

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: "IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS OF LONG AGO": ECHOES OF VAUDEVILLE AND MINSTRELSY IN THE MUSIC OF UNCLE DAVE MACON

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Dissertation directed by: Associate Professor, Patrick Warfield,
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Uncle Dave Macon provided an essential link between nineteenth-century, urban popular stage music (especially the minstrel show and vaudeville) and commercialized country music of the 1920s. He preserved through his recordings a large body of songs and banjo techniques that had their origins in urban-based, nineteenth-century vaudeville and minstrelsy. Like the minstrel and vaudeville performers of the nineteenth century, Macon told jokes and stories, employed attention-grabbing stage gimmicks, marketed himself with boastful or outrageous slogans, and dressed with individual flair. At the same time, Macon incorporated many features from the rural-based folk music of Middle Tennessee. Overall, Macon's repertoire, musical style, and stage persona (which included elements of the rube, country gentleman, and old man) demonstrated his deep absorption, and subsequent reinterpretation, of nineteenth-century musical traditions.

Macon's career offers a case study in how nineteenth-century performance styles, repertoire, and stage practices became a part of country music in the 1920s. As an artist steeped in two separate, but overlapping, types of nineteenth-century music—stage and folk—Macon was well-positioned to influence the development of the new commercial genre. He brought together several strains of nineteenth-century music to form a modern, twentieth-century musical product ideally suited to the new mass media of records, radio, and film. By tracing Macon's career and studying his music, we can observe how the cross-currents of rural and popular entertainment during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries interacted to form the commercial genre we now know as country music.

“IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS OF LONG AGO”:
ECHOES OF VAUDEVILLE AND MINSTRELSY IN THE MUSIC OF UNCLE
DAVE MACON

by

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List of Abbreviations

Br = Brunswick Records

Co = Columbia Records

Ed = Edison Records

Gt = Gennett Records

OK = OKeh Records

Pm = Paramount Records

Vi = Victor Records

Note on Terminology

This dissertation includes historical terminology that in some cases may be offensive to modern readers. Racist language and attitudes were part of many of Uncle Dave Macon's song titles, lyrics, interviews, and biographical writings. Such language is used only when absolutely necessary to document sources or historical texts, and does not reflect the author's personal views in any way.

Introduction

There was never a person that I have come in contact with in the entertainment world that was more individual than Uncle Dave Macon. He was a self-made entertainer who seemed to copy nobody.

—Roy Acuff¹

In the film *Grand Ole Opry* (1940), cast members of WSM's popular Saturday night radio barn dance of the same name reenact their stage show for the cameras. In one scene, Uncle Dave Macon, the "Grand Ole' Man" of the Opry, is sitting at the front of the stage with a banjo in his hand. His son Dorris Macon is seated next to him with a guitar. The rest of the Opry cast waits in the wings with their instruments and scripts, much as they might have during an actual radio performance. Macon is dressed in his usual double-breasted waistcoat with suspenders and black felt hat. Although almost seventy, he is still agile. Performing "Old Carolina Home," he shows off his legendary stage routine, wielding his banjo like a prop, spinning and flipping it, and strumming it high up the neck. He aims it like a Gatlin gun as he sings "bang, bang!" Midway through the song, Macon stands and shows off his fancy footwork by dancing and stomping his feet. Then, with one hand, he swings the banjo from its headstock like a pendulum, and with the other hand, grips his hat from its crown, shaking it rhythmically. Finally, Macon brings his banjo back to the horizontal plane, crisply striking the final chord. Flashing a

¹ Roy Acuff, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, Sept 19, 1977 (no tape no.), Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

gold-toothed grin, he unfurls his hat like a waterfall, and, in a valedictory flourish, bows deeply for the cameras (Figure 1).

This scene is the only known surviving film footage of Uncle Dave Macon (1870–1952), a banjo player, singer, and comedian who played a vital role in the formation of commercial country music during the 1920s and 1930s. As his Country Music Hall of Fame plaque states, Macon was “during his time, the most popular country music artist in America.”² He excelled in both radio and records. An original cast member of the Grand Ole Opry, he helped to shape the sound and format of early radio, and during an era when string bands ruled the Opry, emerged as the show’s first “featured star.”³ As a recording artist, Macon amassed one of the largest discographies of any southern artist before the Second World War: between 1924 and 1938, he recorded more than 180 songs. Macon was among the first country musicians to record 78 rpm discs (his first sessions occurred in July 1924), and he played an important role in establishing country music records as a viable product.

² Country Music Hall of Fame Plaque for “Uncle Dave Macon,” Nashville, Tennessee.

³ Unnamed source, quoted in Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999): 101–02.



Figure 1. Still image from *Grand Ole Opry* (1940) with Uncle Dave and Dorris Macon

This dissertation tells the story of how Macon became one of the most popular and influential country musicians of his day and ended up on the most important country music stage in America. It documents Macon's story as he moved from musical amateur to seasoned professional during the early 1920s, and follows his career through the three principal media of his day: live performance, records, and radio. I argue that Macon provided an essential musical link between nineteenth-century, urban popular stage music (especially the minstrel show and vaudeville) and commercial country music in the 1920s. As the opening vignette suggests, he became a popular and influential performer in part because he drew on the entertainment values and showmanship of nineteenth-century stage music. His repertoire, musical style, banjo techniques, and various stage personas demonstrated his deep absorption of vaudeville and the minstrel show. Like the minstrel and vaudeville performers of the nineteenth century, he told jokes and stories, employed attention-grabbing stage gimmicks, marketed himself with boastful or

outrageous slogans, and dressed with individuality and flair. At the same time, Macon incorporated many features from another nineteenth-century musical tradition: the rural-based folk music of Middle Tennessee.

As an artist steeped in two separate, but overlapping, types of nineteenth-century music—stage entertainment and folk music—Macon was well positioned to influence commercial country music in the 1920s, a genre rooted in mass media that combined various strains of nineteenth-century entertainment. Macon brought together ingredients from several types of nineteenth-century music to form a modern, twentieth-century product well suited to records, radio, and film. In his radio, record, and concert performances, Macon recast the genres of nineteenth-century popular variety theater to fit the tastes of rural southern audiences who made up the primary market for early country music, and thus helped drive the industry's success during its first decades. By tracing Macon's career and studying his music, we can observe how the cross-currents of rural and popular entertainment interacted at the turn of the century to form the musical genre we now call country music.

This case study of Macon aims to accomplish two larger scholarly objectives: 1) to better understand and assess the influence of popular stage music (i.e., vaudeville, minstrelsy, the medicine show, and the circus) on the formation of commercial country, or hillbilly, music, and 2) to show the transition in southern vernacular music from being a live, local, and non-professional musical culture to being a commercial music culture driven by the twin technologies of recording and radio. Macon played a critical role in both of these processes.

Organization

This dissertation is organized into nine chapters. Biographical background is provided in Chapter 1, which begins by establishing Macon's youthful experience in two major nineteenth-century musical traditions: urban stage music and the rural folk music of Middle Tennessee. It recounts his childhood and formative musical experiences during the 1880s and 1890s, particularly the four years he spent living in a theatrical boarding house in downtown Nashville. This chapter also summarizes Macon's work as a farmer, freight hauler, and amateur musician, a critical period of artistic development that spanned 1900 to 1920. Finally, it sketches Macon's professional musical career, including his record making, radio appearances, and concert tours.

Chapter 2 provides brief histories of the main genres of nineteenth-century popular variety music from which Macon drew musical materials: the minstrel show and vaudeville. The objective here is to describe the stage music that informed Macon's style, repertoire, and approach to performing, and to understand better how these musical influences filtered into country music during the 1920s and 1930s. This chapter provides a foundation for the later chapters on recording and radio, which detail how Macon gathered nineteenth-century musical materials into a modern, twentieth-century musical product.

Chapter 3 explores Macon's background in the rural, folk musical traditions of Middle Tennessee. I argue that Macon fit the profile of a pre-mass media nineteenth-century southern songster: he performed semi-professionally for tips, played in a restricted local area, maintained a wide-ranging repertoire suitable for different audiences, and wrote and sang topical songs about local concerns. Even after becoming a

radio and recording artist in the 1920s, Macon preserved these songster habits, underscoring his position as a transitional figure between nineteenth-century, southern musical culture and twentieth-century, mass-media-based commercial music.

Chapter 4 shifts to a discussion of Macon's professional concerts, beginning in 1920. It documents his tours and performances in rural schoolhouses, small-time vaudeville theaters, and radio stations through the Second World War. This chapter argues that Macon, as a touring artist, stood at the crossroads of two eras. On the one hand, he was a nineteenth-century songster who played impromptu shows, booked his own performances, and traveled by mule-drawn wagon or train. On the other hand, he came to rely increasingly on outside professional agencies, and modern methods of marketing and travel. The changes in the extent and nature of Macon's touring reflected broader developments in the industry of country music between 1920 and 1950. During these years, country artists grew increasingly professionalized. They played at new venues such as schoolhouses and vaudeville theaters, traveled greater distances, reached bigger audiences, and expanded their advertising. As touring opportunities grew, country musicians' visibility, popularity, and fan-base also grew, which increased revenues and enabled older songsters like Macon to support themselves as professional artists.

Chapter 5 analyzes the content of Macon's live performances, showing his deep performance roots in nineteenth-century popular variety music, as well as his relatability to rural audiences. By drawing on evidence from his commercial recordings and archival interviews, this chapter reconstructs the atmosphere and format of a typical Macon vaudeville or schoolhouse show. Examining his performances, I argue that Macon used many of the same performance techniques as minstrel and vaudeville musicians from the

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: comedy, variety, banjo tricks, and a theatrical presentation. In addition, I show how he borrowed elements from stock nineteenth-century theater figures to create his stage personas. As we will learn, Macon often donned the dress of the hillbilly, thus playing a popular vaudeville character that by the late 1920s had become integral to many professional country music acts.

Chapter 6 analyzes Macon's repertoire and banjo style, using evidence primarily from his commercial recordings. Through this evidence we can see that Macon linked nineteenth-century stage music and commercial country music in his repertoire, which derived from the black and white song traditions of Middle Tennessee, and from the urban, professional stage music of Nashville. For each of these broad categories, I survey the main song types found in Macon's music: fiddle-and-banjo dance tunes, African-American folk songs, spirituals, jubilee and "coon" songs, comic vaudeville songs, sentimental Tin Pan Alley songs, and gospel songs.⁴

Chapter 7 shifts to a discussion of Macon's recording career. Here, I argue that his recordings synthesized elements from nineteenth-century music to create a distinctly twentieth-century musical product. The chapter begins by placing Macon's recordings in the context of the popular music recording industry after the First World War, which by the late 1920s had developed into three broad marketing categories: popular (mainstream), hillbilly, and race. Phonograph companies only gradually recognized

⁴ The epithet "coon song" refers to a type of late nineteenth-century popular song, composed by both white and black musicians, that had a superficial resemblance to ragtime and was frequently published as sheet music. The term denotes a specific subgenre of minstrel song, and therefore, has a fairly precise historical meaning. Throughout the study, I use this, and other racially-sensitive historical terminology.

hillbilly music as a separate genre between 1923 and 1927. At first, companies viewed rural, southern folk music as an extension of the music previously recorded by mainstream artists such as the blackface performer Al Jolson, who frequently sang southern-themed songs. By around 1927, however, the idea of hillbilly music as something different—folk music played by working-class, rural southerners—crystallized in the marketing materials of Columbia, Victor, Brunswick, and other record labels. Macon’s records provided listeners a smooth on-ramp to the new commercial genre, as his brand of entertainment, with its strong links to nineteenth-century variety music, resembled the theatrical representations of southern music by mainstream artists from the 1910s and early 1920s, while his identity as a rural southerner, positioned him, culturally and musically, to play a leading part in the emerging hillbilly category.

Chapter 8 looks at Macon’s career as a radio performer on the Grand Ole Opry, highlighting and further explaining his role as a musical and cultural bridge to a new industry and performance medium. His radio career demonstrated his ability to repackage nineteenth-century stage genres for rural audiences in a new medium. As we will see, Macon helped shape the Opry during its formative years through his musical and personal relationships with other cast members and announcer George D. Hay.

Chapter 9 examines Macon’s legend and musical legacy. I argue that he affected the future of country music by helping to define, in lasting ways, several institutions or movements, including the Grand Ole Opry, country music television, the urban Folk Revival of the 1950s and 1960s, and the contemporary old-time music movement.

Literature Review

The primary and secondary literature on Uncle Dave Macon includes articles, book chapters, liner notes, autobiographical writings, and recordings. Also important to this study are secondary sources in the areas of early country music, the minstrel show, vaudeville, early radio, the Grand Ole Opry, and the early phonograph industry.

Uncle Dave Macon: Primary Sources

The most valuable source for studying Macon is his recordings, which consist of roughly 180 commercial records made between 1924 and 1938, as well as several home recordings, and a few Grand Ole Opry recordings made after 1939. The Bear Family boxed set, *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*, assembled and annotated by Charles K. Wolfe, contains all known Macon recordings.⁵ In addition, Macon appears in the Republic Studios' film *Grand Ole Opry* (1940), which offers a tantalizing glimpse of his acrobatic stage routine.⁶

Written primary source documentation on Macon is sparse. A 1955 fire at the home of his sister, Annie Macon, destroyed many of his papers, including letters and handwritten song sheets.⁷ Yet a few autobiographical writings and interviews do exist, and these serve as the main source of information about Macon's early life and amateur

⁵ *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy* (Hamburg, Germany: Bear Family Records, BCD 15978, 2004), CD boxed set.

⁶ *Grand Ole Opry* (Republic Studios, 1940), film.

⁷ Michael D. Doubler, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Photo Tribute* (Publication of the Macon-Doubler Fellowship, 2014), 4.

musical career.⁸ Like other country music entertainers, Macon constructed his own public image. As a professional stage entertainer, he paid keen attention to the details of marketing and stage identity. He cast himself as a farmer and workingman, a devout Christian, a grandfather, a minstrel, and, occasionally, an unsophisticated rube. He adopted a nickname, chose colorful stage costumes, and demonstrated a flair for self-promotion. To press and fans, he constructed his biography and presented himself according to the trope of the “authentic” southern musician and songster, as a farmer who played music rather than as a professional entertainer. Although Macon’s personal stories are generally consistent with one another, they are difficult to verify given his fondness for storytelling and self-promotion, and it is thus possible that he embellished or romanticized some of his claims.⁹

Other primary sources used for this study included interviews with Macon family members and associates, such as his sons Eston and Dorris Macon, and his sidemen Sam McGee, Kirk McGee, and Sid Harkreader. These interviews can be found at the Charles K. Wolfe Collection at the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State

⁸ Macon’s autobiographical sketch appears in “My Life and Experience Written Especially for Brunswick Topics,” *Brunswick Topics* (Brunswick Records, 1928): 10–11. During his Loew tour in 1925 (discussed in Chapter 4), he also gave interviews with the *Birmingham Post*, the *Birmingham Age-Herald*, and the *Birmingham News*. A facsimile of a handwritten letter by Macon is published in “Commercial Music Graphics: Number Four,” *JEMF Quarterly* 5, part 3, no. 15 (Autumn 1969): 92–95. Finally Macon’s songbook, *Songs and Stories of Uncle Dave Macon* (Nashville: Uncle Dave Macon, 1938), contains biographical information.

⁹ This dissertation largely omits personal stories and comic anecdotes about Macon that do not provide insights about his music. It also does not provide detailed discussions of Macon’s family lineage and history, a subject covered adequately by Wolfe.

University. This collection—the major archival source for Macon—contains dozens of taped interviews.¹⁰ Several other archives contain Macon-related materials. The Country Music Hall of Fame in Nashville has transcribed interviews with Sid Harkreader, Alcyone Bate Beasley (daughter of Macon’s Grand Ole Opry associate Dr. Humphrey Bate), and the Grand Ole Opry’s David Stone. The Archie Green, Mike Seeger, and Guthrie Meade collections at the Southern Folklife Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill also contain useful information on Macon. Finally, the Ralph Rinzler Collection at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage in Washington D.C. houses an audio interview with Maybelle Carter in which she discusses Macon, and an original copy of George D. Hay’s *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (1945), which includes a full chapter on Macon.¹¹ Taken as a whole, these recollections by friends and colleagues testify to Macon’s strong character, charisma, and ability as a showman, although, because the interviews took place thirty to fifty years after the events they describe, the details are not always reliable. Despite this flaw, interviews with Macon’s friends and family constitute an essential source of information.

Additionally, I conducted interviews with old-time musicians and Macon family members. Banjoist Leroy Troy, Grand Ole Opry collector and banjoist Robert Montgomery, collector Kent Blanton, and family members David Macon III (grandson)

¹⁰ Macon’s principal biographer, Charles Wolfe, taught at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) for many years.

¹¹ George D. Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: G. D. Hay, 1945).

and Mike Doubler (great-grandson), offered perspectives on Macon's life, music, and career that were unavailable in published sources.¹²

Uncle Dave Macon: Secondary Sources

Uncle Dave Macon has attracted the attention of several scholars. The core biographical information on Macon—his family tree, birth and marriage records, and the basic chronology of his career—is laid out in three works: Charles K. Wolfe's liner notes to the boxed set *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*; Ralph Rinzler and Norm Cohen's *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*; and Mike Doubler's illustrated history of Macon's life, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Photo Tribute*.¹³ In addition, Norm Cohen, Archie Green, Tony Russell, and Charles Wolfe have all surveyed Macon's career in short articles and book chapters.¹⁴

¹² Phone and in-person interviews were conducted with Leroy Troy, Jeremy Stephens, and David Macon III, and others between July 2013 and May 2015.

¹³ Charles K. Wolfe, *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*, CD liner notes (Bear Family Records, 2004); Ralph Rinzler and Norm Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*, JEMF Special Series, No. 3 (Los Angeles: The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1975); and Michael D. Doubler, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Photo Tribute* (Publication of the Macon-Doubler Fellowship, 2014).

¹⁴ The most significant of these publications are Charles K. Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999); Archie Green, *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970).

