure 5.4: "Sweet Kind of Love," Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, form.

Intro (a)	**Section 1 (aaba)**	**Section 2 (aba)**	**Section 3 (aaba)**	**Tag/Outro**
8 measures Clarinet Fiddle Guitar Bass Drums	32 measures Vocal Full band	24 measures Instrumental solos, Full band a – clarinet b – fiddle a - guitar	32 measures Vocal Full band	4 measures Full band

Figure 5.5: "Sweet Kind of Love," Pine Valley Cosmonauts, form

[39] Langford, interview, June 22, 2011.

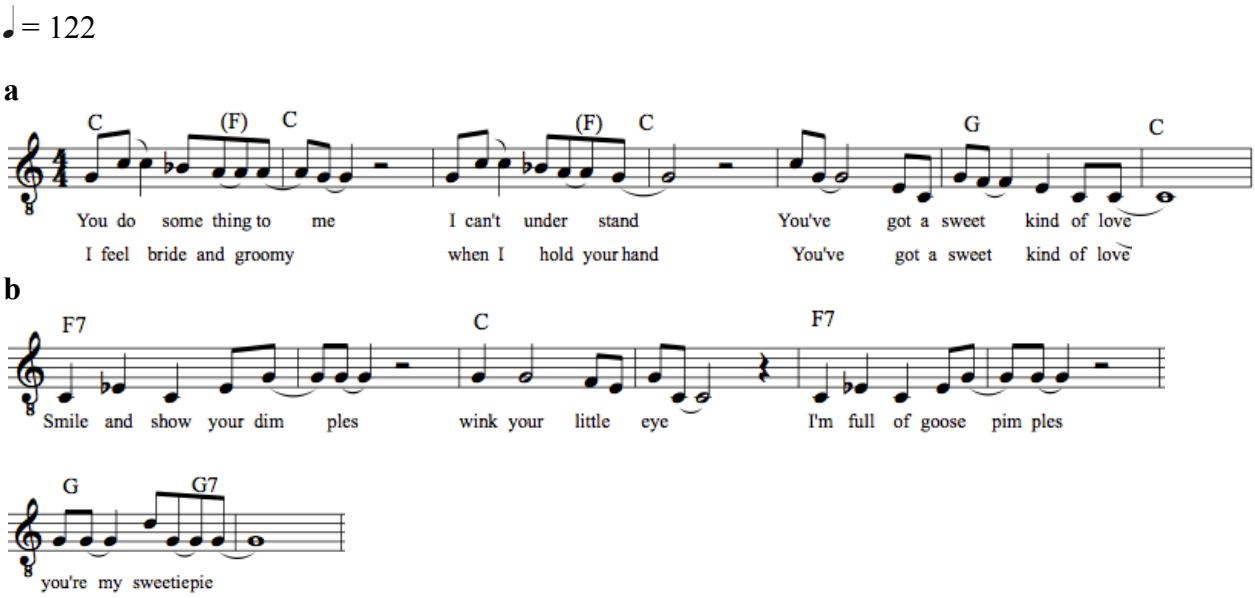

Figure 5.6: "Sweet Kind of Love," Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys, melody.

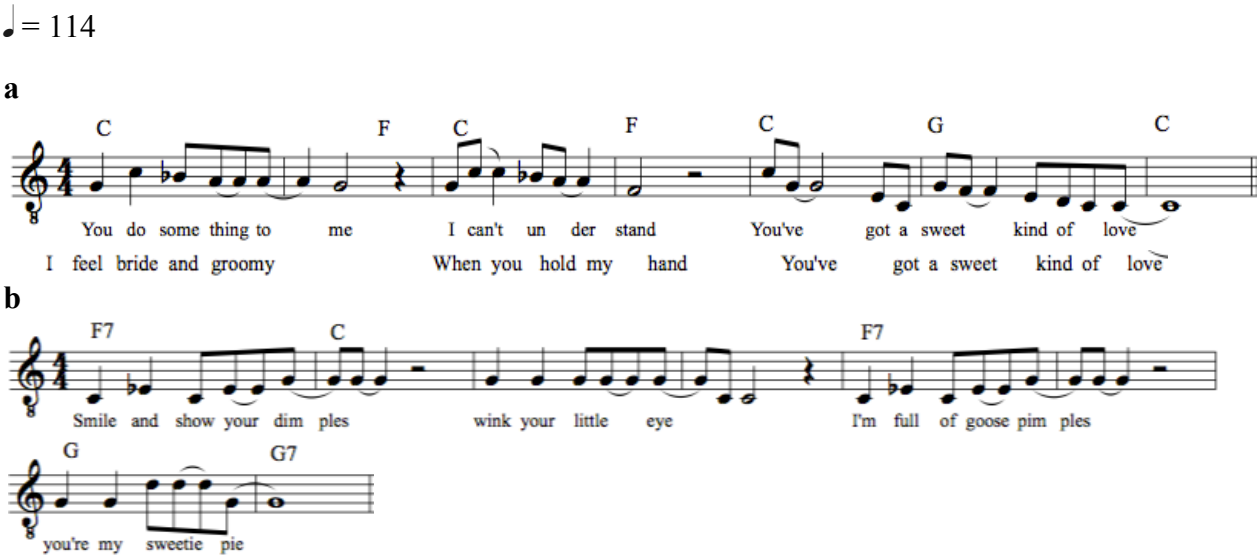

Figure 5.7: "Sweet Kind of Love," Pine Valley Cosmonauts, melody.

Bloodshot Records claims "that without The Knitters, there would have been no Bloodshot."[40] The Knitters were a version of Los Angeles punk band X, and one of the primary

[40] Bloodshot Records, "Poor Litte Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/poor-little-knitter-road-tribute-knitters (accessed May 20, 2014); Derek

bands associated with cowpunk in southern California in the 1980s.[41] The Knitters (named as a goofy play on the name of the Greenwich Village folk quartet, the Weavers) approached country music with irony and even parody, as the West Coast band references any number of hillbilly and redneck stereotypes on their album cover, as seen in Figure 5.8.

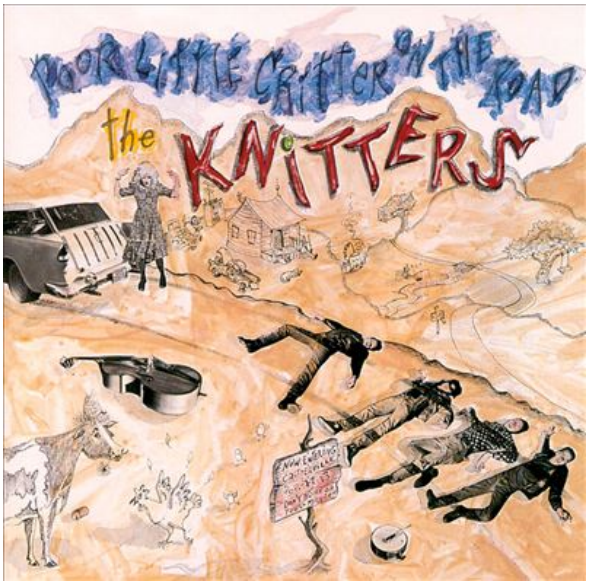

Figure 5.8: Album art for *Poor Little Critter on the Road*, The Knitters.[42]

Yet as singer Exene Cervenka comments about the band, "The Knitters are all about covering great songs so people can go back and find 'em," and the band's first album, *Poor Little Critter on the Road* (Slash Records 25310-1, 1985), features songs by Helen Carter (of the Carter Family), the Delmore Brothers, Leadbelly, and Merle Haggard, and also country versions of two songs previously record by the band X. Original songs on the album also follow traditional

Carmean, "Reunited Knitters Play Benefit In San Francisco," http://www.rockabilly.net/articles/knitters.shtml (accessed May 19, 2014).

[41] For more information about the Knitters and cowpunk, see Chapter Two.

[42] Denise Sullivan, review of *Poor Little Critter on the Road*, *Allmusic,* http://www.allmusic.com/album/poor-little-critter-on-the-road-mw0000312437 (accessed August 31, 2014).

country styles.[43] Bloodshot paid tribute to the Knitters with the album *Poor Litte Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters* in 1999, stating, "[The Knitters] opened all our ears to the fact that loving country and loving punk was not nearly as crazy as it sounds."[44] This album duplicates every track on *Poor Little Critter on the Road*, with the addition of one previously unreleased track performed by the Knitters themselves, "Why Don't We Even Try Anymore." The tribute album features Bloodshot regulars such as Kelly Hogan, Robbie Fulks, and the Old 97's, along with the Sadies and blues, old-time trio Devil in a Woodpile, and Catherine Irwin of Freakwater.

Whiskeytown performs the song, "Silver Wings," on the tribute, and since the Knitters' version is also a cover, the result is a network that links each version of the song and the artists performing each version.[45] "Silver Wings" was written and originally recorded by Merle Haggard in 1969 on the album *A Portrait of Merle Haggard* (Capitol Records ST-319, 1969), and was a number one hit. As part of the "Bakersfied sound," Haggard is often characterized as one of the saviors of country music whose music was an antithesis of the pop influenced "Nashville sound."[46] However, in reality Haggard regularly recorded in Nashville and utilized sweeping strings, background vocals, and "slick" production on many of his albums, and this can be heard on "Silver Wings."[47] The song is sectional but does not follow a traditional song format, as seen in Figure 5.9.

[43] Carmean, "Reunited Knitters Play Benefit In San Francisco."
[44] Bloodshot Records, "Poor Little Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters," accessed December 10, 2013, https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/poor-little-knitter-road-tribute-knitters.
[45] Gabriel Solis, "I Did It My Way: Rock and the Logic of Covers," *Popular Music and Society* 33, No. 3 (July 2010), 300.
[46] For more detail on the "Nashville Sound" and Bakersfield, see Chapter Two.
[47] Neal, *Country Music*, 221.