Although the basic facts of Macon's life are known, a full-length biography has not yet been written, and scholarship is still in the early stages.¹⁵ Certain periods of his life, such as his time spent as an itinerant songster in rural Tennessee, remain largely undocumented. Little has been published about his concert tours in the 1920s and 1930s, including his vaudeville appearances for Loew, RKO, and other vaudeville theater chains. This dissertation provides new information and historical context to better understand Macon's career.

Another area of weakness in Macon scholarship is our knowledge of his music. In 1972, Archie Green proposed that someone do a comprehensive study of Macon's repertoire to identify his musical sources and draw conclusions about his methods of borrowing and recomposition. Such studies already exist for the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, although Green's proposal for Macon has yet to be realized a quarter-century after his suggestion, despite some smaller studies that discuss his music in detail.¹⁶ Other significant questions about Macon's music need to be addressed. For

¹⁵ Mike Doubler, Macon's great-grandson, with whom I spoke in May 2015, is currently researching and writing a biography on Macon that focuses on family background and heritage. The book is set to be published by University of Illinois Press in early 2017. Mr. Doubler showed me several pieces of Macon memorabilia, including a hand-written letter, song sheets, and unpublished photographs.

¹⁶ Green, *Only a Miner*, 218. The Carter Family's songs have been analyzed in Archie Green's "The Carter Family's 'Coal Miner's Blues,'" *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (December 1961): 226–37, and Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg's *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). Jimmie Rodgers's songs have been discussed in detail by Jocelyn Neal in *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). Stephen Wade provides musical analysis of some Macon material (e.g., "Arcade Blues") in *Banjo Diary: Lessons from Tradition*. CD liner notes (Smithsonian/Folkways SFW 40208, 2012).

instance, we know little about the extent of Macon's reliance on songbooks, songsters, banjo tutors, hymnals, sheet music, and other written sources. This dissertation does not attempt to discover the origins of every Macon song. It does aim, however, to assess Macon's music through selective transcription and analysis of his recordings, and by comparing his songs to source material found in sheet music, songsters, and commercial recordings by other artists. One of the goals of this dissertation is to further the critical examination of Macon's music and thereby deepen our understanding of his repertoire, musical style, banjo technique, songwriting, composition, and borrowing.

Early Country Music: Secondary Sources

To frame my topic historically and intellectually, I have relied on various secondary sources in the field of country music. Scholarship has grown significantly in recent years. The most comprehensive history of the genre remains Bill C. Malone's *Country Music U.S.A.*, now in its third edition with new chapters by Jocelyn R. Neal.¹⁷ This book provides the full arc and sweep of country music history—from the pre-commercial era, to early records and radio, to the post-Second World War boom—and has allowed me to tell Macon's story within the frame of broader industry trends that occurred throughout his career, including the standardization of country music styles and professionalization of country musicians in the 1930s, and the shift to new performing outlets such as movies and television.

¹⁷ Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 3d., revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).

Although white southern musicians had sold their music prior to records and radio, these harnessing of these two technologies marked a watershed in the marketing and selling of country music. Records and radio altered the career paths of southern artists like Macon, by exposing them to new audiences and venues, and by increasing earnings. Macon began his professional career in 1920, several years before southern rural music was commercialized through mass media and rebranded as “hillbilly music.” Macon’s professional development in the new media paralleled the development of countless other southern folk-based artists, both white and black, who made records or appeared on radio at the same time. Thus, Macon’s career provides a case study in how rural, southern artists became part of the national, mass media entertainment culture in the early- to mid-1920s.

Aside from general histories, two recently published reference works on early country music proved indispensable to my study. Tony Russell’s *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942*, the first comprehensive discography of early country music, contains complete listings of all known early country music recording sessions, including dates, locations, song titles, and names and instruments of supporting musicians.¹⁸ This discography, which includes unreleased recordings, reveals the full range of Macon’s repertoire, and helped me plot the major developments in his recording career as he changed record labels, sidemen, and recording locations, and therefore, charts the ebb and flow of Macon’s career as he surged and receded in popularity.

¹⁸ Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

The second reference work, Guthrie Meade's *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music*, catalogs pre-Second World War country music recordings of "traditional" (i.e., public domain) or pre-1920-composed songs. Meade organizes the discography by general song type—Ballads, Popular Songs, Religious Songs, Fiddle Tunes—and subdivides the material into specific categories such as Blues, Blackface Minstrel Pieces, and Southern Gospel. For each song, he lists every recording made by a pre-Second World War country artist, along with the standard discographic information. The book is especially valuable for studying Macon because of the additional information it provides for each song: composer (if known); early songbooks and songsters in which the song appears, and a list of select recordings of the song by mainstream (i.e., non-country) artists.¹⁹

Background on the Grand Ole Opry can be found in Charles Wolfe's *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry*, the sole book-length study of the early years of the show. The work, which is based on newspaper articles and interviews with cast members, provides an authoritative history of the Opry's formation and early years. Wolfe portrays Macon as the show's leader during the 1920s, and as a dynamic and savvy radio performer who captivated audiences both at home and in the studio or theater.²⁰ Recent research on radio barn dances, including the essay collection, *The Hayloft Gang*, have shown that the Opry and other early barn dances were often closer in

¹⁹ Guthrie T. Meade, *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

²⁰ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 101–114.

style to other mainstream popular entertainments—such as vaudeville—than to traditional rural barn dances.²¹ By examining the popular variety show roots of the Opry and, specifically, Macon’s contribution to the show, this dissertation lends supports to the claim, made by Charles Wolfe and others, that the show was more than a simple barn dance, but in fact reflected many of the popular music trends of the era.²²

Country Music as “Popular” Music

This dissertation seeks to broaden the context for examining Macon’s music by looking to other forms of popular, non-country music from the 1920s upon which Macon and other hillbilly musicians drew. This requires going beyond the industry-created marketing labels of the 1920s—hillbilly, race, popular—in order to evaluate Macon in a broader context. Such a reorientation is important for the study of Macon, an artist who overlapped stylistically with many mainstream performers of his day.

Several scholars have approached hillbilly music from such a broad angle, viewing it as one of several musical genres of the period that shared essential stylistic

²¹ See Paul L. Tyler, “The Rise of Rural Rhythm,” in *The Hayloft Gang: The Story of the National Barn Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 19–71, for an examination of the modern musical features of the early National Barn Dance, which included plucked string basses and Hawaiian guitars.

²² Other essential introductory country music texts include Norm Cohen, “Early Pioneers,” in *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez*, ed. Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975): 3–39; Jocelyn R. Neal’s textbook *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), which presents a streamlined history of the industry; and Jeffrey J. Lange’s *Smile When You Call Me A Hillbilly: Country Music’s Struggle For Respectability, 1939–1954* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), which recounts the genre’s development around the Second World War, documenting changes in musical style and the assimilation of country music into the American cultural mainstream.

features and overlapped in repertoire and audience. Norm Cohen produced some of the earliest crossover scholarship in *Minstrels and Tunesmiths: The Commercial Roots of Early Country Music*, in which he highlights the musical continuity between early-twentieth-century popular recordings and hillbilly recordings. In a similar vein, Hank Sapoznik methodically traces Charlie Poole's borrowing from popular music figures, such as the early phonograph artist Billy Murray. Scholarship by Tony Russell and Karl Hagstrom Miller transcends the hillbilly-centric perspective by incorporating discussions of blues, jazz, and other popular genres.²³ In addition, Jocelyn Neal's research crosses genre boundaries; for instance, her study of Jimmie Rodgers, which illustrates how his most famous songs have reappeared each generation in country music history, functioning simultaneously as symbols of tradition and vehicles for stylistic innovation.²⁴

Patrick Huber has viewed hillbilly music in a broader historical context in *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South*, by showing how the music formed in response to forces of modernization such as industrialization, urban migration, and population growth. Huber illustrates how old-time string bands flourished in the urban, textile mill villages of the North Carolina Piedmont, and highlights the urban backgrounds of some early country musicians. He argues that hillbilly music

²³ Norm Cohen, *Minstrels and Tunesmiths: The Commercial Roots of Early Country Music*, LP liner notes (Los Angeles, CA: John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1981); Hank Sapoznik, *You Ain't Talkin' To Me Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music*, CD liner notes (New York: Columbia/Legacy, 2005); Tony Russell, *Blacks, Whites, and Blues* (New York: Stein and Day, 1970); Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Jocelyn Neal, *The Songs of Jimmie Rodgers: A Legacy in Country Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

should be viewed as a fundamentally modern form of popular music that, like jazz, was molded by larger historical forces and a national, urban-based entertainment industry.²⁵

Studies by Huber and others deepen our understanding of hillbilly musicians' national currents of pop culture. By using a richly contextual approach, we can continue to trace the stylistic and social connections between early country music and other forms of popular entertainment, whether vaudeville, the minstrel show, cinema, mainstream popular records (including jazz), or African-American styles such as gospel and blues. Drawing these connections will allow us to form a deeper understanding of how artists such as Macon formed their musical styles and crafted their identities.

Other writers have emphasized Macon's deep roots in late-nineteenth-century popular music. Robert Cantwell, for instance, characterizes Macon as a vaudeville, medicine, and minstrel show performer, and argues that his repertory and performance style can be traced to turn-of-the-century popular music, particularly the late minstrel show.²⁶ Country music historian Bill C. Malone has written that Macon was the "major link between nineteenth-century minstrel music and modern country music."²⁷

While historians have long acknowledged Macon's background in vaudeville and minstrelsy, however, the influence of these traditions on Macon's music has not been carefully examined. This study emphasizes Macon's connections to nineteenth-century

²⁵ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

²⁶ Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 78–79.

²⁷ Bill C. Malone, *Southern Music, American Music* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 23.

popular stage music such as vaudeville and the minstrel show. While previous research has looked at Macon largely in terms of his country music career, this study aims to look at him broadly, as a nineteenth-century popular entertainer—a vaudevillian and traveling tent show musician and songster—whose career extended into the mass media age of hillbilly records and radio.

Conclusion

The relative neglect of Macon by historians (at least in comparison to Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, Charlie Poole, and Fiddlin' John Carson) may be due to the perception that his legacy was less significant than that of his contemporaries. Indeed, although Macon influenced the next generation of country musicians—among his protégés were Opry regulars David “Stringbean” Akeman and Grandpa Jones—he produced relatively few musical disciples, and none of these became major commercial stars. By contrast, Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family fostered a long line of influential descendants that included Gene Autry, Ernest Tubb, Lefty Frizzell, Bill Monroe, and Doc Watson. Additionally, Macon’s musical style, in contrast to that of Jimmie Rodgers or the Carter Family, looked backwards to the folk, gospel, minstrel, and vaudeville music of the nineteenth-century more than it prefigured the commercial country music, and, indeed, popular music more generally, of the post-Second World War era. Rodgers’s most famous songs have resurfaced in every generation while the Carter Family’s songs, vocal styles, and guitar playing continue to resound in bluegrass, folk, and more.²⁸

²⁸ See Neal, *Songs of Jimmie Rodgers*; Barry Mazor, *Meeting Jimmie Rodgers*:

Nonetheless, Macon influenced the course of country music in ways that have been either unacknowledged or underappreciated. His success predated both Rodgers and the Carter Family, and he became, along with Fiddlin' John Carson, the first hillbilly music star of the 1920s. As a leader of the Grand Ole Opry, he shaped the course of country music radio, which served as the industry's lifeblood during the Great Depression. Finally, Macon played a central role in the transition in American popular music, as record companies embraced southern artists and transformed local songsters into national, mass-media entertainers. In his radio, record, and concert performances, Macon helped to recast styles of nineteenth-century folk and popular music—especially vaudeville and the minstrel show—to appeal to the tastes of rural, southern audiences who made up the primary market for hillbilly music. Finally, following his death, Macon provided a touchstone for the next generation of Grand Ole Opry performers to measure themselves. He also became an icon of “old-time music,” a traditional offshoot of country music. Thus, Macon influenced country music in several significant ways.

How America's Original Roots Music Hero Changed the Pop Sounds of a Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Mark Zwonitzer and Charles Hirshberg, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone: The Carter Family and Their Legacy in American Music* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

Chapter 1: Biography

There was a feller in that circus that played the banjo like the very mischief and I was just plum fascinated with it and when I went home I urged my mother to git' me a banjo so as I could learn.

—Macon speaking of Joel Davidson¹

This study is, first and foremost, an examination of how Uncle Dave Macon synthesized and transformed nineteenth-century musical traditions rather than a biography per se. Before embarking on this project, however, it will be useful to have some knowledge of Macon's life. This chapter highlights the major personal and professional moments in Macon's career: closing his freight hauling business and beginning his full-time professional musical career, meeting his collaborator Sid Harkreader, and appearing for the first time on radio and records. The purpose of this chapter is to lay the groundwork for showing how Macon served as an intermediary between nineteenth-century popular stage music and modern country music. For the sake of convenience, I have divided Macon's life into three chronological periods: his early upbringing (1870–1899); his career as a small business owner and amateur musician (1899–1920); and his professional music career (1920–1952).

As we shall see, Macon differed from his contemporaries in several significant respects. First, he was significantly older than most hillbilly and blues musicians who

¹ “Tennessee Banjoist Reminisces,” *Birmingham News*, January 1, 1926.

made records in the 1920s, having been born in 1870. While a few commercially successful southern artists of the 1920s (most of them fiddlers) were born around the same time as Macon, or were even older—Fiddlin’ John Carson (1868–1949), Henry Gilliland (1845–1924), Uncle Jimmy Thompson (1848–1931), and Dr. Humphrey Bate (1875–1936)—most of the major country and blues musicians of the 1920s were born during the 1880s or 1890s, and thus, were a decade or more younger than Macon. These artists included Bascom Lamar Lunsford (1882–1973), Vernon Dalhart (1883–1948), Gus Cannon (1883–1979), Gid Tanner (1885–1960), Ma Rainey (1886–1939), Charlie Patton (ca. 1887–1934), Papa Charlie Jackson (1887–1938), Kelly Harrell (1889–1942), A. P. Carter (1891–1960), Charlie Poole (1892–1931), Blind Lemon Jefferson (1893–1929), Bessie Smith (1894–1937), Jimmie Rodgers (1897–1933), Sara Carter (1898–1979), and Maybelle Carter (1909–1978). Among major country and blues artists, only Macon and Fiddlin’ John Carson (1868–1949) were born in the immediate post-Civil War Period, more than ten years before Lunsford and twenty-seven to thirty-two years before Rodgers and Son House (1902–1988). Because of his age, Macon, more than most country musicians of the 1920s, received a long and first-hand exposure to nineteenth-century stage genres, an experience that I argue fundamentally shaped his later work as a country musician.

Second, Macon’s geographical background differed from that of most of his hillbilly contemporaries. Most early country musicians came from the Southeast, in particular, the Appalachian Mountains (e.g., Buell Kazee, the Carter Family), the Piedmont region of North Carolina (e.g., Charlie Poole), and northern Georgia (e.g., Riley Puckett, Fiddlin’ John Carson). By contrast, Macon grew up in the comparatively

western locale of Middle Tennessee. Not until the late 1930s and 1940s, when Western Swing and Honky Tonk emerged, did the country music industry shift westward to Nashville and beyond.² Yet even in the nineteenth century, Nashville, due to its strategic location on the Cumberland River, was accessible to musicians and entertainers from a wide area, introducing Macon to a more diverse musical culture than he might have experienced living in the mountains of East Tennessee, West Virginia, or North Carolina.

A third trait that distinguished Macon from many of his hillbilly contemporaries was his relatively urban upbringing. Although he spent his early years living on a rural farm in Warren County, in 1884, his family moved to downtown Nashville to run the Broadway House hotel. Relocating to the city came at a time when Macon, at age fourteen, was old enough to appreciate fully the different styles of music around him. Years later, as an adult, Macon returned to live in the countryside. By the time he embarked on a professional career in 1920, therefore, he had already absorbed an eclectic mix of rural and urban influences. The extent and depth of Macon's exposure to urban popular theater was unusual for early country musicians, who, by and large, received more parochial, rural upbringings (although, as I discuss later, there were exceptions to this rule, including Fiddlin' John Carson and Charlie Poole).

These unique biographical circumstances—age, geography, and a combination of urban and rural musical influences—shaped Macon's repertoire and performance style, distinguished him somewhat from his hillbilly contemporaries, and positioned him to

² Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings*, 93–100.

serve as a crucial link between nineteenth-century popular stage music and 1920s commercial country music.

Macon's Early Years

David Harrison Macon was born on October 7, 1870, in Warren County, located between the townships of McMinnville and Smartt Station in the central Tennessee hills near the base of the Cumberland Plateau (Figure 2). He spent his early youth living on the farm, which he remembered as being “overshadowed by the blue skies of Ben Lomond Mountain so near Heaven that the angels’ feet could be touched.”³ Macon was the eighth of eleven children. His parents were John Macon (1829–1886), a former Confederate Army captain and farmer, and Martha Ramsay Macon (1838–1906), a homemaker. His older siblings included his brother Vanderbilt (“Van,” 1857–1938), and sisters Lou (1859–1942) and Annie (1868–1960). These siblings all significantly affected Macon’s life: Van, who was thirteen years older, became the family patriarch after Captain John’s death in 1886, while Macon’s two older sisters encouraged him to play music.

³ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 10.



Figure 2. Map of Tennessee and the Cumberland Plateau

Macon had a distinguished ancestry. Captain John Macon’s father, Henry Harrison Macon, owned more than 2,000 acres on which he built a sawmill, cotton gin, and distillery; Captain Macon’s grandfather was the Revolutionary War hero Colonel John Macon; while another ancestor, Nathaniel Macon, had been a North Carolina congressional representative and Speaker of the U.S. House.⁴ After marrying in 1855, Macon’s father, Captain John Macon, settled into a large home and estate, known as Macon Manor, in McMinnville, Tennessee. He operated several businesses including a grocery store and a tin shop. Charles Wolfe describes the Macon family as “well-to-do” and esteemed throughout Middle Tennessee. Indeed, despite some later hardships, the Macon family, compared to their neighbors in Warren County, was affluent, employing housekeepers, field laborers, and other domestic workers.⁵ Nonetheless, the outbreak of the war severely disrupted the family’s businesses. During Reconstruction and the

⁴ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 5.

⁵ Charles K. Wolfe, “Uncle Dave Macon,” in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 306.

financial panic of 1873, the Macon family lost much of their wealth. Nearing bankruptcy, Captain Macon was forced to sell many of his real estate holdings.⁶ Young Dave, though not deprived, had to work hard, and spent his youth “plowing, sowing, and reaping” on the family farm.⁷

Still, the Macon family’s relative prosperity afforded Dave and his siblings opportunities to study and practice music. As a child, he initially played the guitar, learning the traditional song “Greenback.” He also probably briefly studied the piano, as his mother insisted that all of the children learn the instrument. Macon’s older sisters, Annie and, especially, Lou—who later taught music—were skilled pianists who helped their brother learn new songs and develop his musical skills. They would sit at the piano, cycle through popular sheet music, and assist him in setting his lyrics to music: Dave would “come up with a new song—he’d go to [Lou], and she’d play the piano and get him started with it.”⁸

In December 1883, the family sold their McMinnville house and its 600 acres (perhaps due to financial pressures) and moved sixty miles west to Nashville. As Macon later wrote, “the old home was left to strangers.”⁹ In Nashville, the family entered the

⁶ Doubler, *Uncle Dave Macon*, 1–2.

⁷ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 10.

⁸ Archie Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 4, 1977 (no tape no.), Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU. Evidence of Macon’s piano training also comes from the fact that, as an adult, he sometimes played piano and organ in church.

⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, *Songs Sung by Uncle Dave Macon* (Nashville: Radio Station WSM, 1938), n.p.

service and hospitality industry by becoming owners and sole operators of the Broadway House hotel, where they also made their home. Macon's four years living in Nashville marked a critical urban interlude in an otherwise rural upbringing. While living at Broadway House, he formed deep musical impressions from listening to the itinerant vaudeville, minstrel, and circus entertainers who boarded there. As noted above, this first-hand exposure to urban, nineteenth-century theatrical music distinguished Macon from nearly all other country artists of the 1920s.

Nashville offered a rich environment for Macon to develop his musical knowledge and talents. Commercial entertainment developed more slowly in the South because of the region's smaller, less developed urban centers and higher levels of poverty, which made it harder to attract high-quality traveling performers.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Nashville had a long tradition of supporting music. In the 1830s and 1840s, German, Italian, and French immigrants established European-style concert halls such as Odd Fellows Hall and the Masonic Hall, private music academies such as the Nashville Female Academy and the Nashville Academy of Music, and instrument and sheet music dealers such as the McClure Company. The minstrel show, in particular, surged after the Civil War, with new venues springing up around the city at a fast rate. Minstrel companies played regularly in Nashville theaters such as the Masonic Hall, Olympic Theater, and Grand Opera House. Some of the performers who visited the city in Macon's youth included Haverly's Minstrels, Callendar's Famous Georgia Minstrels,

¹⁰ Steve Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire: Public Entertainment in Atlanta, 1880–1930* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 1–11.

Harry Robinson's Minstrels, the New Orleans Minstrels, West's Minstrels, and the Original Georgia Minstrels.¹¹

By the time the family moved to the city in the mid-1880s, Nashville was an established musical center with brass bands, orchestras, vaudeville and minstrel troupes, and singing evangelists who performed in tabernacles, theaters, and venues along the riverfront. The city underwent a major demographic expansion late in the century, with the population growing from around 43,000 inhabitants in 1880 to 80,000 people in 1900.¹² Such growth, along with new technology, further enhanced Nashville's musical life. In 1898, Nashville hosted the Tennessee Centennial Exposition, an event that brought thousands of visitors to the city and featured brass bands, electric light shows, choirs (such as the Fisk Jubilee Choir), and novelty spectacles such as a giant newly constructed organ, water slides, and a full-scale replica of the Greek Parthenon.¹³ By the 1900s, one could find nickelodeons, kinoscopes, and other mechanical novelties at the Nashville Arcade (to which Macon paid tribute in his song, "Arcade Blues," recorded in 1926). Throughout the city, motion pictures, vaudeville and minstrel shows, legitimate theater, and other musical entertainments could be heard and seen. The city also boasted a

¹¹ This list of groups that visited Nashville during the late 1800s comes from Timothy W. Sharp, *Nashville Music Before Country* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2008), 48.

¹² *Ibid.*, 92, 103.

¹³ Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, repr. (Illinois: University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 73. In addition, there sprouted on the perimeter of the fairgrounds a panoply of music theaters and halls to serve the crowds. While no record of Macon attending the event is known, it seems likely that he did go, given that the exposition lasted six months.

remarkably rich and diverse musical culture, as it attracted musicians from across the region: African-American singers from Memphis; string bands from Knoxville, Chattanooga, and North Georgia; and gospel quartets from southern Tennessee and Alabama.¹⁴

The Broadway House hotel served as the perfect environment for Macon, a young teenager in 1883, to absorb Nashville's lively musical culture. Located downtown at the corner of Broadway and Second Avenue, just one block from the Cumberland River, it was highly accessible to the traveling entertainers who arrived by riverboat.¹⁵ As show business blossomed in the late nineteenth century, the number of new hotels and inns catering to traveling entertainers grew. Performers established informal lists of places friendly to actors and musicians. The best ones were inexpensive, served hot meals, and developed reputations within the community as trusted stops where entertainers could sleep, relax, practice, and trade stories about life on the road.¹⁶ The Broadway House, which Macon described as a "theatrical boarding house," seems to have been such a destination, serving theater musicians, circus performers, and other traveling entertainers.¹⁷ According to Wolfe, "the building had a large, open basement where the acts—which ranged from jugglers to animal acts—could rehearse." As a hotel clerk,

¹⁴ Charles Wolfe also provides an overview of the city's musical culture in *A Good-Natured Riot*, 26–42.

¹⁵ The building still stands and is located next to the current Hard Rock Café.

¹⁶ Robert C. Toll, *On With The Show*, 275.

¹⁷ *Purina's Grand Ole Opry and Checkerboard Fun-Fest Souvenir Album*, Grand Ole Opry souvenir book, ca. 1945 (no date), Grand Ole Opry Collection (Box 5), Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

Macon learned first-hand the jokes, songs, and instrumental tricks of the musicians and actors who stayed there.¹⁸ On one occasion, he learned banjo tricks from a Broadway Hotel lodger who had been playing at the nearby Princess Theatre.¹⁹ Other times, he and his siblings received free passes to shows, for instance, when McFlynn's Circus boarded at the Broadway House for two weeks in the fall of 1885.²⁰

The visit of Sam McFlynn's Circus, when Macon was fourteen, was the seminal musical event of his young life.²¹ As Macon later recalled, "it was there that [my] childhood dreams of stage life began developing."²² McFlynn's troupe set up their tents at the corner of 8th and Broadway in an open field, and Macon attended several shows. He was mesmerized especially by the group's banjo player, Joel Davidson, a "noted Comedian and Banjoist" who, according to Macon, played "the banjo like the very mischief." Seeing Davidson perform inspired Macon to ask his mother for money to purchase a banjo, which he did. Like a religious conversion, the circus experience "proved to be the spirit that touched the main spring of the talent," and led Macon to

¹⁸ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 6.

¹⁹ Kirk McGee (with Sid Harkreader), interview by Charles K. Wolfe, 1977, Wolfe 00922, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

²⁰ Macon and his younger brother, R. G. (later a farmer in Oklahoma), both received free passes to the shows. Macon, "Brunswick Topics," 10.

²¹ The name is spelled various ways. For instance, Macon spells it "McFlin" in his "Brunswick Topics" article.

²² Macon, "Brunswick Topics," 10.

become a musician.²³ Throughout his teenage years, Macon gradually developed his musical talents, a process that he explained with an agricultural metaphor (referring to himself in the third person): “As in the natural planting, just so with the cultivation of accomplishments, it took years of hardships, cares, and sorrows and disappointments, but in between all these conditions Uncle Dave would steal away many times and play on his Banjo and sing for those who loved and encouraged his music.”²⁴

In 1887, the Macon family suffered a personal tragedy when Captain John Macon was stabbed and killed outside of the Broadway Hotel by a revenue officer with whom he had a long-running feud. Several Macon family members witnessed the attack, including Dave, who was around seventeen years old at the time. Following John Macon’s death, and the surprise acquittal of the revenue officer, Macon’s mother sold Broadway House, and, in late 1887, the family purchased a farm in Readyville, Tennessee in Rutherford County, about fifty miles southeast of Nashville. The Readyville home, dubbed “The Corners,” was a large, three-story house with an adjacent barn. It sat on a sprawling 423-acre farm abutting the Stones River that had once been the homestead of the town’s namesake, Colonel Chas Ready.²⁵ At The Corners, the family continued to work in the

²³ Uncle Dave Macon, Letter to George D. Hay, May 23, 1933, printed in “Commercial Music Documents: Number Four.” *JEMF Quarterly* 5, no. 15, part 3 (Autumn, 1969): 92–95. Charles Wolfe notes that one of Macon’s trick banjo routines, “Uncle Dave Handles the Banjo Like a Monkey Handles a Peanut,” may have derived from Davidson: *Keep My Skillet*, 6–7. Macon apparently saw Davidson perform on more than one occasion based on his use of the term “first met,” although it is unclear whether he actually took banjo lessons from him.

²⁴ Macon, “Commercial Music Documents: Number Four,” 92–93.

²⁵ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 10.

hospitality business by operating a stagecoach rest stop. Macon watered and fed customers' horses and entertained from a stage that he constructed on top of the barn. In addition, he engaged in daily, arduous farm labor and continued his musical studies: "Ten years passed by very much the same—farm life and practice continued," he later wrote. "Many hard years and days of plowing, sowing and reaping overtook this boy Banjoist on this big farm, yet he found time on rainy days and nights to build up his spirits with his favorite old banjo."²⁶ Macon's return to the countryside at age seventeen marked the closing of a circle, musically speaking, as he synthesized the knowledge he had gained from both urban professional entertainers and rural folk musicians in Middle Tennessee.

By the late 1880s, now in his late teens, Macon had grown increasingly independent. He spent time in Nashville and nearby places (he courted a young woman in Hermitage, Tennessee in 1889), although his whereabouts through much of the 1890s are not entirely known.²⁷ In 1897, at age 27, Macon met Mathilda Richardson. As he recalled, "Cupid came on the scene: the practice was easier, the songs were sweeter, the chords were more harmonious as he played the songs for the girl of his choice."²⁸ In November 1899, he and Mathilda married. "Miss Tildy," as her friends called her, was a devoted homemaker and devout member of the Church of Christ.²⁹ She helped raise the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁷ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 8–9.

²⁸ Macon, "Brunswick Topics," 10.

²⁹ Author interview with two of Macon's grandchildren, Aunt Wren (Mary) and David Macon III.

couple's seven children, all of them boys: Archie, John, Harry, Glenn, Dorris, Eston, and Paul.

Farmer, Small Businessman, and Amateur Musician

The next chapter in Macon's life, from the late 1890s to around 1920, saw him establish an independent farming and freight hauling business while continuing to play music on a mostly amateur basis. During this period, Macon laid the foundation for his professional career by refining his skills as an entertainer and by expanding his repertoire. He became well known throughout Middle Tennessee for his impromptu musical performances from the seat of his wagon. Moreover, it was probably during this period that he acquired the nickname "Uncle."

In 1900, soon after marrying, Macon and his wife moved from Readyville to their own farm in Kittrell, Tennessee, southeast of Nashville. He named his property "Macon Station." At Macon Station, Macon farmed (using a double-shovel plow), raised livestock, and ran a store. In addition, he founded and operated his own freight hauling business, the Macon Midway Mule and Transportation Company, which delivered goods along a nineteen-mile stretch between Murfreesboro and Woodbury, Tennessee.³⁰ The delivery route (which followed the Old Woodbury Highway) spanned Murfreesboro in Rutherford County, to the west, and Woodbury in Cannon County, to the east. Macon's homestead in Kittrell was strategically positioned in that it straddled the county dividing

³⁰ Rinzler and Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*, 5–12.

line, located more or less equidistant from the two towns.³¹ In the spoken introduction to his song “From Earth to Heaven” (1928), Macon describes his freight hauling company and the precise location of his headquarters in Kittrell:

Now good people, I wagoned and farmed for over twenty years. And the style of my wagoning firm was the Macon Midway Mule and Mitchell Wagon Transportation Company, situated on the dividing line, operated by gentlemen on and up the time. Main office: eight and a quarter miles east [of] Main Street, Murfreesboro, and ten and three-and-a-quarter miles west [of] Main Street, Woodbury, Tennessee. Now here’s my song!³²

Because Woodbury did not have a railroad, goods had to be carried in by wagon or by foot, a need filled by Macon’s company, which hauled whiskey, ice, buggies, nails, wire fence, produce, and other products. The most profitable good was liquor (at least until Prohibition), which he transported and sold for a quarter per one-gallon jug. Each day throughout the year, Macon made the full nineteen-mile trip, starting at 4am. Hatton Sanford, who served as his superintendent of wagons and general manager, filled in on days when Macon needed to tend to his farm. Macon’s sons helped run the business as well.³³

Though Macon was not yet a professional musician, he filled his wagon trips with music. He frequently stopped to jam with friends, such as Jasper Aaron “Mazy” Todd, a fiddler who ran a blacksmith shop in Readyville, Tennessee.³⁴ Other regular stops

³¹ The Arts Center of Cannon County (Tennessee) offers a driving tour of Macon’s route from Murfreesboro to Woodbury.

³² Uncle Dave Macon, “From Earth To Heaven” (1928, Br 329).

³³ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1977).

³⁴ Todd was born in 1882 in Big Springs, Rutherford County, Tennessee. He never played music full-time, but he did play fiddle with Macon on the Opry and in the

included the Mullins Jewelry store in Murfreesboro, and an area called Sulfur Springs, which was located halfway between Murfreesboro and Kittrell. If Macon forgot to bring an instrument, banjos seemed to present themselves along the way. Stopping to rest his mules, boys would greet him and place a banjo in his hands. Macon's picking, singing, and jokes always evoked laughter from the children.³⁵ According to Macon's neighbor, Ellen Primm, these eager children bestowed on Macon the honorific title "Uncle Dave" probably sometime during the 1900s or 1910s, when he had reached middle age.³⁶

During his travels, Macon sometimes stepped down from his wagon to put on shows.³⁷ Farmer Homer Green recalls that some people thought Macon was crazy because he would play his banjo on top of a barn.³⁸ At other times, Macon entertained from the perch of his wagon, using the platform as a stage. Regardless, he never failed to capture people's attention. He sang orders to customers, or improvised songs about his products like a street caller.³⁹ C. P. Blankenship, who worked at a hardware store on the public square in Murfreesboro and often saw Macon pass by, recalled that he would

1927 recording sessions with Macon and the Fruit Jar Drinkers. Todd and Macon were close friends and in 1917 Todd moved to a farm next to Macon's property.

³⁵ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1977).

³⁶ Ellen Primm, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, July 12, 1996, Wolfe 01083, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

³⁷ George D. Hay, "Country Music Sketch #10," radio broadcast, WSM (Nashville), Grand Ole Opry Collection, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, date unknown.

³⁸ Homer Green, Interview by Charles K. Wolfe, May, 1986, Wolfe 00352, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

³⁹ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 104.

arrive with great fanfare, loudly singing, plunking his banjo, and hollering as he drove down Main Street. Hearing the ruckus, store clerks and customers would pour outside to watch and listen.⁴⁰

In many ways, Macon's two decades as an amateur performer laid the foundations for his professional country music career. First, he gained valuable performing experience and honed his skills as a banjo player and singer. Second, he acquired songs and jokes during his trips. For instance, he learned material from African-American workers who helped him operate his wagons.⁴¹ Third, during these years, Macon established his regional reputation as a singer, banjoist, and comedian, which provided a basis for his success as a touring musician in the 1920s. Finally, as a songwriter, Macon drew inspiration from his travels throughout rural Tennessee, often recounting the places and people that he saw in his lyrics. For instance, he wrote a song about the moonshiners he came across in Cannon County:

In the Cannon County mountains,
They have sweet and flowing fountains,
On every hill they have a still.
Oh, the bright lights on Broadway,
The sunshine down in Dixie,
They'll have moonshine in the Cannon County Hills.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Uncle Dave Macon*, documentary (Sol Korine and Blaine Dunlap, producers, 1980).

⁴¹ Sid Harkreader, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 16, 1977, Wolfe 00373, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

⁴² Macon never recorded the song in the studio, although he did perform it in concert and in radio appearances. These lyrics have been transcribed from a recording of a 1939 Grand Ole Opry performance that was commercially released on the 2004 CD boxed set *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*.

The song's imagery—mountains, flowing fountains, and moonshine—perhaps would have appealed to listeners who were from the South, or who romantically imagined themselves to be southern.

Professional Musician

In 1920, Macon closed the Macon Midway Mule and Wagon Transportation Company and at the relatively late age of fifty embarked on a new career as a professional entertainer. As Archie Macon lamented, auto-powered trucks “took [Macon’s] mules away from him.”⁴³ In the late 1910s, when trucking companies entered the delivery business, Macon faced increased competition. Some friends urged him to buy his own trucks, but Macon declined.⁴⁴ Around this time, he wrote “From Earth to Heaven,” a song in which he predicted that the automobile would fade from fashion, leaving his beloved mule-powered wagons: “Auto truck is quick and fast/ But a horse and buggy is safest at last/Auto truck has to be cranked up/I can sit right still and say, ‘Get up!’/I’ve been wagoning for over twenty years and a-living on the farm/I’ll betchya ‘hundred dollars and a half a ginger cake I’ll be here when the trucks are gone.”⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, Macon decided to close shop, and turned to music. To his friends and family, he declared, “Boys, there’s just one thing I want: give me my banjo.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Archie Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, December 5, 1974 (no tape no.), Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Uncle Dave Macon, “From Earth to Heaven” (1928, Br 329).

⁴⁶ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1974).