Intro piano, strings, acoustic guitar, bass guitar, snare drum	**A** lead vocal, background vocals, full band	**B** lead vocal, full band	**A** lead vocal, background vocals, full band	**Half A + Guitar solo** electric guitar full band	**A + Tag** lead vocal, background vocals, full band

Figure 5.9: Merle Haggard, "Silver Wings," form.

♩ = 105

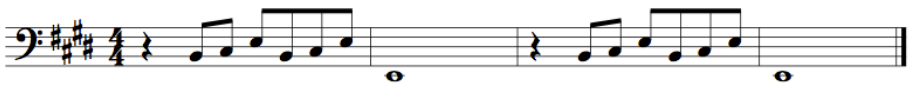

Figure 5.10: Merle Haggard, "Silver Wings," introduction (piano and strings).

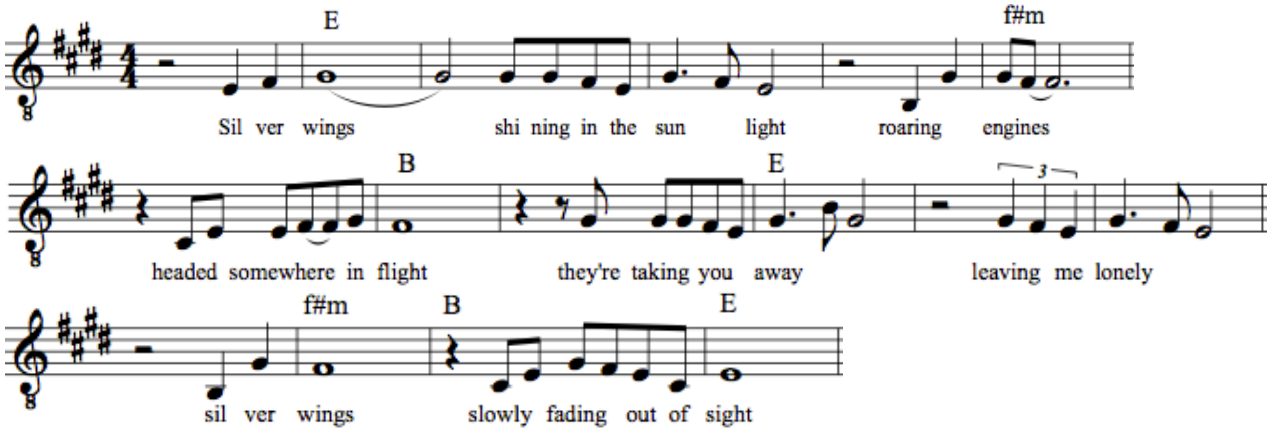

Figure 5.11: Merle Haggard, "Silver Wings," A section melody.

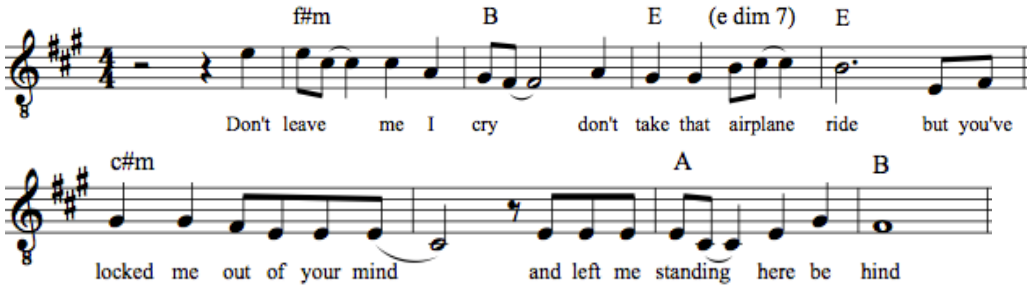

Figure 5.12: Merle Haggard, "Silver Wings," B section melody.

It opens with strings, piano, acoustic guitar, and bass, with the strings and piano playing the instrumental hook that recurs throughout the song (Figure 5.10); and Haggard begins singing with background vocals, as seen in Figures 5.11 and 5.12 on page 158. An electric guitar solo two-thirds into the song, and the song closes with a bit of word painting, as the line "Slowly fading out of sight" is repeated, and the song itself fades.

The Knitters' version features John Doe singing, accompanied by an acoustic guitar and an electric guitar. As a West Coast band, it is not surprising that the Knitters paid homage to Merle Haggard with the inclusion of this song on their first album, and the lyrics and melody remain identical to Haggard's recording, but the instrumental hook is different, as seen in Figure 5.13 (cf. Figure 5.10). The form of the song is slightly changed to an AABA song form, shown in Figure 5.14, with a repeat of the chorus, referencing a form associated with 1950's and 1960's country songs.[48] This version includes an alteration of the fade out: Doe's vocal fades on the repeat, but the guitars finish out the song with a fade.

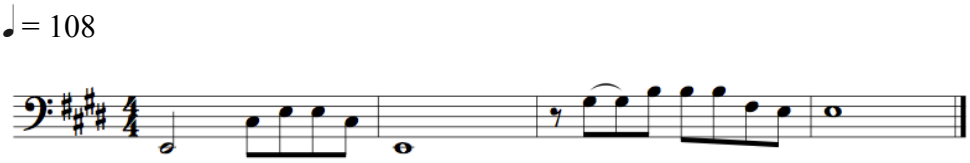

Figure 5.13: The Knitters, "Silver Wings," introduction (electric guitar).

Intro acoustic guitar, electric guitar	**A** lead vocal, acoustic guitar, electric guitar	**A** lead vocal, harmony acoustic guitar electric guitar	**B** vocal, acoustic guitar, electric guitar	**A + Tag** lead vocal, harmony, acoustic guitar electric guitar

Figure 5.14: The Knitters, "Silver Wings," form.

[48] Neal, *Country Music*, 480.

Doe's version of this song on the Knitters' album has been described as "the definitive version," likely due to the stripped down approach to the song, and Doe's straightforward and sincere delivery.[49] Certainly, the two guitars on this version would not be confused with the full instrumentation of the Haggard recording. According to Plasketes, a cover song's "interpretation might offer a fresh insight to the song, its composer or a particular period…[and] allows artists to explore and expose their musical roots, perhaps broader their own oeuvre with uncharacteristic materials, and pay homage not only to songs but to influential artists, composers, styles and eras."[50] In covering a Merle Haggard song, the Knitters pay homage to a country music and West Coast legend, but not the particular style and era of the original song. With their cover, the Knitters distance themselves from the style of the original Haggard recording, and instead, identify with the narrative and discursive authenticity of Haggard and the Bakersfield sound.

In contrast to the Knitters' pared down approach to the song, Whiskeytown's version of the song on *Poor Little Knitter on the Road* is expansive, relying on layers of sound and a generous use of reverb and delay effects. Whiskeytown was an alternative country band from Raleigh, North Carolina, fronted by Ryan Adams. The band experienced a great deal of personnel changes, likely due the volatile Adams who earned a bad-boy reputation from his antics on and off the stage. In only five years of existence and three full-length albums, Whiskeytown became an alt.country darling and garnered a large and loyal fanbase. The band released two EPs on Bloodshot and also appeared on several Bloodshot compilations. Whiskeytown's version of "Silver Wings" features an altered melody and harmony compared to the Haggard and Knitters' versions (see Figures 5.15 and 5.16 on page 162). The form of the song is also changed, resulting in a verse-chorus form with the addition of a new section of

[49] Denise Sullivan, review of *Poor Little Critter on the Road*, *Allmusic*.
[50] Plasketes, "Further Re-flections on "the Cover Age,", 27.

closing material to extend the song (Figure 5.17). Although the majority of the lyrics remain the same, two phrases are altered. In the opening section, Adams sings "Taming you tonight" instead of "Slowly fading out of sight. Whiskeytown's cover of this song drastically alters both the original version by Merle Haggard, and the cover version by the Knitters. According to musicologist Gabriel Solis,

> Covers become meaningful, ironically, by their ability to appear as newly authored work. Rather than making the performers seem to give up their rugged, self-creating individualism, covers show strong rock musicians as artists with personal histories that connect them in time to other authentic artists and as musical thinkers with the ability to imbue someone else's song with some measure of their own, new authorship and authority.[51]

While Solis references rock music exclusively, the quote is applicable here considering Whiskeytown's identification with multiple genres, including rock, punk, and country. In the band's version of "Silver Wings," the numerous changes made to the song, along with a production that follows trends in indie rock at the time, such as the use of thick reverb and delay, result in Whiskeytown's interpretation or adaptation of the song demonstrates the band's creativity and authorship.[52] Nevertheless, because the song can still be heard and understood as a cover, along with the context of this version, Whiskeytown's "Silver Wings" remains in dialogue with the previous versions of the song.

Label co-owner Miller notes hearing the Knitters and becoming a "convert." He states, "I started seeking out the names on the songwriter credits – the Haggards, the Carters, the Ledbetters – and I haven't looked back since. Country music doesn't have to suck."[53] Such a statement follows the record label's publicized disdain for mainstream culture, and especially

[51] Solis, "I Did It My Way: Rock and the Logic of Covers," 301.
[52] The sound is similar to recordings by My Morning Jacket, Iron and Wine, and Palace, from the same time period. Zach Hooker, review of *Tennessee Fire* (Darla, 1999), *Pitchfork.com*, July 13, 1999, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/5529-the-tennessee-fire/ (accessed May 16, 2014); Christopher Dare, review of *At Dawn* (Darla, 2001), *Pitchfork.com*, June 5, 2001, http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/5533-at-dawn/ (accessed May 16, 2014).
[53] Rob Miller, liner notes to *Poor Little Knitter on the Road: A Tribute to the Knitters* (BS 052, 1999).

mainstream country music, and Miller again makes a proclamation of taste and authenticity with references to legendary and historic musicians, such as Merle Haggard, Leadbelly, and the Carter Family.