Macon's career in show business began unofficially in the summer of 1920, in Pensacola, Oklahoma. When Macon's nephew became ill, he took a lengthy vacation with the boy and his mother (Macon's sister) to the "higher climate" of the Ozarks near Pensacola to stay at the home of Macon's younger brother, R. G. Macon. In reality, Macon took this trip not only for his nephew, but also because he had himself taken a "blue spell" due to the recent failure of his business.⁴⁷ During the three-month vacation, Macon's family encouraged him to entertain on his banjo, and in an article written for Brunswick Records in 1928, he recalled (again, in his customary third-person voice) the circumstances of his first professional show:

[M]any friends and neighbors of [the] family gathered to greet them, while there it was suggested that Uncle Dave play some of his favorite songs. He did so and a lady present asked if he would play at the School House for the benefit of furnishing the Preacher's home. Uncle Dave replied yes. So in July 1920 was his first performance with pay. The night came on, a large crowd assembled, and she was well pleased with the entertainment and proceeds.⁴⁸

In the wake of the success, Macon "gave himself up almost entirely to his favorite pastime" of playing and singing. He was "invited to other places in the West," and remained in Oklahoma for three months.⁴⁹ Early on, while performing at a hotel, Macon had a tourist approach him and say that he had "saved" him through his music, and had inspired him due to Macon's advanced age (around fifty at the time): "[I was] so blue and down and out I did not care to live any longer. But by seeing you at your age act out as

⁴⁷ Macon, "Brunswick Topics," 10, and Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1974).

⁴⁸ Macon, "Brunswick Topics," 10–11.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 10–11.

well as playing and singing on your Banjo all at the same time, my spirits just rose and refreshed my whole Soul and body and has given me hope to go on with life's duties.”⁵⁰

At the end of the summer, with his health and spirits restored, Macon returned to Nashville to pursue his musical career. In the late summer of 1920, he embarked on a series of small-time, local gigs, traveling in a horse-and-buggy, with his son, Archie, serving as chauffeur. As in Oklahoma, the early Nashville-area shows took place in informal settings such as private parties, church fundraisers, and picnics, and either did not generate much money or were actually charitable benefits. For instance, he played at a benefit for the Methodist Church (possibly at his own church, the Haynes Chapel, in Murfreesboro) and passed the hat, raising \$17 to help finance a new church door. Sometime later, he accepted an offer from his acquaintance Bob Smith to play for fifteen minutes at a private club for fifteen dollars. In 1928, Macon recalled his great fortune and surprise at receiving such a lucrative offer: “Asked my price, I asked what he would give me. He said \$15 and your dinner—overjoyed at these figures I gladly accepted and was promptly on time and went over time.” During the show, “another gentleman” offered him “\$30.00 for 3 night's work of 10 minutes each,” an experience that encouraged him to pursue a career as an entertainer.⁵¹

By 1923, Macon was teaming up with the guitarist and fiddle player, Sid Harkreader (1898–1988), from Gladeville, Tennessee, whom he met at a Nashville barber

⁵⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, Letter to George D. Hay, May 23, 1933, printed in “Commercial Music Documents: Number Four.” *JEMF Quarterly* 5, no. 15, part 3 (Autumn, 1969): 92–95.

⁵¹ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 10–11; and Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1974).

shop in the early 1920s. The duo performed at schoolhouses and small-time vaudeville theaters throughout the South. In 1925, Macon achieved success in Birmingham, Alabama, playing at Loew's Bijou Theatre for five consecutive weeks. The owner of the vaudeville chain, Marcus Loew, praised Macon and offered him a headline spot on Loew's southern circuit that summer. For the next two decades, Macon performed with Loew, RKO, Crescent, and other vaudeville theater companies, establishing a kind of dual career as a small-time vaudevillian and commercial country musician.

As Macon's career developed rapidly in the mid-1920s, the nascent industry of hillbilly music began to emerge. In July 1924—six months before taking the stage at the Bijou in Birmingham, and almost a year and a half before first appearing on The Grand Ole Opry—Macon and Fiddlin' Sid Harkreader boarded a train to New York City to record two sessions for Vocalion Records. The opportunity to record had come about that spring, when, according to one account, Ed Holt of Harley Holt Furniture Company hired Macon and Harkreader to play at a furniture convention in Knoxville, Tennessee. While at the convention, Macon met C. C. Rutherford, a representative of the Sterchi Brothers furniture store, which sold phonograph cabinets and records. Rutherford also served as a talent scout and regional distributor for Vocalion Records. Impressed by Macon and Harkreader, Rutherford invited them, all expenses paid, to come to New York to record for Vocalion, to “represent the state of Tennessee.”⁵² Macon tells a somewhat different—and more dramatic—story. After performing for miners in Kentucky, Macon writes, he

⁵² The quote comes from Sid Harkreader's interview with Charles Wolfe, (MTSU, 1977). Harkreader also tells the story in *Sid's Memoirs: The Autobiography of Sidney J. Harkreader* (Los Angeles: John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1976), 18.

passed a music store where a crowd of people was gathered around a phonograph machine, listening to the latest record by the Vocalion hillbilly artist George Reneau. Asked what he thought, Macon replied, “very good for a guitar but I believe I can beat it with my Banjo.” Macon then played a song for the crowd. A man (presumably C. C. Rutherford) approached him and exclaimed, the world is “clamoring for what you possess!” and invited him to come to New York to record.⁵³

Macon and Harkreader recorded twenty-four sides at Vocalion’s New York studios on July 8 and 9, 1924, a session that marked the beginning of Macon’s long and successful recording career. Between 1924 and 1938, he recorded approximately 180 sides for such labels as Vocalion, Brunswick, Gennett, and Bluebird, making him one of the most prolific, and longest tenured, country recording artists before the Second World War. Only a handful of country artists from the 1920s (e.g., Vernon Dalhart and the Carter Family) recorded more songs than Macon did, and among these, only the Carter Family continued to record deep into the 1930s.⁵⁴ As shown in Table 1, Macon undertook fourteen separate recording trips between 1924 and 1938 to a variety of cities, including New York, Chicago, Charlotte, Knoxville, New Orleans, and Jackson, Mississippi. He appeared both as a solo artist and with side musicians. Among the artists he recorded with were Sid Harkreader, Sam McGee, Kirk McGee, Dorris Macon, and The Delmore Brothers, all of them Opry artists. In almost all of the recordings, Macon, or one of these artists, is credited as the songwriter, the primary exceptions being the traditional folk

⁵³ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 11.

⁵⁴ Discographic information on pre-Second World War country music can be found in Russell, *Country Music Records*.

songs arranged by Macon, and the approximately two dozen gospel and Tin Pan Alley songs credited to other songwriters.⁵⁵ Eston Macon remembers that, at some point, he spent approximately one month helping his father type out the lyrics to his original songs in order to file the copyrights.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Copyright information is contained in the discography assembled by Ralph Rinzler, Norm Cohen, and Tony Russell for Charles K. Wolfe's *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*, CD liner notes (Bear Family Records, 2004), 140–58.

⁵⁶ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

Table 1. Macon's Recording Sessions⁵⁷

<u>Date</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Label</u>	<u>Personnel</u>
July 8–11, 1924	New York	Vocalion	solo; with Harkreader
April 13–16, 1925	New York	Vocalion	solo; with Harkreader
April 14–17, 1926	New York	Vocalion/ Brunswick	with Sam McGee
September 8–9, 1926	New York	Vocalion/ Brunswick	solo
May 7–11, 1927	New York	Vocalion/ Brunswick	with Fruit Jar Drinkers and Dixie Sacred Singers
June 23, 1928	Indianapolis	Vocalion	solo
July 25–26, 1928	Chicago	Vocalion/ Brunswick	with Sam McGee
June 20–21, 1929	Chicago	Vocalion/ Brunswick	with Harkreader
March 31, 1930	Knoxville	Vocalion/ Brunswick	with Dorris Macon
December 17, 1930	Jackson, MS	OKeh	with Sam McGee
August 14–15, 1934	Richmond, IN	Gennett/ Champion	with McGee Brothers
January 22, 1935	New Orleans	Bluebird	with Delmore Brothers
August 3, 1937	Charlotte	Bluebird	with unknown musicians
January 24–26, 1938	Charlotte	Bluebird	with Glenn Stagner

In November 1925—at age fifty-five, a mere half decade after starting his professional music career—Macon made his radio debut on the WSM Barn Dance, the first incarnation of the Grand Ole Opry. Macon, arguably the second most important figure in the early development of the show behind director George D. Hay, was a fixture on the Grand Ole Opry from the start. He participated in the first broadcast of old-time music, on WSM on November 6, 1925, when he played at a Nashville Policemen's

⁵⁷ Russell, *Country Music Records*, 573–78.

Benefit at the Ryman Theater. This event occurred three weeks before Uncle Jimmy Thompson's more famous appearance on WSM, an event that most scholars consider to be the start of WSM's weekly Barn Dance.⁵⁸ Prior to the arrival of Roy Acuff in 1938, Macon was the show's biggest star and the top draw. A 1957 Opry guidebook states that "Uncle Dave Macon was the Opry's original singing star and remained its top single attraction for 15 years."⁵⁹ George D. Hay asserted that Macon was "our top dog for many years," and WSM executive Jack Harris confirmed that Macon was "the headliner since he started with the program in the early days."⁶⁰ In another testimonial from the mid-1930s, *WSM Radio News* described Macon as "one of the big reasons why the Saturday Night Grand Ole Opry on WSM has become a national institution from coast to coast."⁶¹ He cemented the Opry's dominance in the radio barn dance market of the 1930s.

Although Macon's music was rooted in the rural South, he brought to the Opry many of the performance techniques used by minstrel and vaudeville musicians during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: comedy, banjo tricks, and a theatrical presentation. Those elements played an important role in creating a product that made the

⁵⁸ This chronology is based on research by Charles Wolfe, who examined Nashville newspaper announcements and radio listings in *A Good-Natured Riot*, 106.

⁵⁹ *WSM's Official Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book* 1, no. 1 (Nashville: WSM, 1957), 7. Virtually identical statements appear in a later guidebook, *WSM Grand Ole Opry: Official Opry History-Picture Book*, Nashville: WSM, 1966.

⁶⁰ Hay, "Country Music Sketch #10"; Jack Harris, "The Story of the Famous WSM Grand Ole Opry," *Rural Radio* 1, no. 10 (Nov., 1938): 4–5, 30.

⁶¹ Advertisement, *WSM Radio News*, probably mid-1930s.

new “country” genre comfortable to both audiences and record companies, and thereby contributed greatly to its early popularity.

Conclusion: Macon and Fiddlin’ John Carson as Parallel Artists

In a mass media age, Uncle Dave Macon embodied the spirit and substance of nineteenth-century popular stage traditions as much as any other commercial country musician, a consequence of his age, western background, and unusual exposure to both urban and rural musical influences. This background positioned him to serve as a major bridge between nineteenth-century genres and twentieth-century country music. Another artist, however, Fiddlin’ John Carson (1868 –1949), who worked and performed in the Atlanta area, resembled Macon. In many respects, Macon and Carson were parallel figures in the history of country music—nineteenth-century musicians, raised in a mixture of urban and rural environments, who would later appear on records and radio—and therefore, comparing them provides further insight into Macon’s importance as a country musician.

Macon and Carson both had musical roots in the nineteenth century, and both successfully adapted to the new media of records and radio. Each was a songster and local storyteller in the tradition of American bluesmen such as Charlie Patton, and each sang songs about major community events (e.g., Macon’s “Tennessee Tornado” and Carson’s “The Death of Floyd Collins”) and local political issues (e.g., Macon’s “The Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train” and Carson’s “The Grave of Little Mary

Phagan”).⁶² Carson and Macon both toured widely and were polished entertainers. Like other stage-trained performers, they could project their voices without the aid of a microphone, and used physical tricks, jokes, and other forms of showmanship to keep their audiences enthralled.⁶³ Further, both maintained exceptionally wide-ranging repertoires: a mix of nineteenth-century “folk” songs (narrative ballads, rural dance tunes, hymns and spirituals, and secular slave songs) and commercial material from vaudeville, the minstrel show, and Tin Pan Alley.

Macon’s and Carson’s careers reflected the changing status of nineteenth-century popular stage entertainment in country music as the industry matured and moved away from conventions of the stage. The nineteenth-century traditions of minstrelsy and vaudeville provided an important musical bridge to mass media-based hillbilly music. Artists such as Macon and Carson helped audiences make sense of the new media through reference to popular stage (in addition to traditional folk) sounds and techniques. While these stage roots remained a part of country music well into the age of television, and to some extent even into the present, the core elements of their music—an emphasis on comedy, nineteenth-century repertoire, topical songs, and traditional instruments such as five-string banjo and fiddle—played an increasingly diminished role in the modern era. Once a new music and media became well established in the South, musical

⁶² Uncle Dave Macon, “Tennessee Tornado” (1934, Gt unissued) and “The Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train” (1930, OK 45507) Fiddlin’ John Carson, “The Death of Floyd Collins” (1925, OK 40363) and “The Grave of Little Mary Phagan” (1925, OK 45028).

⁶³ Patrick Huber provides the most thorough and up-to-date biography of Carson in *Linthead Stomp*, 43–102.

intermediaries with nineteenth-century backgrounds were no longer necessary.

Nonetheless, one cannot overstate the importance of artists such as Macon and Carson in creating an entertainment product that allowed audiences to acclimate to the new hillbilly genre heard in records and radio.

Chapter 2: The Macon Persona: Retaining the Nineteenth-Century Stage

Uncle Dave Makins:

We certainly did enjoy you over our Radiator last night, and from the way you talk, laugh and sing, you must be one of the most wonderful old negroes in the South.

—Opry fan letter¹

Uncle Dave Macon's career offers a case study in how nineteenth-century theatrical performance styles, repertoire, and stage practices became part of commercial country music during the 1920s. Despite achieving fame through twentieth-century media, Macon's repertoire, performance style, and approach to showmanship all reflected the strong influence of nineteenth-century stage music. His repertoire included dozens of vaudeville and minstrel songs, such as "Old Dan Tucker" (an early minstrel song), "My Girl's a Highborn Lady" (a song from the later minstrel stage), and "I'll Never Go There Any More (The Bowery)" (a vaudeville song). Onstage, Macon used vaudeville-derived techniques—banjo flips, comedy, and rapid shifts in pacing and mood—to keep his audience engaged. Offstage, he marketed himself with colorful slogans and boasts in the grand minstrel tradition of Edwin Christy (from Christy's Minstrels), including "Uncle Dave Handles The Banjo Like A Monkey Handles A Peanut," "World's Greatest Banjoist," and "The Dixie Dewdrop."

Macon also borrowed heavily from nineteenth-century popular stage music in constructing his stage persona. The "Uncle Dave" persona incorporated several

¹ Uncle Dave Macon, "My Life and Experience Written Especially for Brunswick Topics," *Brunswick Topics* (Brunswick Records, 1928), 11.

characters common in nineteenth-century stage music, including the grandfather, the rube, the hillbilly, and the minstrel (although Macon did not use blackface). Macon fluidly shifted among these characters depending on the expectations of his audience. Thus, some newspaper articles stressed his background in “Negro songs of the old plantation,” while others emphasized his credentials as an elderly, “banjo playing philosopher.” As an artist who strived, above all, to entertain his audiences, Macon willingly adopted these characters as needed.

The chapter begins with a description of “hillbilly music,” the category under which Macon was marketed in the 1920s and 1930s. Next, I give an overview of the minstrel show and vaudeville, the principal genres of nineteenth-century stage music that informed Macon’s style and repertoire, and the traditions that served as a source for his various stage personas. This analysis illustrates some of the ways that Macon—and other hillbilly musicians—borrowed and adapted nineteenth-century stage genres in the 1920s and 1930s.

The “Hillbilly Music” Industry

Between 1923 and 1929, hundreds of southern rural artists, most of them semi-professional and only locally known, earned national recognition as “hillbilly” musicians through their work in records, radio, songbooks, and film. Scholars now generally use the term “hillbilly music” to refer to commercial country music between approximately 1921 and 1942.² The genre of hillbilly music distinguished itself from the other two major

² These are the dates used by Tony Russell in his influential *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

record categories—popular and race—by the identity of its performers and audience, who, as a rule, were rural, southern, working-class, and white.³ Patrick Huber offers a definition of “hillbilly music” as music commercially recorded and broadcast by “ordinary white southern singers and musicians, particularly those from the southeastern United States” during the two decades leading up to the Second World War.⁴ Record companies, radio stations, and promoters adopted other terms as well as “hillbilly music” during the 1920s and 1930s, including “old familiar tunes,” “old-time music,” and “hill and country music.”⁵ Today, however, “hillbilly music” has become the most commonly used term to describe commercial country music during this period.⁶

Hillbilly music represented the commercialized mixture of several musical traditions, including English-Scottish balladry, fiddle-and-banjo dance music, Tin Pan Alley, ragtime, jazz, blues, gospel, minstrelsy, and vaudeville.⁷ Although early country music has at times been equated with the presence of that music on phonograph records,

³ There were some exceptions to the description of hillbilly artists and their fans as southern, working-class, and white. A few hillbilly artists came from the North (e.g., Pee Wee King). Others studied music formally or attended college (e.g., Buell Kazee). Others had middle-class, professional occupations (e.g., Bascom Lamar Lunsford practiced law). In addition, a handful of African-American musicians were part of the hillbilly music industry (e.g., Grand Ole Opry star DeFord Bailey).

⁴ Patrick Huber, *Linthead Stomp: The Creation of Country Music in the Piedmont South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 19.

⁵ Tony Russell, *Country Music Originals: The Legends and the Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3–4.

⁶ Bill C. Malone and Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 3d., revised ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 40.

⁷ For an overview of the musical strains that combined to form modern country music, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 1–29.

as historian Norm Cohen notes, the early country music industry was comprised of live performance, recordings, and radio broadcasts, each of which charted its own course, albeit interdependently.⁸ Southern rural music had, for decades, been presented as semi-professional, commercial entertainment, at fiddling conventions, barn dances, tent and medicine shows, and street corners. The full commercialization of southern vernacular music, however, was made possible by two major media developments of the 1920s: records and radio. With the coming of records and radio, the folk music of rural southerners was widely distributed for the first time. Macon played a leading role in the dissemination of hillbilly music in its three major media forms: records, radio, and live performance.