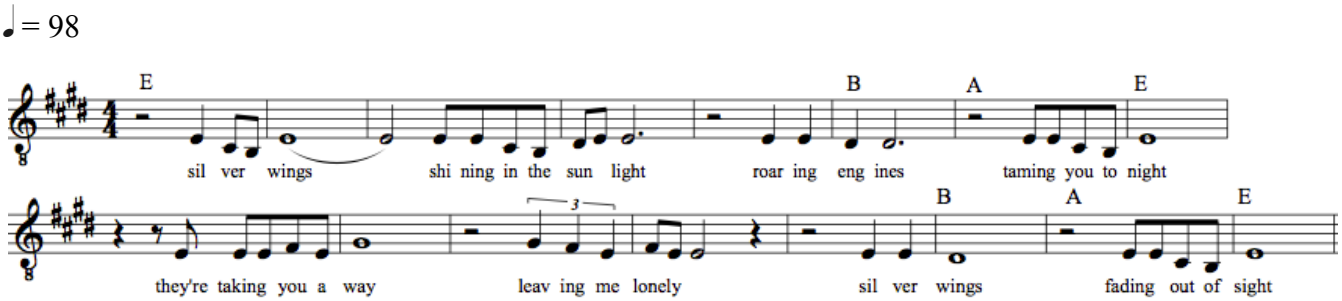

Figure 5.15: Whiskeytown, "Silver Wings," verse melody.

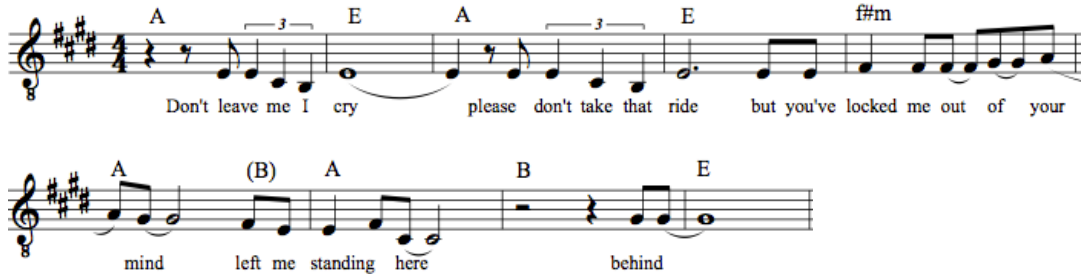

Figure 5.16: Whiskeytown, "Silver Wings," chorus melody.

Intro full band[54]	**Verse** (Chorus of original) lead vocal, full band	**Chorus** (Bridge of original) lead vocal, harmony, full band	**Verse** lead vocal, harmony, full band	**Chorus** lead vocal, harmony, full band	**Outro/ Nonsense syllables** lead vocal, harmony, full band

Figure 5.17: Whiskeytown, "Silver Wings," form.

[54] The credits list many instruments, including drums, bass, electric guitar, mellotron, pedal steel, dulcimer, and vocals; only two individuals are playing and singing: Ryan Adams and Mike Daly; fiddle player Caitlin Cary is listed as "playing hooky." A mellotron is an electromechanical keyboard instrument developed in England in the 1960s, and was the first successful instrument based on pre-recorded sounds, and may be described as an analogue sampler. Hugh Davies, "Mellotron," Grove Music Online/Oxford Music Online, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/47645 (accessed October 8, 2014).

With this tribute album in general, Bloodshot Records benefits from the association with the Knitters, claiming both punk and country authenticities, while the Whiskeytown version of "Silver Wings" provides the record label with a more current association with a "famous" alternative country band. Further, the focus of this project, the Knitters, provides punk authenticity based upon their history and contributions to the Los Angeles punk scene, and their presence on the tribute album provides affirmation and approval to the work of Bloodshot Records. The overall conclusion for the consumer and fan is that Bloodshot's version of country music certainly is superior to the mainstream variety. By associating with historical country music, and individuals with varying degrees of opposition to the mainstream, Bloodshot maintains its punk and insurgent positioning, while also gaining authenticity by associating with legendary musicians of different musical traditions.

Bloodshot Records use of tribute albums aligned with record label with particular country musicians, and also engaged the discourse of country music's traditions and practices, specifically the act of paying tribute to artists through cover songs.[55] The artists that Bloodshot chose to tribute indicate a particular musical lineage for the record label, such as those who have functioned in opposition to the country music establishment to varying degrees, including Wanda Jackson and Johnny Cash. The record label also makes authenticity claims with these tributes. For example, in describing the Bob Wills' tribute, Bloodshot notes, "It is a spot-on classic and puts mainstream country tributes to the masters that they have otherwise forsaken to shame."[56] Such a critique of "mainstream country tributes" positions the record label in opposition to the mainstream, but more importantly aligns Bloodshot with "the masters." While the Bob Wills'

[55] Jocelyn Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 12–13.
[56] Bloodshot Records, "Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/salute-majesty-bob-wills (accessed September 30, 2014).

tribute connected the record label to a particular chapter of country music history, the Knitters' tribute played on ideas of authenticity from both punk and country music history. Further, this latter album enhanced and reinforced the record label's reputation and identity at the time within alternative country music.

Bloodshot's compilations, samplers, and tribute albums have served the record label in various ways. The compilations have constructed and reinforced the record label's discursive identity and established its connections to the local live music scene, while the free samplers moved the record label closer to the practice of mix taping and privileging a DIY approach. The tribute albums established the record label's broader national identity by solidifying a musical lineage that connected Bloodshot to legendary country artists. Taken as a whole, these recorded compilations established the record label's sonic identity and its aesthetic boundaries, but this format was also employed at live events and shows, including official Bloodshot Records' events and as a practice of the local music scene.

Live Performances

Just as compilation albums have been important for Bloodshot Records, in its twenty-year history, the record label has hosted many live shows featuring lineups including multiple bands and artists from the record label's roster. In addition to its official events featuring a compilation-like juxtaposition of performers, the record label has been well represented in local events following a similar format. For example, Bloodshot's first public event was a pair of CD release shows for its first album, featuring live performances from bands on *For a Life of Sin*. Certainly, album release parties are standard fare for bands or record labels, but for a compilation of local acts, such an event was even more fitting. In addition to CD release shows, the record

label has regularly appeared at music festivals such as CMJ and South by Southwest. These live events provided exposure to new audiences, while also facilitating relationships among bands and individuals who may or may not know one another. However, Bloodshot Records has maintained a commitment to live music beyond CD release parties and appearances at music festivals, specifically with the presence of its artists in the local music scene and its connections to Chicago events and venues. The remainder of this chapter illustrates how Bloodshot's live events are performative, referencing the compilation format and the record label's commitment to a live music scene, while also providing a sense of "realness" to its roster. The performative nature of such events includes both the live performance of musicians on Bloodshot's roster, but also the idea that, according to scholar Jnan Blau, "[A]ny act of performance…generates new meanings, even as those meanings are shaped by the past."[57] In the case of Bloodshot Records, each of its live events also can be understood as a performance of the record label's identity with reference to its past work, particularly its association with the compilation format.[58]

According to Rob Miller, when *For a Life of Sin* was released, country and roots influenced bands in Chicago were not necessarily aware of one another, and the first Bloodshot record served as a type of catalyst and model for the scene. He recalls, "Two or three of these bands could start playing together, and then the crowds got bigger and bigger. And [then] it wasn't the Handsome Family playing at Phyliss' and then Waco Brothers playing for beer at Augenblich's… [I]t was all of a sudden, they were playing together, all of a sudden, people going 'there's this great scene in Chicago.'"[59] Miller states that this occurred "all of a sudden,"

[57] Jnan Blau, "More than "Just" Music: Four Performative Topoi, the Phish Phenomenon, and the Power of Music in/and Performance," TRANS 13 (2009), http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/articulo/44/more-than-just-music-four-performat (accessed September 30, 2014).
[58] This also follows to Philip Auslander's concept of a persona, extended broadly to a record label, in that "both the musical work and its execution serve the musician's performance of a persona." Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring 2006), 102.
[59] Miller, interview, June 16, 2011.

but these live events featuring a mix of similar bands served as an example for what the Chicago alt.country scene could (and would) eventually look like. While these events serve to reinforce Bloodshot Records identity, the record label in turn became a curator and architect of the scene with its compilation album and its live events.

Bloodshot Records hosted two CD release parties in Chicago for *For a Life of Sin*, featuring a total of seven acts from the album. The first event was held at Lounge Ax on Thursday, July 21, 1994, and the second was on the following night, Friday, July 22, 1994, at the Empty Bottle.[60] Warshaw recalls that they considered three shows, simply because all of the artists on the album were local, and everyone was eager to promote the project. The line-ups were Swollen Spleens, Robbie Fulks, and Church Key on the first night, and Jon Langford, Texas Rubies, Moonshine Willy, and the Riptones at the Empty Bottle. Similarly, the record celebrated the release of its *Hell-Bent: Insurgent Country Volume Two* with parties on consecutive night. The first event was held at the Beat Kitchen, a venue, bar, and restaurant in Roscoe Village, with performances by the Waco Brothers, Old 97's and Grievous Angels. The second evening of live performances was held at Schubas, featuring Moonshine Willy, the Starkweathers and the Inbreds.[61]

In addition to CD release events, Bloodshot Records has hosted anniversary parties featuring a collection of artists performing throughout the evening. Often, such events have coincided with the release of compilation anniversary albums (typically in celebration of five-year increments), but anniversary parties have also taken place on years when no album has been

[60] Leonora Bixby, "Bloodshot Records CD Release Parties," *Tail Spins* 3, No. 18 (October/November 1994).
[61] David Rothschild, "Homefront," *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1995, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-21/entertainment/9504210019_1_diary-vancouver-show-bands (accessed February 19, 2014).

released, such as a seventeenth or eighteenth anniversary party.[62] Generally taking place in Chicago, the performances at these events maintain Bloodshot's connection to live music, but also privileges particular bands and artists from the roster. This physical and sonic representation of the record label presents a snapshot of Bloodshot Records, particularly now that the roster is rather large. Nevertheless, certain characteristics of live Bloodshot events remain: Jon Langford's presence is certain, and if on the bill, the Wacos close the event.

As discussed in Chapter Four, bar/venue the Hideout began to fill the void left by the closing of Lounge Ax, and Bloodshot Records established a relationship with the Hideout early on. The Hideout has been called "the neighborhood bar without a neighborhood," and its owners are aware of and are intently concerned with maintaining the venue's connection to the local community through political activisim, social justice projects, and emphasizing the venue's working-class roots.[63] With a similar approach to business and a shared commitment to the city of Chicago, the relationship between the Hideout and Bloodshot Records is a logical one. Tim Tuten refers to Bloodshot Records as the Hideout's "cool big sister with the album collection."[64] In an interview with me, co-owner Tim Tuten recalled the beginnings of the Hideout's affiliation with Bloodshot Records, "Bloodshot formally started in '94, but…the bands and the music and all this stuff was happening by like '91, '92. So they come out [in] '94. We bought the Hideout in '96, so there's always been a sense [of a parallel history]… Their bands played at the block parties from the beginning."[65]

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[62] For example, the record label hosted an event, "Barely Bloodshot: 18 Years of Bloodshot Records," to celebrate its eighteenth anniversary party at Rogers Park venue the Mayne Stage on September 22, 2012. This event featured a variety of bands, including Devil in a Woodpile and the Waco Brothers.
[63] Sarah Brooks and Timothy Schuler, "Hideout Block Party & A.V. Fest 2013: Exploring the Themes," *Gapers Block*, http://gapersblock.com/transmission/2013/09/12/hideout_block_party_av_fest_2013_exploring_the_themes/ (accessed February 19, 2014); Tim Tuten, interview by the author, Chicago, IL, June 28, 2011.
[64] Tuten, interview, June 28, 2011.
[65] Tuten, interview, June 28, 2011.

The Hideout's first Block Party was in 1997, inspired by Texas-style parties to celebrate special occasions. Tim Tuten, co-owner of the Hideout notes, "My wife, Katie, attended the University of Texas from 1980-85 – this was way before South by Southwest – and bars and restaurants there would always throw barbeques for anniversaries and birthdays. We were already going to Hideout for ten years before we bought it in October 1996 and we thought it would be a good idea to throw an Austin-style party for a few friends and regulars."[66] More people showed up, and the event has grown to encompass two-days and the entire street that runs in front of the Hideout, and for the past several years has been in partnership with *The A.V. Club*, a Chicago-based entertainment and media website published by *The Onion*. As Chicago-based web publication *Gapers Block* notes regarding the Hideout's annual Block Party, "No other large-scale festival places such an emphasis on local talent," regularly including Jon Langford's projects, Neko Case, Kelly Hogan, Andrew Bird, Mavis Staples, and Wilco.[67]

The Hideout became the primary location in the city for country and alt.country music production and consumption. The band Devil in a Woodpile began playing at the Hideout every Tuesday night in 1997, setting up in the small front room bar area and playing acoustic music and covering a range of country blues, country, old time, hot jazz, and folk. The band was originally comprised of Rick "Cookin'" Sherry on vocals, washboard, harmonica, and jug, and Tom V. Ray, then bassist with the Bottle Rockets, on double bass. Eventually, Gary Schepers on tuba began filling in for Ray, and guitarist and vocalist Joel Paterson joined the group in 2003.[68]

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[66] Chuck Sudo, "Interview: Tim Tuten Talks (And TALKS) About The Hideout Block Party," *Chicagoist*, http://chicagoist.com/2013/09/06/interview_tim_tuten_talks_and_talks.php (accessed February 19, 2014).
[67] Sarah Brooks and Timothy Schuler, "Hideout Block Party & A.V. Fest 2013: Exploring the Themes," *Gapers Block*, http://gapersblock.com/transmission/2013/09/12/hideout_block_party_av_fest_2013_exploring_the_themes/ (accessed February 19, 2014).
[68] Schepers was the sound technician for the band Son Volt, one of the resulting bands from Uncle Tupelo's split. Devil in a Woodpile opened for Son Volt for several Midwestern tour dates as a result of this connection. See Linda Ray, "Devil In A Woodpile Gives You Something To Stomp About," *Chicago Tribune*, January 15, 1999

This increasingly popular and free weekly event resulted in Devil signing with Bloodshot. The band's self-titled debut was released in 1998, with two additional albums on the record label released in 2000 and 2003. Remarkably, Devil in a Woodpile maintained this residency at the Hideout for twelve years, ending in 2009 when the band officially broke up.

The Hideout's connections to Bloodshot Records were clear: Bloodshot bands have always performed at the Hideout, the record label has long supported the Block Party, and several artists on the label's roster have worked there. Thus, it was logical for Bloodshot to host both its tenth and fifteenth anniversary parties at the Hideout in conjunction with the Block Party. As Tuten noted, "[W]hen they had their tenth anniversary, it's a natural fit. So then the whole festival, Block Party was dedicated to them. And then their fifteenth anniversary, they did the same thing. It's like, why not do our whole Block Party dedicated to them.[69]

To date, the record label's most ambitious anniversary celebration was in 2009 to mark its fifteenth year, which culminated with an anniversary party merged with the annual Hideout Block Party. For its fifteenth anniversary, Bloodshot Records partnered with Rolling Rock, a brand of beer, to put on a series of events across the country called The Bloodshot Beer-B-Qs (a boozy play on the word barbeque) to commemorate the record label's fifteenth anniversary and the beer brand's seventieth year. Featuring over ten events in cities ranging from Boston to Austin (coinciding with South by Southwest and the annual Yard Dog Party) to Seattle, Bloodshot hosted two Chicago events, one in September at the Hideout Block Party and another at the Double Door in December. Both Chicago events were fundraisers, with the former benefiting 826 Chicago and Rock for Kids, and the latter benefiting Bloodshot artists Scotland

(http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1999-01-15/entertainment/9901150264_1_son-volt-devil-woodpile (accessed February 19, 2014).

[69] Tuten, interview, June 28, 2011.

Yard Gospel Choir who were in a van accident, and friend of Bloodshot and Chicago musician Lawrence Peters, who also was recovering from an accident and mounting medical bills.[70]

In what it described as "our flagship 15th Anniversary Beer-B-Q," Bloodshot hosted this special event coinciding with the annual Hideout Block Party on September 12, 2009.[71] The event featured food, beer, belt sander races, kids activities, a drunken spelling bee, and live music by current and past Bloodshot artists. In addition to this celebration at the Hideout Block Party, Bloodshot released a live two-disc album of performances from this event a year and a half later. According to the record label, "This album is a sonic scrapbook of that day, representing all the performers in the order they performed. 19 tracks and almost 70 minutes of [music]. It is a chance for people to revel in the memories or pretend they were there."[72] The album includes the Sanctified Grumblers, Rick "Cookin'" Sherry's latest project, Sally Timms and Jon Langford, The Blacks, Bobby Bare, Jr., Moonshine Willy, Scotland Yard Gospel Choir, Scott H. Biram, Deadstring Brothers, Alejandro Escovedo, and the Waco Brothers.

Throughout the album, there are markers of liveness, or indicators that this album is record of a live event. For example, the second track begins with a Tim Tuten announcement, and audience noise, such as cheering or clapping, is audible throughout. Further, there is spoken word and banter from the performers on many tracks, and the majority of the tracks concludes with an extended ending that is characteristic of live performance but rarely appears on studio tracks, including drum fills and guitar playing or feedback that extends and marks the close of the song. The audio quality and production of this live album is sparse and basic. Very little

[70] Bloodshot Records, "Bloodshot Anniversary/Holiday Show Announced!" Bloodshot News, November 3, 2009, https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/news/bloodshot-anniversaryholiday-show-announced (accessed October 9, 2014).
[71] Bloodshot Records, "Bloodshot Anniversary/Holiday Show Announced!"
[72] Bloodshot Records, *No One Got Hurt: Bloodshot's 15th Anniversary @ The Hideout Block Party*, https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/no-one-got-hurt-bloodshots-15th-anniversary-hideout-block-party (accessed December 10, 2013).

electronic manipulation has been added to these tracks, and the overall sound is reminiscent of DIY punk or home recordings.

Bloodshot's fifteenth anniversary compilation album bolsters the record label's identification with the Chicago music scene, and also reinforces the record label's commitment to live music. From the record label's origins in a live music scene, Bloodshot has privileged performance throughout its history, and beyond its association with a particular genre or even its intimate association with the city of Chicago, Bloodshot Records has always valued live performance, as demonstrated by its sponsored events, the artists it signs, and its connections to music venues.