The Minstrel Show's Influence on Early Country Music

The essential values of nineteenth-century popular stage music—variety, spectacle, imitation, parody, comedy, showmanship, and direct engagement with audiences on everyday topics—all found expression in the works of early country artists such as Macon, Fiddlin' John Carson, The Skillet Lickers, and Charlie Poole. First-generation country musicians absorbed vaudeville and minstrelsy through many sources during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: vaudeville and minstrel stage shows, phonograph recordings, sheet music, songsters, and instrumental tutors. Macon and a few other early country musicians also performed in vaudeville, minstrel, and medicine shows, either during or before their country music careers.

⁸ Cohen, "Early Pioneers," 3.

The minstrel show, in particular, exerted a major influence on the first-generation of country musicians. Blackface minstrelsy, the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in nineteenth century America, flourished between 1840 and 1870, although it remained popular nationwide through the 1890s (and even longer in the rural South). Minstrel shows were, in essence, comedic performances in which the players dressed in blackface and presented caricatures of African-American song, dance, and speech. The principal figures in a minstrel show were the interlocutor (sometimes called “Mr. Johnson”) and the endmen (called “Mr. Bones” and “Mr. Tambo”). The minstrel group sat in a semicircle on stage, with the interlocutor positioned in the middle, and the Endmen on the flanks. The interlocutor emceed the show and spoke in “proper” English, while Bones and Tambo spoke in a supposedly black vernacular English, offering puns, conundrums, malapropisms, hyperbole, and other humorous twists of language.⁹ Bones and Tambo, in spite of their buffoonish nature, always got the best of the interlocutor, whose pretentiousness made him an object of ridicule for endmen and theatergoers alike.¹⁰

The stagecraft and musical style of blackface minstrelsy changed over the course of the nineteenth century. In the early 1840s, the Virginia Minstrels inaugurated the first era of minstrel shows with their performance at New York’s Bowery Amphitheatre. Initially, minstrel shows were modest affairs with four, five, or six people who played

⁹ For information on black dialect in popular music, see John Graziano, “The Use of Dialect in African-American Spirituals, Popular Songs, and Folk Songs,” *Black Music Research Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn, 2004): 261–86.

¹⁰ Cockrell, *Demons*, 17–18.

string and percussion instruments, sang rough plantation songs, told jokes, and performed “eccentric” dances. Troupes diversified in the 1850s and 1860s by adding more musicians, and introducing novelties such as yodelers and ethnic (e.g., “Dutch” and Irish) characters. Over time, the character of minstrel songs changed as a rhythmic, fiddle-driven, declamatory style gave way to *bel canto* melodies and sentimental lyrics. In the final stage of minstrelsy’s development after the Civil War, shows became more elaborate to compete with vaudeville and musical comedy. For example, in 1878, J. H. Haverly fronted the Mastodon Minstrels, a group with a forty-member cast.¹¹

Blackface minstrelsy was based on an assertion of white supremacy, and the denigration of African-Americans. Implicit in the minstrel show’s virulent racism, however, was an element of homage to black folk culture. White performers often expressed their admiration for their musical sources, namely, the black folk artists that inspired the genre, even while assuming an evident air of racial superiority. In the words of radio minstrel performer and author Dailey Paskman,

It is to the Negro that the white minstrel owes everything, for without the presence of the black race in this country American minstrelsy would never have existed. The pathos, the tragedy, the humour of the Negroes, their heritage of superstition and of religious fervor, their music, their linguistic whims and fancies, have been the richest material for translation to the stage.¹²

Yet minstrel performers addressed more than racial matter in their shows.

Minstrels communicated with their largely urban, working-class audiences on such social

¹¹ Toll, *Blacking Up*, 139.

¹² Paskman, *Blackface and Music*, 174.

and political matters as immigration, class conflict, and gender roles.¹³ Indeed, much of the parody in minstrel shows centered on class rather than race. From its start, the minstrel show put forth an anti-elitist point of view. Blackface characters such as Jim Crow and Zip Coon embodied the values of Jacksonian populism: rural, western, self-reliant, anti-intellectual, and opposed to the gentile piety of upper class Americans. Minstrelsy strove to appeal to the common (read “white”) man in a society increasingly gripped by egalitarian sentiments.

The minstrel show was a product of the nineteenth-century split between lowbrow and highbrow culture. Audiences were typically working-class men. Noisy and aggressive, they demanded entertainment that conformed to their own social values and attitudes toward race, immigration, and gender. Performers usually complied. Dale Cockrell contends that blackface performers aimed their burlesque humor at the wealthy and social elite through the black mask.¹⁴ “Zip Coon,” a doubly transvested character who assumed the roles of black dandy and “larned scholar,” simultaneously lampooned the effete manners and pretensions of the upper class while mocking the absurd ambitions of a powerless member of society.¹⁵ Robert Winans argues that the “real essence of minstrelsy was burlesque” rather than the denigration of black Americans. While true that

¹³ William J. Mahar, “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840–1890,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 179.

¹⁴ Dale Cockrell, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” in *The Encyclopedia of Country Music: The Ultimate Guide to the Music*, ed. Paul Kingsbury, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.

¹⁵ Finson, *The Voices That Are Gone*, 168–172.

audiences interpreted shows in partly non-racial terms, however, it is important not to understate the centrality of race, or the viciousness of the racism, present in minstrel shows.¹⁶

Long after fading from fashion in the North, minstrelsy remained a staple of rural southern entertainment. Through the First World War, professional minstrel troupes toured the South; while amateur minstrel groups, often performing from guidebooks written by professionals such as Dailey Paskman, performed as well. Blackface in the early twentieth century continued to be used as a theatrical convention in southern music. Minstrel show songs, jokes, skits, characters, and costumes circulated as part of a southern cultural currency. As Bill Malone explains, minstrelsy ultimately infused every aspect of rural southern music, including “songs, dance steps, instrumental styles, and jokes.”¹⁷

According to Norm Cohen, the “essence of the minstrel show—namely, the interspersion of musical with non-musical entertainment—became part and parcel of live country music shows.”¹⁸ Many artists, including Clayton McMichen, Jimmie Rodgers, Bob Wills, Roy Acuff, and Bill Monroe began their careers in medicine or minstrel shows, and in some cases performed in blackface.¹⁹ In short, country musicians preserved minstrel show repertoire, jokes, comedy routines, and other theatrical conventions.

¹⁶ Robert B. Winans, “Ethiopian Skits and Sketches: Contents and Contexts of Blackface Minstrelsy, 1840–1890,” in *Inside the Minstrel Mask*.

¹⁷ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 8.

¹⁸ Cohen, “The Folk and Popular Roots of Country Music,” 177.

¹⁹ Cockrell, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” 36.

The minstrel show legacy is apparent in the string band recordings of the 1920s, which preserved the basic instrumentation of the classic minstrel ensemble—fiddle and banjo—but added guitar. This is not to say hillbilly string bands derived solely from the minstrel show; the tradition of African-American fiddle-and-banjo dance music, adopted and developed by white folk musicians during the late nineteenth century, served as an equally important foundation.²⁰ The repertoire of early string bands, however, included a number of rollicking, up-tempo minstrel songs recast as square dance tunes, usually stripped of their original lyrics: “Zip Coon” (renamed “Turkey In the Straw”), “Old Dan Tucker,” “Buffalo Gals,” “Bile Them Cabbage Down,” and “The Arkansas Traveler.” These minstrel stage songs became mainstays of the hillbilly string band repertoire; most 1920s string bands, including the Skillet Lickers, The Red Fox Chasers, and Earl Johnson’s Clodhoppers, recorded their own renditions of such tunes. String bands (such as Macon’s Fruit Jar Drinkers) also made use of the basic elements of minstrel comedy: sexual puns, ethnic and racial jokes, and political satire. An example is the music of the Skillet Lickers, a string band that recorded “rural dramas,” which were humorous skits featuring music and often political or social commentary that drew inspiration from minstrel comedy routines. Titles of popular Skillet Licker records included “Corn Licker Still in Georgia” and “Prohibition Yes or No.”²¹

²⁰ Paul F. Wells makes the point that hillbilly string bands developed from two different streams—one minstrel, the other folk—in his entry “String band” in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* (2d. edition, ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett), 53–54.

²¹ The Skillet Lickers, “Corn Licker Still in Georgia” (1927, Co 15201-D, etal.) and “Prohibition Yes or No” (1930, Co 15632-D). For more information on the Skillet Lickers’ discography, see Russell, *Country Music Records*, 887–892.

Country musicians of the 1920s also borrowed formal elements of the minstrel show, which had three segments. The First Part was a running dialogue between interlocutor and endmen, beginning with the interlocutor commanding, “Gentlemen, be seated!” and ending with a “Walk Around” in which the characters paraded across stage. The Second Part, or, olio, was a “free fantasia” that resembled a variety show (and was a precursor to vaudeville), featuring a mixture of dance numbers, skits, specialty acts, and typically a stump speech. Finally, the Afterpiece was a short play, usually a burlesque or blackface parody of a Shakespeare play or a plantation scene.²²

Country musicians adopted many of these structural elements from the minstrel show. The Grand Ole Opry and other radio barn dances were structured as olios or variety shows. Opry host George Hay even relied on the interlocutor-endmen arrangement in his productions.²³ In addition, some barn dances, such as the Boone County Jamboree, in Cincinnati, positioned performers onstage in a minstrel-like semicircle and closed shows with a group “shout” analogous to the “walk around.”²⁴ Even the third part of the minstrel show, the afterpiece, arguably resurfaced in the semi-dramatic comedy scenes of the Skillet Lickers and other groups. The legacy of the minstrel show, therefore, could be seen and heard in almost every aspect of country music from the 1920s, including repertoire, comedy, instrumentation, and form.

²² Debus, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, 7.

²³ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 254.

²⁴ Cockrell, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” 36.

Vaudeville's Influence on Early Country Music

Vaudeville, a later form of popular variety theater, also had a strong musical effect on the first generation of hillbilly artists. As the minstrel show waned in popularity in the 1880s and 1890s, the vaudeville show took its place. In contrast to the minstrel show, which retained images of slavery and plantation life, vaudeville was associated with urban life and technology.²⁵ The prominent use of ethnic humor by immigrant performers in vaudeville reflected the genre's origins in the modern city.

As a series of short sprints, vaudeville differed from other forms of theater that developed long-range plots, or, as in the minstrel show, had performers return throughout the show. The organizing principle of vaudeville was "unity in variety" (a description which, as we will see, was especially applicable to Macon). Vaudeville shows featured an eclectic mix of singers, dancers, slapstick comedians, talking horses, acrobats, strongmen, and blackface comics. Each performer on the bill played a distinctive role; there were "dumb acts," "corkers," and chasers.²⁶ The genre required a special approach for performers, who appeared only once per show, usually from ten to thirty minutes depending on how well-known they were. Because success depended on the ability to quickly connect with and dazzle the audience, performers presented condensed and specialized routines that were fast-paced and full of variety and surprise: anything to grab, and hold, the audience's attention. "Like sprinters at track meets, vaudevillians had to start at full speed and then maintain the pace for their entire, short stints," writes

²⁵ Robert Toll, *On With the Show*, 277.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

vaudeville historian Robert Toll.²⁷ As future chapters will demonstrate, Macon's entertainment product clearly fit this description, and it proved important to his position as the first star of the Grand Ole Opry.

Vaudeville's "golden age" occurred between 1890 and 1915, when it emerged as the most popular form of entertainment in the United States. Vaudeville promoters such as B. F. Keith and Edward Albee repackaged variety as wholesome, middle-class entertainment appropriate for women and children. They attached a new label, "vaudeville," which conferred class and sophistication. Further, they presented their shows in "palaces," suggestive of opulence and luxury, a trend that culminated in the 1913 opening of New York's grand Palace Theatre on 47th and Broadway. By the 1910s, over five thousand theaters, large and small, staged vaudeville productions.²⁸ Success led to consolidation of theater ownership and the rise of theater chains such as the Keith-Albee circuit in the East, and the Orpheum circuit in the West.²⁹

Vaudeville, like the minstrel show, had a profound influence on country music's development. By the First World War, mainstream vaudeville shows flagged in popularity due to competition from commercial radio, phonograph records, and movies. Nevertheless, "small-time" vaudeville, represented by Loew and other small-theater circuits, continued to thrive, especially in the South.³⁰ For rural southern musicians,

²⁷ Ibid., 278.

²⁸ Ibid., 393.

²⁹ Frank Cullen, ed., *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. New York: Routledge), 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 13.

vaudeville functioned as a finishing school, teaching them how to present a tightly constructed act marked by novelty, variety, and showmanship. Many country musicians, including Macon, Jimmie Rodgers, Charlie Poole, The Delmore Brothers, Cliff Carlisle, and Clarence Ashley, learned their craft playing on the small-time vaudeville circuits during the 1920s and 1930s.³¹

Vaudeville also served as an incubator for a persona that would eventually dominate country music: the hillbilly. The hillbilly descended from the country bumpkin, or rube, which had been a fixture of American popular theater since the nineteenth century with such stock figures as the Backwoodsman, the Frontiersman, and Brother Jonathon.³² Rural comedy skits, such as “The Arkansas Traveler,” featured the rube and became part of the stock and trade of popular theater performers. By the end of the First World War, the hillbilly—a sharper edged version of the rube—became part of many vaudeville shows.³³ The hillbilly had achieved cultural currency through local color nickelodeon films (e.g., *Billy the Hillbilly* (1915) and *The Feud* (1920)) and popular southern literature of the early 1900s (e.g., John Fox, Jr.). The character built on well-known Appalachian stereotypes of “feuding” and “moonshine.” Hailing from the

³¹ This list is drawn partly from Bill Malone’s article, “Radio and Personal Appearances: Sources and Resources.” *Western Folklore* 30 no. 3 (1971): 215–25. Malone points out that the number of rural-trained musicians who played in urban vaudeville theaters in the 1920s may actually be much higher than the roster of hillbilly recording suggests since many, or even most, rural musicians never made records.

³² Toll, *On With the Show*, 11–14.

³³ For a general discussion of this group, see Tim Hollis, *Ain’t That a Knee-Slapper: Rural Comedy in the Twentieth Century* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008): 83–86.

mountains, the hillbilly was illiterate and backward, and distilled moonshine liquor in his mountain cabin. The hillbilly also possessed some positive qualities: self-reliance, independence, musicality, mirthfulness, and, at times, a kind of homespun wisdom. The character was fiercely independent and possessed a strong moral code, had a proclivity for music and humor, and enjoyed skewering the pretentious and overly educated city-dweller.

During the First World War, vaudeville theaters regularly began to feature rural-trained, old-time musicians, who typically played the roles of the hillbilly or rube. In 1913, The Weaver Brothers, calling themselves “Abner” and “Cicero,” teamed up with female sidekick Elviry to become the first major hillbilly act in vaudeville. Their popularity opened the door to other rural, southern musicians to play in vaudeville. By the late 1920s, industry leaders established “the hillbilly” as a main marketing theme in country music, making the persona virtually compulsory for country musicians who played on vaudeville or in other theatrical settings.

Macon’s Performance Persona

The deep influence of vaudeville and minstrelsy on the formation of early country music is evidenced by Macon, a musician who came of age during the nineteenth-century and was fundamentally shaped by popular stage genres such as vaudeville, the minstrel show, and the circus. In the following section, I examine one facet of Macon’s vaudeville and minstrel show inheritance: his stage persona.

Macon presented himself to audiences wearing a variety of personas, all of which ultimately came out of the minstrel show or vaudeville. One of Macon’s personas—the “Uncle” character—was really a variation on the blackface minstrel. Although Macon

never wore blackface, his banjo playing, manner of speaking, and jokes and repertoire all evoked the blackface minstrel. Even the epithet “Uncle,” which connoted a friendly old-timer and was often used by grandfatherly rural music figures such as Uncle Am Stuart, held associations with black folk culture and had been used by nineteenth-century minstrel banjo-comedians such as Billy “Uncle Bill” Carter.³⁴

Newspapers often described Macon as a minstrel. For instance, a Birmingham, Alabama newspaper labeled him “the minstrel man from Tennessee,” and described his routine as consisting of “negro songs of the old plantation.”³⁵ Seemingly, the lack of blackface would undermine the notion of Macon as a minstrel; however, it accorded with minstrel practices at the time. Many minstrels or minstrel-like performers of the early 1900s chose not to wear blackface. Examples included white female “coon shouters” such as May Irwin, Marion Harris, and Sophie Tucker.³⁶ The lack of verisimilitude apparently posed no problem for critics and audiences, who still viewed such performers as minstrels, as shown by an 1895 *New York Times* review of a May Irwin concert:

³⁴ Edward Le Roy Rice discusses Carter in *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, From “Daddy” Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing, 1911): 94.

³⁵ “Minstrel man from Tennessee” appeared in an advertisement in the *Daily Boston Globe* on May 18, 1930, while “Comedy Enlivens” was a January 6, 1925 headline from the *Birmingham Post*.

³⁶ According to David Brackett, Harris was also sometimes mistaken for being black because of the authenticity of her sound. “Fox-Trots, Hillbillies, and the Classic Blues: Categorizing Popular Music in the 1920s,” Lecture at the Rock n’ Roll Hall Fame, Cleveland, Ohio, April 25, 2012. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3i1RQAVad0w>.

When she sang her new darkey songs . . . one forgot her blonde hair, her peaches-and-cream complexion, and her blue eyes; every tone of her voice, every expression of her countenance, every gesture and motion combined to create an illusion now of a lovelorn Virginia darkey, now a dangerous Tennessee ‘coon.’³⁷

Those who listened to Macon over the radio, or on records, might be forgiven for thinking that he was a blackface minstrel, given his singing style and dialect, which recalled earlier minstrel recording artists such as Golden and Hughes. In fact, as suggested by this chapter’s opening quotation, some radio listeners believed Macon was African-American.

Macon’s songs and recorded monologues also reinforced the impression of him as a minstrel, by evoking the sounds and sights of an Old South plantation. For example, Macon begins his 1924 recording of “Bile Them Cabbage Down” with a short instrumental on the banjo, explaining to his audience that it is an example of “some southern Dixie playing.” Next, he gives a monologue that, in terms of language, might have been taken from a nineteenth-century minstrel show and was highly suggestive of the blackface mask, or persona:

Now, I’m a way up here with these cars running under the ground and over my head, and bothered with side-cars and smoke. And I’m like the poor, lonesome nigger who got lost one night, prayin’ to the lord. He begin to sing . . .”