The Hideout was also home to an event called the Honky Tonk Living Room, which was a musical variety show centered around performances of old and obscure country music. Created and hosted by Kelly Kessler, she told me in an interview that the event was inspired by Devil in a Woodpile's residency at the Hideout.[73] She recalled,

> [The Hideout] felt like a clubhouse when I went in. I didn't know all these people, but it felt like I had just joined a clubhouse. It did not feel like a Chicago bar. The more time I spent down there, the more it felt that way. Plus they had this thing going…[an] acoustic blues band called Devil in a Woodpile, and they would just play in the front bar. And it was so awesome on an afternoon just to have acoustic music, and I just loved it…[I]t's the kind of thing that's done a lot now, but hadn't been done a lot then. It's like, oh my god I love this place. And so I literally think I just woke up in the middle of the night and said, 'I have to do a live music series at the Hideout.' And the really funny thing was, I called Katie and Tim [Tuten] and they said like, 'Yeah. Yeah, you do.'[74]

The Honky Tonk Living Room series began in the summer of 1998, and ran approximately bimonthly on most every other Thursday.[75] Kessler served as the emcee for the events, and featured a variety of performers throughout the evening. A typical Living Room show was "a

[73] For more information on Kelly Kessler, see Chapter Two.
[74] Kessler, interview, October 27, 2012.
[75] Kessler, interview, October 27, 2012; Peter Margasak, "A Ruby Returns," *Chicago Reader*, March 14. 2002, http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/a-ruby-returnsuncle/Content?oid=908008 (accessed February 19, 2014).

night of country and related music punctuated by Opry-like comic banter," but might also include "contests and special attractions such as performance artists, old movies…[or] even a pie auction."[76] Kessler admitted to not knowing how to make the Honky-tonk Living Room happen back then, but relied on Katie Tuten's ideas, connections, and experience with booking and promotion. Once the series got going, it was well attended and "everyone in town was great about it."[77] She described the series,

> The idea would be just for me to host, so I might play a song or two just to open. What I was really going for was live country music in Chicago. I'm one of those big umbrella people, where I was really interested in all the roots and all the branches, trying to feature that in. In my mind that would anywhere from bluegrasss, to Cajun, to Texas songwriter… [N]early everyone of the Waco Brothers played there under some guise or another… I love the idea of the music they had on the Opry in the '40s. Such a range of stuff, and everything hadn't been hammered into a category yet. So just trying to represent what was out there. And there was a sense from me then that live [country] music was kinda under threat. So I wanted it to be just a landing pad for country music in Chicago.[78]

Adding a second country or alt.country event to the Hideout at that time, in addition to Devil in a Woodpile, secured the venue as a locus for the scene, and also accomplished Kessler's goal of establishing a location for live country music Chicago.[79] Although the Honky-tonk Living Room ceased in late 1999, collaboration between Kessler, Katie Tuten, and Heather McAdams led to another Chicago country music event, the Country Calendar Show.

The first Country Calendar Show was held in 1998, however artist and filmmaker Heather McAdams began producing her country calendars in the early 1990s, featuring her own drawings of country stars. In addition to a featured artist for each month, the calendars were brimming with information for each day of the year, including birth and death dates of musicians

[76] Linda Ray, "Miked: Honky Tonk Living Room," *No Depression* No. 20 (March-April, 1999), http://archives.nodepression.com/1999/03/kelly-kessler-the-hideout-tucson/ (accessed February 19, 2014).
[77] Linda Ray, "Miked: Honky Tonk Living Room."
[78] Kessler, interview, October 27, 2012.
[79] Kessler, interview, October 27, 2012.

and pop culture figures, trivia, and humorous and/or obscure bits of information. Originally, the first Country Calendar Show was a part of the Honky Tonk Living Room, involving many artists from the early Bloodshot compilations, including Kelly Hogan, Jon Langford, Moonshine Willy, the Handsome Family, the Texas Rubies (Kessler and Jane Baxter Miller), and Robbie Fulks.[80]

When the Honky Tonk Living Room series ended, McAdams and her husband, musician Chris Ligon, eventually began hosting the Country Calendar Show to accompany the calendar with a performance of songs associated with each calendar month's artist. In addition to the performances, the show featured 16 mm movie shorts from McAdams' extensive collection, showing footage of country stars performing on television shows from the 1950s and '60s.[81] The show became known as "Chris and Heather's Country Calendar Show" and moved to FitzGerald's, longtime venue for roots music in the Chicago suburb of Berwyn. The performances typically featured an eclectic mix of Chicago musicians, and artists associated with Bloodshot Records were regular participants, including Robbie Fulks (and his wife Donna), Kelly Hogan, Jon Langford, and the Texas Rubies.[82] Although Bloodshot Records was never officially associated with this event, the activities of its artists and their participation in events such as the Country Calendar Show reveal the symbiotic relationship between the local music

[80] Ray, "Honky Tonk Living Room."
[81] Mark Guarino, "Country Stars: Calendar in a Time Warp," *Chicago Tribune*, December 8, 2010. Chris Ligon and his brother Scott Ligon (of the band NRBQ) both appear on several Bloodshot albums and compilations. McAdams drew a comic strip for Chicago's alternative weekly, *The Chicago Reader*, for twenty years, and also taught film and drawing at the University of Kentucky in Lexington for two years.
[82] The final Country Calendar Show on Friday, December 7. 2012, featured the following artists associated with Bloodshot Records: Robbie Fulks, Jon Langford, Devil in a Woodpile, and Jane Baxter Miller. Rob Miller and several other Bloodshot employees were in attendance, along with Hideout owners Tim and Katie Tuten. The event was a variety show alternating between live performances and film shorts. Ligon and McAdams hosted the show, providing humor and shtick between components throughout the evening during stage changes or while the screen was set up for showing film. Each act had a marquee hand-drawn by McAdams with the performers' names and the artist they were covering. YouTube user hmc1410 posted video of each act from the evening, and these videos have been compiled at "The Beachwood Reporter" website, http://www.beachwoodreporter.com/music/the_weekend_in_chicago_rock_he.php (accessed February 19, 2014).

scene and the record label, while also reinforcing that relationship and promoting the record label.

Bloodshot Records' first album was a compilation that represented "insurgent country music" in the local Chicago music scene. Throughout its history, compilation albums, samplers, and tribute albums have reinforced Bloodshot's local identity and its commitment to a musical community. However, these projects also associated Bloodshot's local identity with broader historical narratives, and contributed to its national identity. Beyond these material products, the compilation format has been enacted by Bloodshot in its events featuring live performances by multiple bands and artists, such as CD release parties or anniversary celebrations. In addition to Bloodshot's official events, this compilation format was employed at events at the Hideout that regularly featured Bloodshot artists and bands. In this way, Bloodshot Records served to represent the local music scene, but was also influential in the way the local music scene developed and progressed, particularly as the record label aged and grew in national prominence.

CHAPTER SIX

"WHILE NO ONE WAS LOOKING": TWENTY YEARS OF BLOODSHOT RECORDS AND BEYOND

On Wednesday, September 24, 2014, a post on *Rolling Stone*'s "Country" page of the magazine's website announced a forthcoming compilation album, *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records* (BS 223, 2014) to celebrate Bloodshot Records' twentieth anniversary with streaming audio of the album's first track. Following the headline, "Hear Blitzen Trapper Cover Ryan Adams," the subtitle read, "A new double-disc tribute to Bloodshot Records features artists covering Bloodshot acts like Adams, Neko Case and Justin Townes Earle."[1] The *Rolling Stone* feature continued,

> Over 20 years, Bloodshot Records has been home to some of alt-country and rock's most eclectic artists, including the Old 97's, Neko Case and Justin Townes Earle. That legacy is celebrated on the two-disc set *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*. Set for release November 18th, the compilation features non-Bloodshot acts covering some of the artists that have defined the label.[2]

The two-disc (or limited edition red three-disc LP) includes thirty-eight tracks, and features an eclectic line-up of bands performing songs originally recorded by Bloodshot artists over the past twenty years, including "hits" from the label's more well known artists, such as those mentioned

[1] Joseph Hudak, "Hear Blitzen Trapper Cover Ryan Adams," *RS Country*, September 24, 2014, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/premieres/hear-blitzen-trapper-cover-ryan-adams-20140924 (accessed September 24, 2014).

[2] Hudak, "Hear Blitzen Trapper Cover Ryan Adams," September 24, 2014. Ryan Adams' solo album remains the label's best selling album to date, and it is not surprising that this would be the first track released to promote the album. The artist also had a much-anticipated and highly publicized solo album released in September 2014.

above, but also features songs from "underappreciated" bands such as Meat Purveyors or Devil in a Woodpile (see Figure 6.1).[3]

Figure 6.1: Album art for *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*.

The self-deprecatory title of this compilation implies that Bloodshot's twenty-year history has been overlooked. The veracity of this claim notwithstanding, this dissertation addresses the gap in scholarship regarding the record label's history and contributions to alt.country. More importantly, I have examined the musical style and practices of alt.country, and specifically considered the construction Bloodshot Records' sonic identity. This sound is shaped by the record label's geography and defined by Bloodshot's history and association with the punk and underground rock scene in Chicago. The consideration of a "Bloodshot sound" provides new insight into the record label's identity, approach to music production, and the business of

[3] Bloodshot Records, "While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/while-no-one-was-looking-toasting-20-years-bloodshot-records (accessed November 23, 2014).

independent music making in an era of the music industry that had been characterized by corporate mergers and multinational conglomerates.

With a focus on the practices of local producers and consumers of music, this project emphasizes the importance of grassroots work in the formation of a new musical genre. Such a bottom-up approach indicates the power of DIY and the lasting influence of punk and the concept of "indie." This term continues to be used as an artistic, ideological, and/or marketing descriptor, while also generally referencing independent record labels and a particular style of music. Independent record labels and local music scenes have been important producers of music since punk, and in the case of alt.country in the 1990s, small-scale production was a critical component in the genre's formation and development. The discourse surrounding independent record labels often frames them in terms of their economic failings, or even worse, their success and subsequent "selling out" to a larger business or major record label. While recent studies have offered more nuanced views of indies, this dissertation certainly presents an exception: an indie whose narrative is not understood as an economic failure nor as a footnote within the context of a major record label. The story of Bloodshot Records is one of indie success and a label that continues to maintain its original local affiliation.[4]

Much of Bloodshot Records' continued success is connected to the city of Chicago's established infrastructure, or the organizations and businesses that support music making in the city. While Chicago musicians and scene participants regularly acknowledged the city's unique

[4] Similarly, indie (labels and as a genre) has been criticized for its lack of political positioning or activism, noting indie's origins in punk and its oppositional and/or extreme politics. See David Hesmondhalgh, "Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre," *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1999): 34-61. Bloodshot Records has not been politically active throughout its history. However, in 2002 and 2003, under the direction of Jon Langford, the record label released a compilation project, *The Executioner's Last Songs,* Volumes 1-3 (BS 074, 2002 and BS 095, 2003), featuring songs about death and murder. This project raised money and awareness for the Illinois Death Penalty Moratorium Project and the National Coalition Against the Death Penalty. Both Langford and Miller have noted that some of the artists on the albums actually supported the death penalty, but contributed songs anyway, while both Miller and Warshaw have noted negative feedback from fans that disagreed with the cause. In 1998, Illinois abolished the death penalty.

attributes, they also noted this infrastructure as integral to the scene's growth and success. Scene studies have focused on amateur music-making and practices, individual and collective identity formation, and even the role of various structures within a scene.[5] I have argued that the structural history of the Chicago live music scene, and its shift toward professionalization provide a new perspective and understanding of how scenes work and thrive. Bloodshot Records' evolution from a side project to a fully professional independent record label with national recognition began in the local scene, but in turn helped the Chicago scene to flourish. This success, however, raises new questions related to the label's original anti-establishment stance. For example, as a veteran in the music industry, how does Bloodshot maintain an oppositional identity? Also, in light of debates regarding streaming music and the growing influence of businesses such as Spotify, how "independent" can an indie be and still maintain its indie integrity?