Imitating the sound of an African-American field holler or spiritual, he then sings, *a capella*: “Lawwwd, I wonder, when will I ever get back home, get back home?”³⁸

³⁷ *The New York Times* (Sept. 17, 1895), reprinted in Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 17.

³⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, “Bile Them Cabbage Down” (1924, Vo 14849).

Macon also suggested he was a minstrel in the way he positioned himself as an observer and student of African-American folk traditions. White minstrels had always claimed knowledge of “authentic” black folk music practices. In the 1830s, T. D. Rice claimed that he learned the dance and melody to “Jump Jim Crow” from a black stevedore on the steamship docks in Louisville. In the 1930s and 1940s, The Grand Ole Opry’s popular minstrel duo, Jamup and Honey (the “Southland’s Favorite Minstrel Men”), were said to spend “hours around cotton fields, dice games, shine parlors, etc.” in order to pick up “new negro expressions, sayings, and yarns.”³⁹ Macon made similar claims, telling reporters that he had picked up the banjo from listening to the “darkies who used to work for my father” and asserting, “I got all my songs from hearing colored folks sing at their work or when they was restin’ after work.”⁴⁰ He also attributed his comedic abilities to having lived in close proximity to African-Americans, and said, “they’re just naturally funny people.”⁴¹ Like singer Vernon Dalhart, however, Macon differed somewhat from earlier minstrels in that he did not approach black culture from afar as a curiosity to be marveled at, but rather, claimed it as part of his genuine rural southern heritage.⁴² In his monologue to “Run, Nigger, Run” he makes a claim of authenticity: “Hello, folks. Raised in the South among the colored folks. And worked in

³⁹ *Purina’s Grand Ole Opry*, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

⁴⁰ “Bijou Banjoist,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 13, 1925; and “Mountain Farmer, With Banjo, Plays Way into Ranks of Vaudeville Stars,” *Birmingham News*, January 8, 1925.

⁴¹ “Bijou Banjoist,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 13, 1925.

⁴² Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 140–41.

the fields of toil with them all the days of my life. I will sing them good old southern songs.”⁴³

Another of Macon’s performance personas, or masks, was the “old man.” The image of the elderly, rural fiddler had been circulating for decades, enshrined in the most famous rural musical skit of the nineteenth-century, “The Arkansas Traveler,” about a fiddler who sits on his front porch and deflects the questions of a stranger by responding in comedic puns. In most popular representations of the old man in southern music, he played fiddle, although he sometimes played banjo as well. He lived far from the city (usually in the mountains), preserved a dying music tradition, and was a symbol of lost agrarianism amid an urbanizing, industrializing nation. The musical old-timer gained vogue in the 1910s and 1920s, in part from publicity generated by old-time fiddling conventions like the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention and Henry Ford’s old-time fiddling contests. The elderly fiddler also served as one of the primary artistic personas and marketing images for country music during the mid-1920s. Many early recording and radio artists, including Uncle Bunt Stephens (winner of Henry Ford’s 1926 national fiddling championship), Uncle Jimmy Thompson, and Fiddlin’ John Carson, competed successfully in old-time fiddle contests in the mid-1920s.⁴⁴

Macon often invoked this well-known stock figure of vaudeville and rural southern music. Roy Acuff once noted that Macon never presented himself onstage as a young man. Instead, he greeted his audiences by saying, “this is *old* Uncle Dave Macon,”

⁴³ Uncle Dave Macon, “Run, Nigger, Run” (1924, Vo 15032).

⁴⁴ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 57–58.

and then shook his goatee (to “let ‘em know that it was natural”) and smiled to reveal his gold teeth.⁴⁵ In their coverage of Macon’s concert run in Birmingham in January 1925, local newspapers often latched onto the image of the wise, grizzled old-timer. *The Birmingham Post*, in a profile entitled “Banjo Just Like Life,” referred to Macon as a “banjo playing philosopher”; in the article, he pulls on his chin whiskers, lights his pipe, and offers wisdom gleaned from years of living on the farm and playing old-time music on the banjo:

Well, now, youngster . . . life is like this old banjo of mine. If you know how to pick it you can get the right pert’ [pretty] music from it, and if you hit the wrong string you don’t get nothing but discord. . . . [T]here’s lots of folks who don’t know how to tune the banjo of life. They depend on themselves too much. . . . Use your fellerman and let your fellerman use you. That’s my way of gettin’ along.⁴⁶

Romantic tropes about the backwoods musician—someone who plays for pleasure over glory, and who produces music of the heart rather than the intellect—appeared often in stories about Macon. A 1926 article in the *Sandusky Star Journal* could have been drawn from the local color literature on Appalachia: Macon was a “picturesque character of the Tennessee hills” who, after harvest, “tucks three banjos under his arm, puts on his wide-brimmed hat and begins life as a wandering minstrel.”⁴⁷

The characterization of Macon as a wise, old man from the countryside fit nicely with a more general characterization of him as a hayseed or rube. Newspapers portrayed Macon as a simple farmer who had been plucked from the countryside, almost against his

⁴⁵ Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

⁴⁶ Luke Oliver, “Banjo Just Like Life.” *Birmingham Post*, January 10, 1925.

⁴⁷ Ed Friedman, “Before the Mike,” *Sandusky Star Journal*, December 24, 1926.

will, and thrust into the dizzying spotlight of the urban entertainment world. The *Daily Boston Globe* reported that Macon was “primarily a farmer and not an actor.” He had agreed to play at the Scollay Theatre only after weeks of begging by promoters, and even then, just to “get it over with.”⁴⁸ *The State Journal*, from Madison, Wisconsin insisted that Macon and his cohorts were not “show folks” but “seven real rustics well-versed in the arts that have helped to while away the long hours back home, and are so new to the outside world as to constitute a genuine theatrical novelty.”⁴⁹ Macon was a natural musician, articles claimed, rather than a trained professional: “his type of entertainment consists of “any old song that comes to mind.”⁵⁰ At the close of the Loew tour, in 1925, the *Birmingham News* wrote that the banjoist had felt the “lusty call of the farm” and longed to be in the company of his “hog jowl and chitterlings, cracklin’ bread and sweet potatoes.”⁵¹

In each of his personas, Macon projected a folksy, small-town manner suggestive of the rural South. In the estimation of historian Bill Malone, he represented for southern audiences the spirit of small-town America that was rapidly being swallowed up by the industrial revolution of the early twentieth century. Macon’s style of dress, Malone argues, revived the “merry country gentleman” of the 1890s, and suggested to his

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Madison Wisconsin State Journal*, July 3, 1931.

⁵⁰ “Farmer is a Headliner on the Vaudeville Stage,” *Daily Boston Globe*, May 18, 1930.

⁵¹ “Tennessee Banjoist Reminisces,” *Birmingham News*, January 1, 1926.

audience a fierce agrarianism and commitment to old-fashioned ways.⁵² Historian Edward L. Ayers has similarly characterized Macon as being, for rural southern audiences, an embodiment of “the good old days.”⁵³ Indeed, Macon’s personality and usual appearance—suit, winged collar, stick-pin tie, felt hat, and dangling pipe—resonated with small-town and rural audiences and was integral to his success. He seems to have had a special connection with rural workers and farmers. In the words of Gordon Boger, who saw Macon live during the 1930s, “audiences in the small towns and rural areas of the South felt a kinship with him.”⁵⁴ He always made sure to remind audiences of his former work as a farmer and mule driver. Moreover, many of his songs, including “All Come Hungry Hash House,” “Eleven Cent Cotton,” and “Farm Relief,” discussed the struggles of farmers during the Great Depression.

Such descriptions were part of a general media depiction of Macon as a hayseed or rube. Although the rube or hillbilly persona had not yet become mandatory in country music during the early and mid-1920s, Macon often played the part during this period, alternating between wearing traditional formal attire, and overalls with a straw hat. For instance, in his first vaudeville show, in 1923, he appeared onstage with mules and a wagon, dressed in full rural garb; and two years later in Birmingham, his newspaper

⁵² Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 74.

⁵³ Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 395–96, 551.

⁵⁴ Gordon Boger, “Opry’s Uncle Dave Macon,” *News Herald* (Morganton, North Carolina), April 17, 1984.

publicity photos showed him wearing a straw hat and overalls.⁵⁵

Macon's persona sometimes took on the more acerbic and satirical characteristics of the hillbilly. The *Birmingham News* ran a tongue-in-cheek profile in the fall of 1925, in which they described Macon as, quite literally, a farm animal caught in the footlights of urban show business:

[T]he Vaudeville stage picked 'Uncle Dave' up right off the farm a year or so ago and told him to come along, galluses, hickory shirt, banjo and all and give an exhibition of himself and his music just exactly like he would on the farm. At first, 'Uncle Dave' balked like a mule because he had never been behind the footlights, nor yet set one of his nimble feet on the stage, and he was sort of 'skeered like,' but he was persuaded and when he made his first bow as a vaudeville, he fairly captivated the multitudes.⁵⁶

While some early country musicians bristled at the hillbilly name and image (e.g., Clayton McMichen of the Skillet Lickers), Macon seemed to good-naturedly embrace the role, perhaps recognizing in it both comedy and good business. As he told one newspaper, "I'm just an ole' country feller that ain't never had no show experience and don't know hardly what all this fuss is about. This is my boy Sid who just come down to help the ole' man out."⁵⁷ Advertisements playfully riffed on Macon's hillbilly image, declaring that he came from "Moonshineville," or "Billy Goat Hill," Tennessee.⁵⁸ In Birmingham, Macon called his group the "Billy Goat Hill Quartet" and labeled himself "Billy Goat Hill's Gift To The Amusement World"; Harkreader and McGee were his

⁵⁵ "Mountain Farmer," *Birmingham News*.

⁵⁶ "Tennessee Banjoist Reminisces," *Birmingham News*, January 1, 1926.

⁵⁷ "Bijou Banjoist," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 13, 1925.

⁵⁸ "Dave Macon, Banjoist, Is Loew's Feature," *Birmingham Post*, January 3, 1925; and "Uncle Dave Again Loew's Headliner," *Birmingham Post*, January 10, 1925.

“sons.”⁵⁹ Macon also embellished his back story for comedic effect. As he told one newspaper, “I never thought of bein’ a stage actor as I had jes’ been playing for school entertainments and such. . . . I’m just an ole’ country feller that ain’t never had no show experience and don’t know hardly what all this fuss is about.”⁶⁰ With his country background and talent for creating entertaining shows—no doubt partly honed by his considerable early experience performing in small town venues—Macon indeed played a part in the development of that hillbilly persona.

For audiences in the mid-1920s, the blackface minstrel and whiteface hillbilly characters were not as far apart as they seem today. Both characters signified “rural southern music.” The black mask had another meaning apart from race and class: it served as a nostalgic symbol of a pre-modern South, an imaginary past that connoted agrarian or small-time life and social values. The blackface character pined for the “rural paradise” of the past, and embodied and expressed the nostalgic sentiments of his audience, similar to the function of the hillbilly character in country music during the 1920s. As Karl Hagstrom Miller has shown, both characters were social outsiders, ostracized from mainstream society.⁶¹ The hillbilly wore his own costume or mask: whiteface. The whiteface costume included baggy pants, crooked hats, oversized shoes, and a piece of straw that dangled from the lips. This exaggerated persona marked a

⁵⁹ *Birmingham Post*, February 2, 1925; *Birmingham Post*, January 26, 1925; “Dave Macon, Banjoist, Is Loew’s Feature,” *Birmingham Post*, January 3, 1925; “Uncle Dave Again Loew’s Headliner,” *Birmingham Post*, January 10, 1925.

⁶⁰ “Bijou Banjoist,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*.

⁶¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 141–47.

continuation of the comic banjo character from earlier minstrel, vaudeville, and medicine shows. As Karen Linn notes, “the mark of the minstrel is clear, only the color of the mask has changed.”⁶²

When Macon began his career in the early 1920s, country music had not yet settled on a marketing concept for its performers. Although the identity of the music and artists was clearly rural and southern—as suggested by early record company slogans such as “Songs From Dixie”—it remained an open question exactly how the music would be represented visually through characters. While ultimately the industry settled on the hillbilly character, the conflation in the public imagination between hillbilly and minstrel, both of which represented “southern music,” meant that audiences might have simultaneously thought of Macon as a minstrel and a hillbilly. Thus, the 1928 *Logansport Pharos Tribune* advertisement for Macon: “Hear them play the old barn dance tunes. Hear them sing the Southern Negro Spirituals.”⁶³

Conclusion

As shown in this chapter, nineteenth-century popular variety music provided a training ground for early country musicians, and served as part of the musical foundation for the hillbilly music industry that emerged in the 1920s. Minstrelsy and vaudeville supplied country musicians with repertoire, comedy routines, attention-grabbing

⁶² Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang*, 141. Later examples of whiteface comedians in country music included banjoists Grandpa Jones, Stringbean, and Archie Campbell, and Minnie Pearl, all artists who performed on the Grand Ole Opry after the Second World War.

⁶³ Advertisement, *Logansport Pharos Tribune* (Indiana), June 15, 1928.

marketing gimmicks, and stage characters such as the hillbilly. Indeed, Macon built his own stage personas around stock characters from vaudeville and the minstrel show, including a variation on the blackface minstrel, the wise old man, and the hillbilly. Macon flexibly adopted these characters, grabbing bits and pieces of each while tailoring his image to fit the changing expectations of his audiences.

Macon provided a musical bridge between the folk, minstrel, and vaudeville styles of the late nineteenth century and the radio- and phonograph-based commercial country music of the 1920s. As an entertainer who fused skills and experiences from a wide range of musical and artistic sources, both rural and urban, he had the ability to create a lively entertainment product that appealed to audiences of the day. He used popular stage techniques, repertoire, and characters to relate to audiences who may have already been familiar with vaudeville and the minstrel show. Macon's eclecticism and versatility helped him to become a key figure in popularizing hillbilly music in the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter 3: “Minstrel of the Countryside”: Macon as a Pre-Country Songster

A professional performer on the Grand Ole Opry for 26 years, [Macon] was a ‘Minstrel of the Countryside’ prior to that. . . . a country man who loved humanity and enjoyed helping others.

—Macon’s Country Music Hall of Fame plaque¹

Throughout his career, Macon resembled the pre-mass media, nineteenth-century figure of the songster. For roughly two decades before becoming a professional musician, he drove “four mules and two Mitchell wagons” across Middle Tennessee, delivering goods, singing, and playing his banjo, free of charge, from the seat of his wagon, or sometimes standing on the roof of a barn.² Like other early twentieth-century songsters, such as Dick Burnett and George Reneau (both of whom also recorded as hillbilly musicians in the 1920s), Macon performed semi-professionally for tips, maintained a wide-ranging repertoire, and wrote songs about political and social issues relevant to his community. As a songster, or a “minstrel of the countryside” (as written on his Hall of Fame plaque), Macon built up his folk song repertoire and refined his performing skills. Also, through his travels in the countryside in the early twentieth century, he developed a

¹ Hall of Fame plaque, “Uncle Dave Macon,” Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee.

² From Macon’s monologue on his recording of “From Earth To Heaven” (1928, Br 329).

knowledge of the issues and trends of the rural South, a background that served him well during his country music career in the 1920s and 1930s.

In his role as a songster, Macon served—once again—as a bridge between nineteenth-century musical tradition and commercial country music of the 1920s. This chapter examines Macon’s songster origins, focusing on the early venues in which he performed. First, I show how Macon’s experience playing in traditional rural settings shaped his approach to performing by teaching him to capture a crowd’s attention through broad comedy, loud singing, and banjo tricks. Specifically, he learned to attract and hold an audience through jokes, physical antics, and, at times, sheer volume. These experiences served Macon well in the 1920s as he translated his performance skills to records and radio. Second, I discuss how Macon’s experience as a songster taught him about the political and social concerns of ordinary people in the rural South and informed his later country music songwriting. This experience allowed him to echo in his performances many of the concerns and attitudes of regular people, a fact that partly explains his success in records and radio.

Macon as a Songster

The songster was the nineteenth-century American equivalent to the medieval European minstrel. First noted in the scholarly literature by Howard Odum in 1911, songster was a term used in the African-American community to describe itinerant rural musicians. The songster was usually semi-professional or amateur, and predated mass media. He (or possibly she) traveled widely, performing at small-time events such as dances and parties, store openings, county fairs, auctions, and barbecues. Odum distinguished the use of the term songster from musicianer, the latter referring to

someone who played an instrument: “In general, the term ‘songster’ is/was used to denote [a person] who regularly sings or makes songs; ‘musicianer’ applies often to the individual who claims to be expert with the banjo or fiddle.” Odom also noted the term “musician physician,” used by locals to describe a singer or instrumentalist “who is accustomed to travel from place to place.”³

As a pre-mass media performer, the songster delivered his music through live performance rather than records or radio, although he might sell printed song “ballet cards” at performances.⁴ According to Paul Oliver, songsters were expected to perform at a wide range of events. As a result, they tended to be versatile performers with diverse repertoires that included blues, ballads, comic songs, and fiddle tunes. Very often, songsters were local storytellers, or *griots*, who sang topical songs about political concerns relevant to the community.⁵

Macon’s activities as a songster—a pre-mass media, itinerant musician who traveled the countryside performing—began around 1900, when he moved with his family to a farm in Kittrell, Tennessee.⁶ There he ran the Macon Midway Mule and Transportation Company, which delivered goods by mule and wagon. As illustrated in the epigraph above, some people referred to Macon as a “minstrel” in the classic,

³ Howard W. Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 24, no. 93 (Jul.–Sep., 1911): 258–59.

⁴ Wolfe, *Tennessee Strings*, 7–9.

⁵ Oliver, *Songsters and Saints*, 22.

⁶ This definition is based on Paul Oliver’s description in *Songsters and Saints: Vocal Traditions on Race Records* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 22.

European sense of the word. In certain respects, the nineteenth-century southern songster resembled the bards or minstrels of medieval Europe, who traveled across the countryside and circulated their songs through live appearances and, sometimes, printed “ballets” (song sheets). In fact, this usage of “minstrel”—and related words, such as troubadour and bard—were common in descriptions of early country musicians. Bascom Lamar Lunsford (“Minstrel of the Appalachians”) and George Reneau (“Blind Minstrel of the Smoky Mountains”) provide two examples. Commentators often applied such epithets to Macon, who seemed to invite comparisons to the archetypal medieval poet-musician. George D. Hay, announcer and producer of the Grand Ole Opry, called Macon a “troubadour of the countryside.”⁷ In his 1929 novel, *The Mountainy Singer*, Harry Harrison Kroll, a novelist and short story writer from Dyersburg, Tennessee, and a good friend of Macon’s, included a character with a medieval-sounding name, “Uncle Dave Saxon”: a heroic folk-singer character evidently based on Macon.⁸

Although obviously not African-American, Macon embodied many of the traits of a songster, musicianer, and “music physicianer, as described by Odum. He traveled the countryside, singing and playing banjo; he performed at a wide range of community events including fairs, ballgames, and picnics; he kept a vast and diverse repertoire suitable for many occasions; he wrote topical songs about local politics and events (such

⁷ Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*, 13.

⁸ According to Eston Macon, Kroll and Uncle Dave may have toured together one summer, with Kroll screening motion pictures and Macon singing. Kroll’s published books, manuscripts, and other papers are located in the Paul Meek Library Special Collections at University of Tennessee at Martin. His published output is described in Richard L. Saunders, *Harry Harrison Kroll: The Works* (Tennessee: Caramon Press, 2009). Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

as “Tennessee Tornado,” which chronicled the tornado that ripped through the Cumberland Valley in 1902); he remained tied to a restricted geographic area; and he performed as an amateur or semi-professional, singing either for free or collecting tip money.⁹

Traditional Venues

In the years before record companies began selling country music and blues, opportunities for southern songsters to perform were largely restricted to amateur or semi-professional forums.¹⁰ Prior to the mid-1920s, white, southern musicians performed in four basic places: 1) local dances, 2) fiddling contests, 3) street corners, and 4) at community events, including auctions, store openings, club meetings, and political rallies. Rural musicians also traveled with medicine shows, an important training ground for many country and blues musicians.¹¹

Most hillbilly radio and recording artists of the 1920s, including Macon, began their careers playing in such semi-professional nineteenth-century venues. Sam and Kirk McGee, for example, first worked for a medicine show led by “Doctor” Harris, and Kirk McGee briefly fronted his own blackface group, the Dixie Comedy Company.¹² Hank

⁹ Oliver lists several of these attributes in *Songsters and Saints*, 20–22. Archie Macon discusses pre-professional performances at “ice-cream socials” and other local events in his 1977 interview with Charles Wolfe, located at MTSU.

¹⁰ Richard Peterson summarizes the Southern, pre-country, commercial music landscape in *Creating Country Music*, 12–17.

¹¹ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 14–15.

¹² Kirk McGee, interview by Douglass B. Green, December 18, 1973, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Sapoznik describes Charlie Poole and his North Carolina Ramblers as “inveterate wanderers” who played at dances, general stores, and on street corners.¹³ The Allen Brothers cut their teeth in traveling medicine shows and vaudeville troupes.¹⁴ Fiddlin’ John Carson, a favorite of north Georgia’s political class, played at political events for Governor Eugene Talmadge, and at rallies for the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁵

The best performance opportunities for rural, old-time musicians in the 1910s and 1920s existed in larger southern cities such as Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham, and Louisville. For instance, Atlanta, which served as a railroad hub for the middle South region, attracted a large population of Appalachian migrant workers and rural residents from north Georgia and east Tennessee. As a result, Atlanta boasted a vibrant old-time music scene that was rich in string band music. Between 1913 and 1935, the Gate City hosted an annual Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers’ Convention, the best-known fiddling competition in the South. The city’s roster of string bands included such well-known groups as the Skillet Lickers, Earl Johnson and His Clodhoppers (or Dixie Entertainers), and the Georgia Yellow Hammers. Also, for the enterprising old-time musician, Atlanta offered opportunities to play at community events such as store openings and political rallies, and was home to many street performers, especially on Decatur Street, where

¹³ Hank Sapoznik, *You Ain’t Talkin’ To Me Charlie Poole and the Roots of Country Music*, CD liner notes (New York: Columbia/Legacy, 2005).

¹⁴ Charles K. Wolfe, “A Lighter Shade of Pale,” in *Nothing But the Blues: The Music and the Musicians*, ed. Lawrence Cohn (New York: Abbeville Press, 1993): 241.

¹⁵ Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 85–86.

blues and old-time musicians such as Blind Willie McTell and Fiddlin' John Carson played.¹⁶

Similarly, Nashville offered many professional performance opportunities for country musicians early in the century. The city's status as the musical center of the mid-South hinged on its central geographical location midway between Memphis and Knoxville, and close to Atlanta. Tennessee had at least five distinct musical regions by the 1920s: 1) Memphis, known for African-American blues, jazz, and jug band music; 2) greater Nashville, an area extending south to Lawrenceville (the home of music publisher James D. Vaughan), known for gospel music; 3) Chattanooga, located near North Georgia and famed for its fiddlers and string bands; 4) Knoxville, also known for string bands and fiddlers (many of who came from the nearby Cumberland Mountains to work in the factories); and 5) the Tri-Cities region containing Bristol, Johnson City, and Kingsport, a mountainous area with a diverse Appalachian musical culture.¹⁷ These musical tributaries came together in Nashville, the state's geographical and commercial center, thus providing Macon with a rich musical culture filled with performance opportunities, even during his amateur years.

Throughout his career, but especially during his first years as a professional, Macon played in all of the standard nineteenth-century places: fiddle and banjo contests, dances, medicine shows, auctions, and the like. As a young man, he performed with the Readyville String Band, a Murfreesboro-based string band that entertained at local square

¹⁶ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 177.

¹⁷ Charles Wolfe outlines these musical regions in *Nashville: The Early String Bands, Volume 1*, CD liner notes (Charlottesville, VA: County Records, 2000).

dances and picnics.¹⁸ He also played at old-time music competitions. For instance, in 1925 or 1926, Macon and Sam McGee competed at an old-time banjo convention in Birmingham, Alabama. Playing from behind a curtain, McGee took first prize, which wounded Macon's pride.¹⁹

There are even references, possibly spurious, to Macon performing in medicine shows. Traveling medicine shows flourished in small-town America between the Civil War and World War I, when restrictions on the selling of patent medicines and the advent of new forms entertainment such as motion pictures diminished the popularity of such shows. The traveling medicine show doctor was a descendent of the European mountebank, a swindler who sold vials of medicine on the streets of Venice and Paris while performing a stage show of tricks, demonstrations, music, and comedy. The medicine show man's sales routine was a carefully calibrated sleight-of-hand; he sold elixirs and tonics, made pseudo-scientific claims, and distracted spectators with free entertainment, costumes, and spectacles of various kinds. The performance might take place on an elevated platform or stage. The medicine show entertainer relied on misdirection and constant patter to convince his audience to buy his wares, which were typically sold and distributed from the back of the wagon.²⁰ Early Grand Ole Opry

¹⁸ A photo of the group with a young Macon on banjo appears in Charles Wolfe's *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy*, 11.

¹⁹ McGee believed that, without the curtain, Macon surely would have won. Sam McGee, interview by Mike Seeger, April 10, 1961, Mike Seeger Collection, MS 259, Southern Folklife Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²⁰ Information on the medicine show can be found in Brooks McNamara, *Step Right Up*, rev. ed. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 3–18.

historian Don Cummings asserted, without attribution, that Macon worked for medicine shows during his youth.²¹ An Opry souvenir book from the 1940s claimed that Macon “has played in vaudeville, picture houses, and on the back end of a truck since his 18th birthday,” which implied a medicine show.²² The strongest evidence of Macon’s medicine show involvement, however, comes from Sid Harkreader, who said that he and Macon spent five weeks working for an Evansville, Indiana medicine show operated by a Native American “doctor” named “Whitecloud.” Four or five acts would appear on the program, and after each one, artists sold “prize candy” to the crowd.²³

In addition to dances, competitions, and medicine shows, Macon played at a wide variety of community events, including county fairs, real estate and tobacco auctions, store openings, rotary club meetings, private benefits, and church services. He even worked on the campaigns of several Tennessee politicians, including John J. Jewell, Square Robison, Hill McAlister (elected Tennessee governor in 1932), and congressional candidate Pat Sutton, as an entertainer at rallies.²⁴

²¹ Don Cummings, *Birth of Grand Ole Opry* (self-published, 1964), 12.

²² *Purina’s Grand Ole Opry*, Opry brochure, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

²³ Sid Harkreader, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs: The Autobiography of Sidney J. Harkreader* (Los Angeles: John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1976), 22. Incidentally, the name Whitecloud appears in references to medicine shows involving other early country musicians, including Clarence Ashley. See *Tom Ashley, Sam McGee, Bukka White: Tennessee Traditional Singers*, ed. Thomas G. Burton (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

²⁴ Interview, Eston Macon, MTSU (1982).

Macon was ideally suited to playing at such community events where the function of the music was, principally, to draw a crowd in order to sell a product or an idea. In the pre-microphone age, effective entertainers could attract and maintain a crowd through singing loudly, telling jokes, and performing physical comedy. Macon had the attention-grabbing skills of a spieler or a street hawker and knew how to draw a crowd. He could sing and speak loudly without the benefit of a microphone, projecting long distances and thus drawing attention.²⁵ He could also preserve the crowd's attention once they arrived through a combination of forceful delivery and loud volume, stage theatrics, and humor. Medicine shows, in particular, relied on patter and misdirection to guide audiences into buying the product. Macon could mesmerize his audiences with a parade of flashy dance steps, banjo flips, and flutters of his hat. Macon's skill in attracting and maintaining the attention of an audience undoubtedly contributed to his later success on records and radio.

Macon also played on the street corner, another traditional location for southern songsters. For Macon, nearly any public spot—a barbershop, restaurant, country general store, courthouse steps—was a suitable place to entertain. In his autobiography, Sid Harkreader recalls Macon's great love for "bustin'," a variant of "busking," which refers to playing an impromptu show on the street or elsewhere for tips. His main busting

²⁵ For years, as Kirk McGee remembered, Macon refused to use a microphone on stage, insisting it was unnecessary. See Kirk McGee, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, no date, Wolfe 00951, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU. According to Roy Acuff, another artist who learned to sing and speak loudly without the aid of a microphone, other singers were continually surprised at the tremendous volume he and Macon could generate without amplification. See Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

technique was simple yet bold. Riding along “branchline” railroads, the secondary railway lines that split off from the main lines, Macon would decamp at small towns, some of which had no more than a general store and church. He would approach a general store owner, introduce himself, play a song, and tell a joke. Then, if the storekeeper agreed, he played later that evening in front of the store. Sometimes a large crowd assembled and a “real old-fashioned hoe-down” ensued, prompting Macon to turn his flat-top wagon bed into a stage.²⁶ Using such methods, it was not uncommon to make seventy-five to a hundred dollars in a single evening from passing the hat.²⁷

Macon’s love for bustin’ highlighted some of his most endearing qualities: his personal charm, his talent for connecting with people, and his irrepressible desire to entertain. Earning money was apparently secondary. Often, he would entertain for free, stopping people on the street to sing them his latest song.²⁸ Or, he would play an impromptu show in the hotel lobby. As Sam McGee recalled, “A lot of times when we’d be staying overnight in a hotel, ready to do the show, I’d come and find him playing for a small crowd in the lobby; we had to watch it, for he’d give the whole show away—there wouldn’t be anyone to come to [the] show that night.”²⁹

²⁶ Harkreader, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs*, 17–18.

²⁷ Sam McGee, quoted in Wolfe, *Tennessee Traditional Singers*, 96. Macon used the railroad busking technique at least during the 1920s, when he was establishing his professional career, and possibly beyond.

²⁸ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

²⁹ Sam McGee, quoted in Wolfe, *Tennessee Traditional Singers*, 96.

Macon's Political Songwriting and Social Commentary

As a nineteenth-century songster or “minstrel of the countryside,” Macon wrote and performed songs that addressed the social and political concerns of his community. He used satire and humor as a vehicle for delivering social and political commentary, and composed songs that spoke directly to average folks about their everyday concerns, including prohibition, the economy, and political corruption. Macon’s time spent traveling the country exposed him to the political trends of the countryside, which were reflected not only in his songs, but in his commentary on records and radio. In the following section, I examine several of Macon’s political songs, and show how they echoed many of the concerns and attitudes of regular people, a fact that partly explains his success in records and radio.

Culturally and politically, Macon straddled two different eras: the pre-industrial, rural South of the immediate post-bellum period, and the more urbanized and industrial South of the 1920s. A “died-in-the-wool” Democrat, Macon was a dedicated agrarian and social conservative (common among southern Democrats of the period). He railed against the automobile, lent his support to small farmers, and campaigned against Prohibition, evolution, and changes in women’s fashions.³⁰ In his songs about farmers, automobiles, and the teaching of evolution in public schools, Macon cast his lot with rural, working-class people in ways that implied that traditional southern culture and society were under attack from wealthy outsiders, urban growth, technology, and changing social mores.

³⁰ Eston Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, July 8, 1982, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection (no tape number), Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

Essentially, he espoused an “anti-modernist” position, arguing for the need to return to a simpler time, which he describes in one song as “the good old days of long ago.”³¹

One of the central themes in Macon’s political repertoire was the struggle of small farmers, a subject which he knew intimately from decades of farming. For instance, he wrote “All I’ve Got’s Gone,” a song composed after the flooding of the Cumberland River, in March of 1902, which led to economic devastation for many farmers in Middle Tennessee. In the 1938 songbook, *Songs and Stories*, Macon recalled his inspiration for writing the song. Driving his wagons through the Cannon Country Hills (near Woodbury, Tennessee) soon after the flood, he encountered a man whose property had been completely destroyed:

When we at last reached the city limits of Woodbury, to
find the first face to greet us was none other than the old
familiar face of Bob Vernon, noted musician, chimney
builder, gardener, and general flunkey.

Our first question was, “Well, Bob, how did the flood serve
you?” He replied, “Boss, all I’ve got is gone.”³²

The resulting song, “All I’ve Got’s Gone,” which Macon recorded in 1924, catalogs various economic problems facing the small farmer. In one verse, the narrator tries to borrow money from a bank but is denied:

Went to the bank for to borrow some money
Tell you right now, I didn’t find it funny
The banker said he had none to loan
Get your old hat and pull out for home
All we’ve got’s gone, all we’ve got’s gone ³³

³¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “In the Good Old Days of Long Ago” (1926, Vo 15442).

³² Macon, *Songs and Stories*, n.p.

³³ Uncle Dave Macon, “All I’ve Got’s Gone” (1924, Vo 14904).

In another verse, a farmer gets a loan to buy more land but cannot pay it back:

Whole lot of people had a good little farm
Doing well, didn't know no harm.
Sold the farm, bought a larger one, too,
The note's come due, they had to "skidoo"
All I've got's gone, all I've got's gone.

While sympathetic to the struggling farmer, Macon also cast blame on farmers who lived beyond their means. In another verse of "All I Got's Gone," a farmer imprudently buys too many mules, and reaps the consequences:

Whole lot of men did act as fools,
Went along ahead and bought a lot of mules
Cotton was high but now it's down
You can't jump a mule man in your town.
For all he's got's gone, all he's got's gone.

The morality of frugal living was a common theme in Macon's songs. He lambasted those who strayed from established ways to enjoy luxuries and newfangled inventions—such as tractors and automobiles—that Macon deemed undependable and corrupting of spirit. For instance, in "We Are Up Against It Now," a man buys a tractor, which causes his ruin:

A farmer bought him a tractor,
He raised quite an alarm.
He only broke one little piece
And he had to sell his farm.

We are up against it now.
There's no use to raise a row.
But the safest rig I've ever seen
Is a mule and a bull-tongue plow.³⁴

³⁴ Uncle Dave Macon, "We Are Up Against It Now" (1926, Vo 15447).

In Macon's songs, there is an overriding concern that people have lost their way, and that the social order has broken down. Automobiles, public debt, women who wear unaffordable "satin dresses," political corruption, Prohibition: all of these were modern threats to the traditional way of life, according to Macon. In "We Are Up Against It Now," he signals a deep—almost biblical—discontent about the condition of society (see Musical Example 1):

The world is turned upside down, it surely must be true,
The way that things are running now proves that to me and you.

Chorus:
We're up against it now,
There's no use to raise a row,
But of all the times I've ever seen,
We're sure up against it now.

Musically, Macon offsets the dark lyrics with a bouncy, dotted melodic figure that includes arpeggios of major chords in B-flat. The melody has a humorous, sing-song quality to it. Indeed, delivering social and political commentary through humor and a light-hearted musical delivery were highly characteristic of Macon's approach.

Musical Example 1. “We’re Up Against It Now”

Note: pitched somewhere in between B-flat and B

The musical score is written for Tenor (T.) in a 2/4 time signature with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of four staves of music. The lyrics are: "The world is turned up side down it sure-ly must be true the way that things are runn-ing now proves that to me and you We're up a-gainst it now There's no use to raise a row But of all the times I've e-ver seen we're sure up a-gainst it now". The score includes various musical notations such as rests, notes, and a triplet. Chord symbols Bb, Eb, F, and Bb are placed above the notes. A note on the first staff is marked with an '8' below it, and another note on the second staff is also marked with an '8' below it. A triplet of eighth notes is marked with a '3' and a bracket below it on the fourth staff.

Anti-Modernism

The social and economic critiques leveled by Macon had a definite anti-modernist edge. In several songs, he evoked the turn-of-the-century trope about technology being in conflict with society. As historian Jackson Lears has noted, antimodernism caused many Americans of the period to “recoil from an ‘over-civilized’ modern existence” and seek out aesthetic experiences unmediated by technology.³⁵ Macon’s anti-modernist perspective was most evident in his songs about automobiles. He believed in the superiority—practical and moral—of animal-drawn wagons over cars. In “From Heaven to Earth,” he laments the loss of traditional forms of transportation, praises the efficiency

³⁵ Jackson Lears. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), xv.

of mule-powered vehicles, and asserts he would “rather go to heaven in a wagon than to hell in an automobile”:

An auto truck has a guiding wheel, while I hold my line,
Whoa, when my feet and body get cold, I’m a-walking half the time.
I speak right to my power, they understand my talk,
And when I holler, we get right, they know just how to walk.