Beyond these questions, this project raises other issues that invite further consideration. Not all local music scenes boast a clearly defined identity and/or sound. What are the relationships between geography, identity, and sound in these cases? In such scenes, what is the role of infrastructure and how does it function in scenes boasting multiple genres or identities? Also, the Midwest has been a crucial site of country music production throughout the commercial genre's history, and this history has been largely overlooked. Beyond studies on the *National Barn Dance*, this project is one of the first to consider Chicago's more recent contributions to country music. While the goal of this project has not been to provide an overview of country music history in the Midwest, it does situate Bloodshot Records within the context of country music production, and opens the door for further research into the importance of the Midwest in country music history.

[5] See Chapter One, "Literature Review," for more information on scene studies.

More specifically, Bloodshot Records' history and continued success present numerous opportunities for future study by scholars in the fields of music, history, cultural studies, and media studies. While I have considered the record label's history, this discussion has favored the label's formative years. Research into the record label's more recent past, particularly in light of the changing landscape of the music industry as it has shifted to digital commerce, would provide a broader understanding of Bloodshot Records, but also small, independent record labels generally. Due to the large number of artists that are or have been signed to Bloodshot, a detailed study of the record label's roster was beyond the scope of this project. However, such an endeavor would provide a more precise understanding of the record label's sound and practices than the overview provided by an examination of the label's compilation albums. Finally, a discussion of Bloodshot Records opens up Chicago's music scene, infrastructure, and the city's numerous independent record labels as sites for further study, considering issues of Chicago exceptionalism, small scale production and consumption of music, and local identities.

As I have argued throughout the dissertation, the compilation format, both recorded and at live events, has been important for Bloodshot Records in establishing and enhancing the record label's branding and sonic identity. Also, this format reinforces the record label's influence and presence within the local music scene in Chicago. The twentieth anniversary compilation functions in a similar way for the label, but also expands the scope and reach of Bloodshot Records beyond geographic and generic boundaries. Bloodshot Records' website describes the process of assembling its twentieth anniversary compilation album stating, "[W]e reached out to a few artists and floated the idea of covering songs from our ample catalog because we thought it would be cool to hear what might happen. The speed, sonic breadth,

ingenuity, and diversity of responses took us all by surprise."[6] This description recalls the process of assembling the label's first compilation, *For a Life of Sin*, from the local scene in 1994. However, this narrative is strikingly different regarding Bloodshot's standing and status. The roster of this most recent project boasts well-known and famous artists and bands that were enthusiastic about being a part of the compilation. Bloodshot's headline for this album states, "38 artists, including Andrew Bird, Blitzen Trapper, Superchunk, Chuck Ragan, Nicki Bluhm, Ted Leo, Ben Kweller, Chris Shiflett (of Foo Fighters), Into It. Over It., and more covering songs from Bloodshot's 20-year history." This partial listing highlights indie rock bands from across the country (Blitzen Trapper of Portland, Oregon; Superchunk from Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Texas-based Kweller), individuals with history in punk and underground scenes, along with two well known Chicago artists (Andrew Bird and Into. Over It.). The description of the album continues, "We heard from old friends, new friends, friends we didn't know we had, and even a few heroes of ours (Holy shit! ***Mike Watt*** knows who we are?)" (emphasis in original).[7] This instance of name-dropping one of the founding members of the influential and legendary punk trio, the Minutemen, indicates that the record label has attained the levels of legitimacy and authenticity once boldly claimed in early press releases twenty years ago.

In addition to and perhaps despite the label's established presence in the Chicago scene and music industry, Bloodshot continues to reinforce key components of its identity, describing itself twenty years later, "As an indie label operating on the fringes, we try to keep our eyes forward and ignore and avoid the chaos, distractions, inanities, and indifference on the peripheries of the biz and bring to bear our ingrained, Chicago stacker-of-wheat work ethic."

[6] Bloodshot Records, "While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records," https://www.bloodshotrecords.com/album/while-no-one-was-looking-toasting-20-years-bloodshot-records (accessed September 28, 2014).
[7] Bloodshot Records, "While No One Was Looking."

Bloodshot still boasts its outsider, non-mainstream identity, and also embraces and claims its particular view of the city and the idea of Chicago exceptionalism. Early publicity for its twentieth anniversary compilation suggests that Bloodshot Records has been successful in its rebranding efforts to distance itself from insurgent country. The *Rolling Stone* feature mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was the first publicity for the new compilation, and does not mention "insurgent country" at all. However, the fact that the feature appeared on the "Country" page of the magazine's website, and that the author describes the record label as "home to some of alt-country and rock's most eclectic artists," indicates the record label remains associated with country music and its alt.country roots. Certainly, as numerous media outlets feature the record label to mark its twentieth year and review *While No One Was Looking*, an overview of Bloodshot's history involves a requisite mention of "insurgent country."

The relatively large amount of press and media response to Bloodshot Records' twentieth anniversary compilation album, *While No One Was Looking: Toasting 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*, indicates that the record label's work has not gone unnoticed, as the title suggests. Despite claims from Rob Miller and Nan Warshaw that they are still surprised by Bloodshot Records' continued existence, the co-owners of the record label have worked to strategically position Bloodshot within the Chicago scene and as a respected voice within the music industry. Upon consideration of the label's history, historical context, music and musicians, business and musical practices, and its associated community, Bloodshot's identity and reputation were clearly established early in the label's history, while its sonic identity has reflected its connections to the Chicago music scene. As Bloodshot expands its roster (the newest addition to the label, Nashville-via-Birmingham, AL group Banditos, was signed to the label in November, 2014) and approaches the generic range it boldly claimed years ago, the label exists in a changed

musical landscape. How Bloodshot Records adheres to its clearly constructed identity, the role it plays in the local music scene, and the evolution of the label's sonic identity will likely be demonstrated and heard in its twenty-fifth compilation album and beyond.

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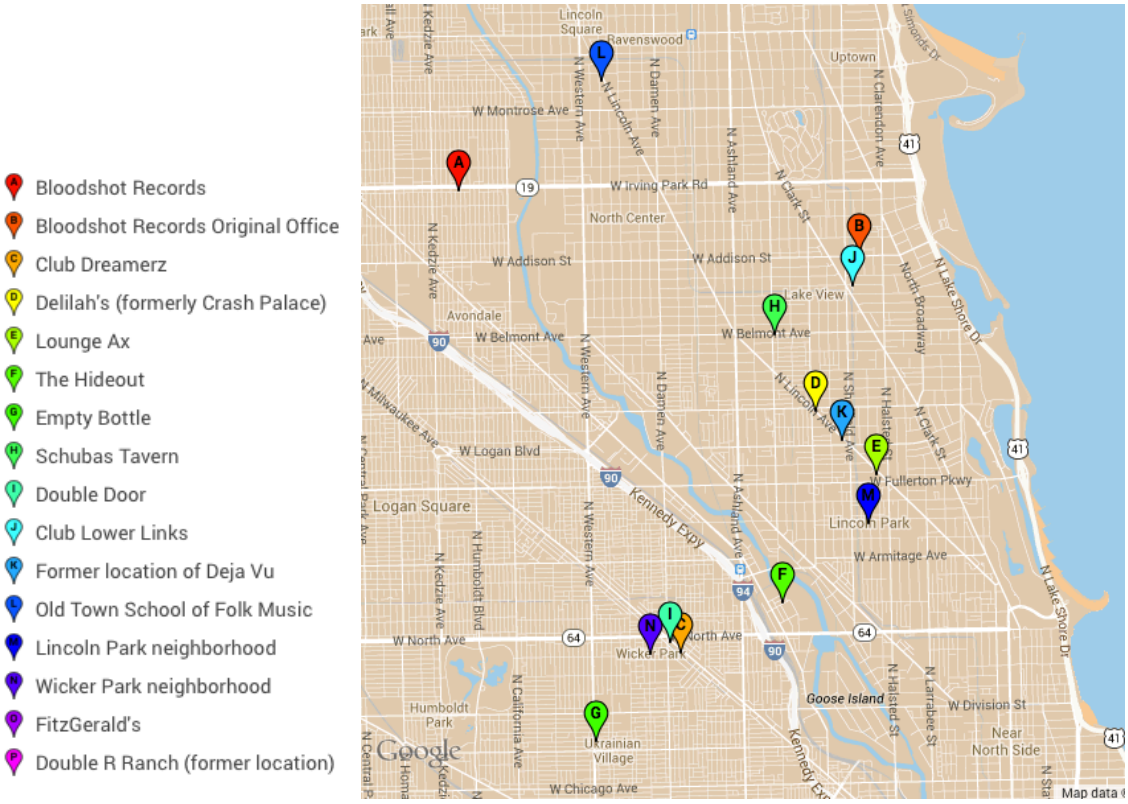
APPENDIX A

"WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?": IMPORTANT LOCATIONS AND VENUES[1]

This map includes locations and venues discussed throughout the dissertation.[2] FitzGerald's Nightclub is listed, but not shown. It is located nine miles southwest of the Empty Bottle (marker H), or where the legend begins. The Double R Ranch was located in downtown Chicago, and is also not shown. Relative to the Lincoln Park neighborhood (marker M), the Double R would be approximately four miles south, or slightly below where the image stops.



[1] During my research in Chicago, whenever I scheduled an interview with someone, the person invariably asked me, "Where are you coming from?" I soon realized this question addressed transportation concerns (I was using public transportation), but also particular identifications and associations with certain neighborhoods in the city.

[2] Google Maps, https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=zX4EuTdh7oBg.kJNrilOunnVY (accessed October 8, 2014).

APPENDIX B

BLOODSHOT RECORDS DISCOGRAPHY[1]

BS 001	Various Artists	*For A Life of Sin; Insurgent Chicago Country, Vol. 1*	CD	1994
BS 002	Moonshine Willy	*Baby Alive*	7"	1994
BS 003	Waco Brothers	*Bad Times Are Comin Round*	7"	1994
BS 004	Various Artists	*Hell-Bent; Insurgent Country Vol 2*	CD	1995
BS 005	Moonshine Willy	*Pecadores*	CD	1995
BS 006	Waco Brothers	*To The Last Dead Cowboy*	CD	1995
BS 007	Old 97's	*Eyes For You/W.I.F.E*	CD	1995
BS 008	Grievous Angels	*Angels & Inbreds*	CD	1995
BS 009	Old 97's	*Wreck Your Life*	CD	9/1/95
BS 010	Old 97's	*Cryin' Drunk*	7"	1995
BS 011	Robbie Fulks	*Country Love Songs*	CD	6/27/96
BS 012	Rico Bell	*Return of Rico Bell*	CD	6/1/96
BS 013	Moonshine Willy	*Complicatd Game/George Set Me Strait*	7"	1996
BS 014	Various Artists	*Nashville; The Other Side of the Alley*	CD	8/1/96
BS 015	Waco Brothers	*Cowboy In Flames*	CD	1/1/97
BS 016	Sally Timms	*Cowboy Sally*	CD	2/25/97
BS 017	Scroat Belly	*Daddy's Farm*	CD	11/1/96
BS 018	Moonshine Willy	*Bold Displays of Imperfection*	CD	10/1/96
BS 019	Various Artists	*Straight Outta Boone County*	CD	2/1/97
BS 020	Grievous Angels	*New City of Sin*	CD	5/1/97
BS 021	Whiskeytown	*Theme for a Trucker*	7"	4/2/01
BS 022	Riptones	*Extra Sauce*	CD	8/5/97
BS 023	Robbie Fulks	*South Mouth*	CD	10/7/97
BS 024	Waco Brothers	*Do You Think About Me?*	CD	9/9/97
BS 025	Volebeats	*Maggot Brain*	7"	10/22/01
BS 026	Meat Purveyors	*Sweet In The Pants*	CD	1/20/98
BS 027	Alejandro Escovedo	*More Miles Than Money*	CD	2/24/98
BS 028	Neko Case	*The Virginian*	CD	2/10/98
BS 029	Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Salute the Majesty of Bob Wills*	CD	10/6/98
BS 030	Sadies & Neko Case	*Murder Ballads*	7"	5/6/02
BS 031	Trailer Bride	*Smelling Salts*	CD	3/24/98
BS 032	Moonshine Willy	*Bastard Child*	CD	4/7/98
BS 033	Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Misery Loves Company*	CD	5/5/98
BS 034	The Sadies	*Precious Moments*	CD	6/23/98

[1] All information is taken from two files shared with me by Joe Swank (CatalogWordDoc012914.doc and BloodshotRelease062011.xls) and Bloodshot Records website (bloodshotrecords.com).

BS 035	Split Lip Rayfield	*Split Lip Rayfield*	CD	7/21/98
BS 037	Whiskeytown/Neko Case	*Car songs*	7"	10/20/98
BS 038	Grievous Angels	*Miles On The Rail*	CD	9/8/98
BS 039	Blacks	*Dolly Horrorshow*	CD	9/22/98
BS 040	Jon Langford	*Gravestone*	CD	8/1/98
BS 041	Andre Williams	*Jet Black Daddy, Lilly White Mama*	7"	10/20/98
BS 042	Devil in a Woodpile	*Devil In A Woodpile*	CD	11/3/98
BS 043	Waco Brothers	*Waco World*	CD	2/23/99
BS 044	Riptones	*Cowboy's Inn*	CD	2/9/99
BS 046	The Meat Purveyors	*Madonna*	7"	3/9/99
BS 047	Rico Bell & the Snakehandlers	*Darkside of the Mersey*	CD	7/20/99
BS 048	Andre Williams & The Sadies	*Red Dirt*	CD	5/18/99
BS 049	Alejandro Escovedo	*Bourbonitis Blues*	CD	4/20/99
BS 050	Neko Case	*Furnace Room Lullaby*	CD	2/22/00
BS 052	Various Artists	*Poor Little Knitter On The Road*	CD	9/21/99
BS 053	Rex Hobart & the Misery Boys	*Forever Always Ends*	CD	6/22/99
BS 054	Waco Brothers	*Electric Waco Chair*	CD	10/17/00
BS 055	The Sadies	*Pure Diamond Gold*	CD	9/21/99
BS 056	The Meat Purveyors	*More Songs About Buildings & Cows*	CD	7/6/99
BS 057	Split Lip Rayfield	*In The Mud*	CD	8/10/99
BS 058	Trailer Bride	*Whine de Lune*	CD	8/10/99
BS 059	Robbie Fulks	*The Very Best of Robbie Fulks*	CD	1/18/00
BS 060	Various Artists	*Down to the Promised Land: Five Years of Bloodshot Records*	2 CD	6/20/00
BS 061	Sally Timms	*Cowboy Sally's Twilight Laments*	CD	11/2/99
BS 062	Kelly Hogan & Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Beneath The Country Underdog*	CD	4/4/00
BS 063	The Blacks	*Just Like Home*	CD	3/7/00
BS 064	Alejandro Escovedo	*A Man Under The Influence*	CD	4/24/01
BS 065	Devil in a Woodpile	*Division Street*	CD	7/18/00
BS 066	Old 97's	*Early Tracks*	CD	5/23/00
BS 067	Riptones	*Buckshot*	CD	8/22/00
BS 068	Split Lip Rayfield	*Never Make It Home*	CD	2/20/01
BS 069	Rex Hobart & the Misery Boys	*The Spectacular Sadness of...*	CD	9/19/00
BS 070	The Sadies	*Tremendous Efforts*	CD	3/20/01
BS 071	Ryan Adams	*Heartbreaker*	CD	9/5/00
BS 072	Jon Langford & Sally Timms	*Songs of False Hope & High Values*	CD	7/1/00
BS 074	Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Executioner's Last Songs*	CD	3/19/02
BS 075	Rex Hobart & the Misery Boys	*Playin' A Couple of Hardluck Favorites*	7"	5/1/08
BS 077	Various Artists	*Wanda Jackson tribute*	CD	10/26/04
BS 078	Various Artists	*The Bottle Let Me Down*	CD	6/18/02
BS 079	Kelly Hogan	*Because It Feel Good*	CD	10/9/01
BS 080	Wayne Hancock	*A-Town Blues*	CD	9/4/01
BS 081	Trailer Bride	*High Seas*	CD	6/19/01
BS 082	The Yayhoos	*Fear Not The Obvious*	CD	8/7/01
BS 083	Wayne Hancock	*The South Austin Sessions*	EP	9/1/08
BS 084	Robbie Fulks	*13 Hillbilly Giants*	CD	11/6/01
BS 085	Waco Brothers	*New Deal*	CD	10/22/02
BS 086	Bottle Rockets	*Songs Of Sahm*	CD	2/19/02

BS 087	Various Artists	*Slaughter Rule soundtrack*	CD	3/4/03
BS 088	Rico Bell	*Been A Long Time*	EP	4/1/02
BS 089	Bobby Bare Jr.	*Young Criminals' Starvation League*	CD	7/9/02
BS 090	Neal Pollack & Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Anthology of American Literature*	CD	3/5/02
BS 091	The Meat Purveyors	*All Relationships Are Doomed To Fail*	CD	4/23/02
BS 092	Jon Langford & His Sadies	*Mayors Of The Moon*	CD	2/4/03
BS 093	Jon Rauhouse	*Steel Guitar Air Show*	CD	9/24/02
BS 094	Rex Hobart & the Misery Boys	*Your Favorite Fool*	CD	9/24/02
BS 095	Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Executioner's Last Songs, Vol. 2&3*	2 CD	6/17/03
BS 096	Legendary Shack*Shakers	*Cockadoodledon't*	CD	4/22/03
BS 097	Wayne Hancock	*Swing Time*	CD	8/19/03
BS 098	Dollar Store	*Dollar Store*	CD	2/3/04
BS 099	Neko Case	*Blacklisted*	CD	8/20/02
BS 100	Various Artists	*Making Singles, Drinking Doubles*	CD	11/12/02
BS 101	Trailer Bride	*Hope Is A Thing With Feathers*	CD	9/23/03
BS 102	Bobby Bare Jr.	*O.K...I'm Sorry*	CD	10/21/03
BS 103	Paul Burch	*Fool For Love*	CD	10/21/03
BS 104	Various Artists	*Bloodshot U.K. 2003 Sampler*	CD	6/25/05
BS 105	Jon Rauhouse	*Steel Guitar Rodeo*	CD	3/23/04
BS 106	Graham Parker	*Your Country*	CD	3/9/04
BS 107	Split Lip Rayfield	*Split Lip Rayfield*	7"	2/4/08
BS 108	Jon Langford	*All The Fame Of Lofty Deeds*	CD	4/20/04
BS 110	Bobby Bare's Young Criminal Starvation League	*From The End Of Your Leash*	CD	6/22/04
BS 111	The Meat Purveyors	*Pain By Numbers*	CD	7/27/04
BS 112	Various Artists	*For A Decade Of Sin*	2 CD	10/25/05
BS 113	Split Lip Rayfield	*Should Have Seen It Coming*	CD	9/28/04
BS 114	Rex Hobart & the Misery Boys	*Empty House*	CD	2/22/05
BS 115	Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Barn Dance Favorites*	CD	4/1/04
BS 116	Nora O'Connor	*Til The Dawn*	CD	8/24/04
BS 117	Devil in a Woodpile	*In Your Lonesome Town*	CD	3/8/05
BS 118	Jim & Jennie & the Pinetops	*Rivers Roll On By*	CD	4/26/05
BS 119	Waco Brothers	*Freedom & Weep*	CD	8/16/05
BS 120	Waco Brothers & Paul Burch	*Great Chicago Fire*	CD	4/24/12
BS 121	Various Artists	*Bloodied But Unbowed*	DVD	10/10/06
BS 122	Scott H. Biram	*Dirty Old One Man Band*	CD	3/22/05
BS 123	Graham Parker	*Songs Of No Consequence*	CD	6/7/05
BS 124	Dollar Store	*Money Music*	CD	8/14/07
BS 125	Detroit Cobras	*Baby*	CD	9/27/05
BS 126	Deadstring Brothers	*Starving Winter Report*	CD	2/21/06
BS 127	Bottle Rockets	*Zoysia*	CD	6/6/06
BS 128	Cordero	*En este momento*	CD	3/14/06
BS 129	Mark Pickerel	*Snake In The Radio*	CD	5/9/06
BS 130	The Meat Purveyors	*Someday Soon Things Will Be Much Worse!*	CD	7/18/06
BS 131	Scott H. Biram	*Graveyard Shift*	CD	7/18/06
BS 132	Bobby Bare Jr.	*The Longest Meow*	CD	9/26/06
BS 133	Jon Rauhouse	*Steel Guitar Heart Attack*	CD	3/13/07

BS 134	Wayne Hancock	*Tulsa*	CD	10/10/06
BS 135	Paul Burch	*East To West*	CD	8/15/06
BS 136	Wee Hairy Beasties	*Animal Crackers*	CD	10/24/06
BS 138	Graham Parker	*103 Degrees In June; GP & Figgs live*	CD	11/1/06
BS 137	The Silos	*Come On Like The Fast Lane*	CD	2/20/07
BS 140	Graham Parker	*Don't Tell Columbus*	CD	3/13/07
BS 139	Detroit Cobras	*Tied and True*	CD	4/24/07
BS 141	Danbert Nobacon	*The Library Book of the World*	CD	8/14/07
BS 142	Gore Gore Girls	*Get The Gore*	CD	6/26/07
BS 143	Various Artists	*Just One More: A Musical Tribute to Larry Brown*	CD	5/22/07
BS 144	Waco Brothers	*Waco Express; Live & Kickin' at Schubas*	CD	3/4/08
BS 145	Ha Ha Tonka	*Buckle In The Bible Belt*	CD	9/11/07
BS 146	Mark Pickerel	*Cody's Dream*	CD	3/4/08
BS 147	Deadstring Brothers	*Silver Mountain*	CD	10/9/07
BS 148	Scotland Yard Gospel Choir	*Scotland Yard Gospel Choir*	CD	10/23/07
BS 149	Cordero	*De donde eres*	CD	8/26/08
BS 150	I'm Not Jim	*Your Are All My People*	CD	9/9/08
BS 151	Justin Townes Earle	*The Good Life*	CD	3/25/08
BS 152	Firewater	*The Golden Hour*	CD	5/6/08
BS 153	Justin Townes Earle	*Yuma*	EP	3/25/08
BS 154	Charlie Pickett	*Bar Band Americanus*	CD	10/7/08
BS 155	Andre Williams & the New Orleans Hellhounds	*Can You Deal With It?*	CD	7/29/08
BS 156	Ben Weaver	*The Ax In The Oak*	CD	8/12/08
BS 157	Bottle Rockets	*Lean Forward*	LP	2009
BS 157	Bottle Rockets	*Lean Forward*	CD	8/11/09
BS 158	Dexter Romweber Duo	*Ruins Of Berlin*	CD	2/10/09
BS 159	Deadstring Brothers	*Sau Paulo*	CD	2/23/10
BS 160	Justin Townes Earle	*Midnight At The Movies*	CD	3/3/09
BS 161	Scotland Yard Gospel Choir	*...And The Horse You Rode In On*	CD	9/15/09
BS 162	Rosie Flores & the Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Girl Of The Century*	CD	10/27/09
BS 163	Wayne Hancock	*Viper Of Melody*	CD	4/21/09
BS 164	Ha Ha Tonka	*Novel Sounds OF The Nouveau South*	CD	6/16/09
BS 166	Exene Cervenka	*Somewhere Gone*	CD	10/6/09
BS 167	Scott H. Biram	*Somethings Wrong/Lost Forever*	CD	5/19/09
BS 169	Old 97's	*Complete Recordings*	LP	12/17/09
BS 170	Alejandro Escovedo	*Deluxe*	LP	12/17/09
BS 171	Andre Williams	*That's All I Need*	CD	5/18/10
BS 172	Graham Parker	*Imaginary Television*	CD	3/16/10
BS 173	Ben Weaver	*Mirepoix & Smoke*	CD	10/19/10
BS 174	Maggie Bjorklund	*Coming Home*	CD	3/22/11
BS 175	Jon Langford & Skull Orchard	*Old Devils*	CD	8/24/10
BS 176	Whitey Morgan & the 78s	*Whitey Morgan & The 78s*	CD	10/12/10
BS 177	Exene Cervenka	*The Excitement Of Maybe*	CD	3/28/11
BS 178	Justin Townes Earle	*Harlem River Blues*	CD	9/14/10

BS 179	Roger Knox & Pine Valley Cosmonauts	*Stranger In My Land*	CD	2/12/13
BS 180	Eddie Spaghetti	*Sundowner*	CD	2/13/11
BS 181	Ha Ha Tonka	*Death Of A Decade*	CD	4/5/11
BS 182	Various Artists	*No One Got Hurt*	2xCD	4/16/11
BS 183	Firewater	*International Orange*	CD	9/11/12
BS 184	Justin Townes Earle	*Move Over Mama/Racing…*	7 in"	4/16/11
BS 185	Andre Williams	*Hoods & Shades*	CD	2/28/12
BS 186	Dex Romweber Duo	*Is That You In The Blue?*	CD	7/26/11
BS 187	Bottle Rockets	*Not So Loud*	CD	8/16/11
BS 188	Lydia Loveless	*Indestructible Machine*	CD	9/13/11
BS 190	Scott H. Biram	*Bad Ingredients*	CD	10/11/11
BS 191	JC Brooks & the Uptown Sound	*Want More*	CD	10/25/11
BS 193	Justin Townes Earle	*Nothings Gonna Change The Way You Feel About Me Now*	CD	3/27/12
BS 194	Rosie Flores	*Working Girl's Guitar*	CD	10/16/12
BS 195	Cory Branan	*Mutt*	CD	5/22/12
BS 198	Deadstring Brothers	*Cannery Row*	CD	4/9/13
BS 200	Murder By Death	*Bitter Drink, Bitter Moon*	CD	9/25/12
BS 202	Wayne Hancock	*Ride*	CD	2/26/13
BS 203	Whitey Morgan & the 78s	*Born, Raised & LIVE from Flint*	CD	12/2/14
BS 204	Eddie Spaghetti	*The Value Of Nothing*	CD	6/18/13
BS 205	JC Brooks & The Uptown Sound	*Howl*	CD	5/21/13
BS 206	Luke Winslow-King	*The Coming Tide*	CD	4/23/13
BS 207	Ha Ha Tonka	*Lessons*	CD	9/24/13
BS 208	Barrence Whitfield & The Savages	*Dig Thy Savage Soul*	CD	8/13/13
BS 209	Cory Branan	*The No-Hit Wonder*	CD	8/19/14
BS 210	Dex Romweber Duo	*Images 13*	CD	3/18/14
BS 211	Robbie Fulks	*Gone Away Backwards*	CD	8/27/13
BS 212	Bottle Rockets	*Re-Issues*	CD	11/19/13
BS 213	Scott H. Biram	*Nuthin' But Blood*	CD	2/4/14
BS 214	Lydia Loveless	*EP - Boy Crazy*	CD	11/5/13
BS 216	Luke Winslow-King	*Everlasting Arms*	CD	9/13/14
BS 218	Bobby Bare Jr	*Undefeated*	CD	4/15/14
BS 219	Lydia Loveless	*Somewhere Else*	CD	2/18/14
BS 221	Maggie Bjorklund	*Shaken*	CD	10/14/14
BS 223	Various Artists	*While No One Was Looking: 20 Years of Bloodshot Records*	CD/LP	11/18/14
BS 705	Mekons	*Ancient And Modern*	CD	9/27/11
BS 911	The Blacks	*In Sickness And Health*	Digital	3/9/10
BS 707	Firewater (Re-issue)	Get Off The Cross…	CD	6/19/12
BS 708	Firewater (Re-issue)	Psychopharmacology	CD	6/19/12
BS 709	Firewater (Re-issue)	Man On The Burning Tightrope	CD	6/19/12
BS 710	Firewater (Re-issue)	Songs We Should Have Written	CD	6/19/12

	Bloodshot Revival			
BS 801	REX ALLEN	*Last of the Great Singing Cowboys*	CD/CS	3/23/99
BS 802	SPADE COOLEY	*Shame On You*	CD/CS	4/20/99
BS 803	HANK THOMPSON	*Hank World*	CD/CS	8/10/99
BS 804	PEE WEE KING	*Country Hoedown*	2xCD	11/2/99
BS 805	GOV. JIMMIE DAVIS	*Louisiana*	CD/CS	4/18/00
BS 806	HANK PENNY	*Crazy Rhythm*	CD/CS	7/18/00
BS 807	JOHNNY BOND	*Country & Western*	CD/CS	1/16/01
BS 808	SONS OF THE PIONEERS	*Symphonies of the Sage*	CD	9/18/01
BS 809	SUNDOWNERS	*Chicago Country Legends*	CD	11/3/08