Cause an auto truck runs a-quick and fast, the wagon hasn’t the speed,
Four good mules and a Mitchell Wagon is the safest oh yes indeed.
I’m on my way to heaven, said I’ll tell you just a-how I feel,
I’d rather ride a wagon and go to heaven then to hell in an automobile.³⁶

To Macon the automobile symbolized the decline of American society, a position stated explicitly in his 1927 recording, “Jordan Is a Hard Road to Travel”: “I don’t know but I believe I’m right, the auto’s ruined the country / Let’s go back to the horse and buggy, and try to save some money.”³⁷

Yet Macon held conflicting beliefs about the automobile. On the one hand, he was repelled by the social changes it engendered; on the other hand, he was fascinated by the automobile’s speed and flash. Two of Macon’s songs, “On The Dixie Bee Line (In That Henry Ford of Mine)” and “The New Ford Car” (written at the request of Henry Ford)—and countless verses and lines from other songs—celebrated the modern marvel of the auto industry, the Model-T Ford. In “On The Dixie Bee Line,” Macon sings about the Ford’s speed and reliability in getting him from Louisville to Nashville by sun-down (in time for the Saturday evening Opry broadcasts, presumably):

³⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, “From Earth To Heaven” (1928, Br 329).

³⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, “Jordan is a Hard to Travel” (1927, Vo 5153).

Some folks says that a Ford won't run,
Just let me tell you what a-Henry has done.
She left Louisville about a-half past one,
She got into Nashville about the setting of the sun.³⁸

Another perk of driving a Ford, Macon quips, is that bootleggers can make a quick get-away from the police:

Went to the mountain for to get some booze,
A Henry Ford car was the one I choosed.
The officers got right on me I say,
I pulled her wide open and made my get away.

Macon understood that automobiles could provide the same services faster and cheaper (after all, he later traveled in cars, although he never drove himself). At the same time, cars had led to the demise of his hauling business. As late as 1928, he was still paying tribute to his then-defunct freight business with the original composition, "From Earth to Heaven." The lyrics, which he likely wrote around 1923, strike a defiant tone: "I've been a-wagonin' for over twenty years and a-livin' on the farm/I'll betchya' 'hundred dollars and a half a ginger cake I'll be here when the trucks are gone."³⁹

Prohibition

Another favorite theme for Macon was Prohibition, a topic sung about by other popular and country musicians of the era as well. Mainstream prohibition songs included "The Moon Shines On the Moonshine" by Bert Williams (1919, Columbia A2849), and "Prohibition Blues" (1919, Columbia A2823) by Nora Bayes. Among the hillbilly

³⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, "On The Dixie Bee Line (In That Henry Ford of Mine)" (1926, Vo 15320).

³⁹ Macon, "From Earth to Heaven."

prohibition songs were Lowe Stokes's "Prohibition Is a Failure" (1939, Br 491) and Clayton McMichen's "Prohibition Blues" (1930, Co unissued).

Perhaps no recording artist of the 1920s sang about Prohibition more fervently, or more often, than Macon. Like most other performers who sang about the issue, he opposed the Eighteenth Amendment, which banned the sale and transport of alcohol. His anti-progressive (if not necessarily anti-modernist) position was part and parcel of his more general distrust for government authority. More than a dozen of Macon's recordings criticize or lampoon the Eighteenth Amendment in some way. For instance, in "All I've Got's Gone," he sings:

Said the bone dry people, says they won't do,
For on the sly, they'll have a whiskey too,
Goodbye brandy, says a-farewell gin,
Thank the Lord the white corn's my friend.⁴⁰

In the opening verse of "From Earth to Heaven," he links Prohibition with the closing of his freight hauling business, associating saloons and alcohol with the "good ole days" of wagoning:

I remember the year when I began to haul,
It was during the summertime.
Back in those good ole' days,
You could find whiskey, beer, and wine.
I'd walk right in to every saloon,
I was strictly up to time.⁴¹

In 1928, Macon recorded a song in honor of Democratic presidential nominee Al Smith, entitled "Governor Al Smith." A principal issue in the campaign was Prohibition, already

⁴⁰ Macon, "All I've Got's Gone."

⁴¹ Macon, "From Earth to Heaven."

the law for eight years. Smith favored relaxation of prohibition laws and advocated a return to open saloons, while simultaneously decrying the illegal practices of bootlegging and moonshining. In support, Macon sings:

Al Smith nominated for president, darling (3x)
My vote to him I'm a-gonna present, darling

Moonshine has been here enough, darling (3x)
Let's all vote right and get rid of this stuff⁴²

In another recording, "In The Good Old Days of Long Ago," Macon lampoons Prohibition through a musical parody of William S. Hays's lament on the Old South, "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane" (the same melody is used):

I've been thinking of the day since they took our booze away,
How me miss it, how we miss it, you know,
There was whiskey on the bar, we could have today and tomorrow,
In the good old days of sweet long ago.⁴³

As with automobiles, Macon had conflicting feelings about alcohol. At times, his religious background prevailed and he chastised himself for drinking. His song, "Hill Billie Blues," illustrates this impulse: "Whiskey whiskey, I'm going to let you be/The bone-dry law made a Christian out of me," and "Got water in the ocean, there's water in the sea/Since [unclear] a-bone dry it's been water for me." In the second verse, he laments that good liquor is hard to find since "the bone-dry has come," but that it is alright since he has quit drinking and found God.⁴⁴

⁴² Uncle Dave Macon, "Governor Al Smith" (1928, Br 263). When Smith lost the election in a landslide, Macon joked: "Did you hear Al Smith's suing the Democrat Party?" "No, what for?" "Non-support." Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1977).

⁴³ Uncle Dave Macon, "In The Good Old Days of Long Ago" (1926, Vo 15442).

⁴⁴ Uncle Dave Macon, "Hill Billie Blues" (1924, Vo 14904).

Yet Macon was not always able to remain consistent with that principle, and he struggled with the two demons of alcoholism and depression. Sid Harkreader recalled that Macon would “always have some whiskey to drink,” although he would guard against getting too drunk, as he could be “awful unruly.” Harkreader said, “I’ve seen him pretty well-loaded when he came out on stage.” One story casts a humorous light on Macon’s inner conflict about alcohol: Macon and his friend were driving in a Cadillac, and as they descended a steep hill, the brakes failed. Macon prayed: “Lord, if you save me this one time, I’ll never touch a drop of whiskey again.” Sure enough, the car rolled up safely on flat ground and came to a halt. Macon then took a swig from his whiskey flask. His companion turned to him and said, “Uncle Dave, I thought you were gonna quit drinking.” Macon replied, “Just a little nip to calm my nerves!”⁴⁵

Local Politics

At times, Macon became embroiled in the back-and-forth mudslinging of electoral politics, and even wrote songs about local political scandals. For instance, around 1930, he wrote “The Reece Case” about Tennessee politician B. Carroll Reece, who was embroiled in a bribery scandal. Macon’s son, Eston Macon, at the time a columnist for the *Rutherford County Courier*, said it was a major local scandal. Due to the sensitive political nature of the song, Macon had to “tone it down” when he played it on the Opry.⁴⁶ Macon wrote another song concerning political corruption that commented

⁴⁵ Interview, Sid Harkreader, MTSU (1977).

⁴⁶ Eston Macon, interview (1982). Charles Wolfe discovered lyrics to “The Reece Case,” apparently written by Uncle Dave, in Archie Macon’s Bible, although I have not yet been able to examine it. Mention of the song can be found in Dorris Macon, interview

on a scandal involving the *Nashville Tennessean*'s editor Luke Lea, and the newspaper's role in the impeachment trial of Tennessee Governor Henry Horton.⁴⁷ Perhaps his most famous song about local politics was "Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train," recorded in 1929, which criticized the Tennessee legislature and governor for cronyism and fiscal recklessness:

The people of Tennessee want to know who wrecked our gravy train.
The one we thought was run so well and now who can we blame?
They want to know who greased the track and start them down the road?
This same ol' train contained our money to build our highway roads.

Chorus:

But now we're up against it and no use to raise a row.
But of all the times I've ever seen, we're sure up against it now.
The only thing that we can do is to do the best we can.
Follow me, good people, I'm bound for the promised land.

Now, I could be a banker without the least excuse,
But look at the treasurer of Tennessee and tell me what's the use?
We lately bonded Tennessee for just five million bucks,
The bonds were issued and the money tied up and now we're in tough luck.⁴⁸

Often, Macon took inspiration from news stories when writing his political songs.⁴⁹ An example is "The Bible's True," his possibly tongue-in-cheek commentary on the Scopes Trial. In 1925, John Scopes, a public schoolteacher, was prosecuted for violating state law by teaching the doctrine of evolution. The trial turned into a national

by Charles K. Wolfe, no date, Charles Wolfe Collection (no tape number, Dorris Macon interviews #2), cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

⁴⁷ Eston Macon believes the lyrics to the Horton song may have been printed in one of his columns for the *Rutherford County Courier* or the *Daily News Journal* (Rutherford) during the 1930s. Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

⁴⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, "Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train" (1930, OK 45507).

⁴⁹ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

sensation. After hearing lawyer Clarence Darrow defend the teaching of evolution during the trial, which took place in nearby Dayton, Tennessee, Macon decided to write a song that proclaimed his belief in the “biblical account of creation”:

Evolution teaches man came from a monkey.
I don't believe no such thing,
On the days of the week or Sunday.

Chorus:
Oh, the Bible's true, yes, I believe it,
I'm seen enough and I can prove it,
What you say, what you say,
It's bound to be that way.⁵⁰

Eston Macon recalls that, after Macon wrote the song, he would stop people on the street and sing a verse for them and ask their opinion.⁵¹

Conclusion

Macon was deeply influenced not only by the urban, popular stage traditions of vaudeville and the minstrel shows, but by the habits and practices of rural, nineteenth-century musicians. As a musical amateur early in the century, he resembled a nineteenth-century, southern songster. During this pre-mass media era, he traveled locally and performed at a range of community and events, dances, and competitions. Like other songsters, he maintained a close relationship with his audience and wrote songs that addressed their political and social concerns. Macon's early career as a traveling songster was similar to the experience of many early country and blues musicians who, like Macon, went on to make records or play on the radio.

⁵⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, “The Bible's True” (1926, Vo 15322).

⁵¹ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

Macon's interest in writing political songs—often with a humorous spin—placed him not only in the songster tradition, but in the professional minstrel show tradition, which often featured political commentary and social lampooning. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century minstrels often laced their routines with political commentary on the topics of the day, including the economy, immigration, race relations, fashion, and women's suffrage.⁵² Early country music records, however, typically avoided open political protest, although there were a few notable exceptions, including the anti-Prohibition skits by the Skillet Lickers, Great Depression-themed protest songs by Bill Cox, and labor protest songs by the Carter Family. Protest songs took on a greater importance in commercial country music during the 1960s. Thus, as one of the few hillbilly musicians to feature political commentary in his songs, Macon served as a bridge between politically-themed nineteenth-century stage music and the protest country music of the 1960s and beyond.

⁵² Toll, *Blackening Up*, vi.

Chapter 4: From Songster to Commercial Country Musician: Macon on Tour in the 1920s and 1930s

“All of my life I had played and sung for fun. . . . I was [now] in the show business and I have been in it ever since.”

—Uncle Dave Macon¹

Now that we have seen the roots of Macon’s style, we can shift our focus to his professional career beginning in the 1920s. By examining his developing career, we can see how the cross-currents of rural and popular entertainment interacted to help create the new hillbilly genre. Macon was part of a relatively small group of southern artists who came of age in the late nineteenth century and subsequently transitioned to the mass media of records and radio. Like most early professional country musicians, however, he sustained himself primarily with his live appearances, since, by themselves, radio and records paid little. Even the most successful barn dances of the 1920s and 1930s, such as the Grand Ole Opry and the National Barn Dance (WLS in Chicago), paid only a nominal weekly fee to their cast members; meanwhile, records generated little profit for hillbilly musicians, especially after 1930, when the record market contracted. As a result, Macon relied on live performances to earn his living.

Initially, Macon’s touring practices were not much different from those of any rural musician from the nineteenth century. He played at traditional songster venues such as storefronts, auctions, campaign rallies, and courthouse steps; booked his gigs through a

¹ Macon quoted by George D. Hay in *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*, 14.

close network of family and friends; traveled by horse and buggy or train; and did all of his own advertising. Performing in such traditional locations provided Macon with the opportunity to develop and refine his crowd-pleasing skills, a crucial component of his success on the bigger stages of vaudeville, radio, and recording.

With the coming of radio and records in the 1920s, new opportunities opened for Macon and others, as country musicians gained exposure through mass media and enjoyed greater prestige in their communities. Two new venues—the rural schoolhouse and the vaudeville theater—became regular performance spots in the early 1920s and provided an economic basis for country musicians to tour. By the 1930s, paved roads and more reliable automobiles made it easier for artists to travel long distances and drive deeper into the countryside. Following industry trends, Macon increased his use of booking agencies, poster print shops, and new methods of advertising to sell his musical product. These innovations improved the efficiency of his operation, helped to attract larger audiences, and made touring more profitable. As a result of these opportunities, Macon and other country musicians grew increasingly professionalized. Thus, by studying the changes in Macon’s touring practices during the 1920s and 1930s we can observe the transition, made by many artists, from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century musical practices.

New Venues

In the early 1920s, Macon began playing at rural schoolhouses and vaudeville theaters, two venues that had only recently become accessible to country performers. The shift occurred partly out of necessity. According to Roy Acuff, the climate for country entertainers was difficult: “No city of any size would accept hillbilly performers, so we

played schoolhouses out in the woods and small theaters in small towns.”² Schoolhouse and vaudeville theater shows ultimately made up the bulk of Macon’s concert schedule, and provided a firm foundation for his professional music career.

A critical figure in Macon’s transition to playing schoolhouses and theaters was Sid Harkreader, a musician from Wilson Contry (east of Nashville) who served as his partner for almost a decade. In the summer of 1921, the two met in a chance encounter at Melton’s Barber Shop in downtown Nashville. Macon, who lived in Rutherford County at the time, but had come to town that day (presumably with his mules and wagon), was set up and performing for patrons in the middle of the room. He had “the whole barbershop charmed” with his songs, jokes, and banjo flips. As Harkreader walked into the shop and saw Macon, he immediately thought he was “one of the funniest men [he] had ever seen.” After customers pressed Harkreader, who was well-known by the locals, to retrieve his fiddle across the street, he and Macon put on an impromptu show for the store. With this event, their partnership was born.³

As a musician and performer, Harkreader complemented Macon in several ways. He was an outstanding fiddler who had won several regional fiddling contests in the 1920s and 1930s. He could also play guitar and sing.⁴ In addition, Harkreader was a deft showman with a sharp sense of comedic timing, an ability to banter onstage, and—in what was rapidly becoming a requirement for country musicians—a willingness to play

² Escott, *The Grand Ole Opry*, 53.

³ This account is reconstructed from two sources: Harkreader, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs*, 17; and Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

⁴ Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

the part of the country rube. Further, he added depth to Macon's already extensive repertoire; he sang lead on sentimental southern ballads such as "The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," and played fiddle on traditional instrumentals such as "Sourwood Mountain" and "Girl I Left Behind." Macon could be stodgy and set in his ways, but Harkreader had a more open attitude toward contemporary music. In the summer of 1925, he formed a musical comedy troupe, Fiddlin' Sid and his Arkansas Charleston Dancers. Harkreader's group (which Macon was not a part of) consisted of six men that impersonated female dancers doing the Charleston, and a pit orchestra, and featured a mixture of down-home, rural music with the latest syncopated, popular dance songs.⁵ Harkreader seems to have introduced Macon to at least a few recent popular songs, such as "Down in Arkansaw," which they recorded in 1925.⁶

Rural Schoolhouses

Macon and Harkreader's first regular gigs took place in rural schoolhouses.⁷ Although southern musicians were probably performing in schoolhouses for decades, schoolhouses appear to have acquired importance as a paying venue only during the 1920s, with the rise of commercial country music. In the 1920s, the Carter Family, Bradley Kincaid, Ernest Stoneman, Macon, and other artists played shows at rural

⁵ In one scene, Harkreader fiddled and sang the sentimental country song "When You and I Were Young Maggie" while sitting on an oak stump, before launching into Lee Morse's popular jazz hit from 1925, "Yes Sir, That's My Baby," accompanied by the orchestra and dancers. Harkreader, *Fiddlin' Sid's Memoirs*, 23.

⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, "Down In Arkansaw" (1925, Vo 15034).

⁷ Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

schoolhouses. Before then, professional touring musicians (apart from perhaps the occasional medicine show) had rarely stopped to play in small southern towns or farming communities. Harkreader, reflecting on his first schoolhouse tour with Macon, noted that “down-to-earth country music” was “something new . . . something different” for rural people.⁸ Guitarist Sam McGee agreed that country folk were not used to hearing professional entertainers at the time. In 1924, when McGee first saw Macon play at a schoolhouse show near his home in Franklin, Tennessee, it “just set [him] wild because there wasn’t anything like that going on nowhere in the country—everybody turned out.”⁹

Professional country musicians playing at small-town, southern schoolhouses reflected the rise of a national entertainment culture which, by the 1920s, had filtered out to the countryside through radio, movies, phonographs, automobiles, and mass-circulated newspapers and magazines. Indeed, the expanded performance opportunities that Macon and other country musicians enjoyed were a direct result of their exposure through records and radio. Radio shows, in particular, functioned as advertising outlets for the musicians to gain name recognition and promote their live touring. With the publicity generated from radio and records, hillbilly musicians began to receive invitations to perform in small towns. Kirk McGee remembers that, after he made a “splash” in the community with his records, job offers poured in.¹⁰ Some rural southerners no doubt felt

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Wolfe, *Tennessee Traditional Singers*, 94.

¹⁰ McGee, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00951).

pride at seeing members of their own communities return as successful, nationally-recognized artists; others were perhaps fascinated by the prospect of seeing a radio or recording “star” in the flesh (and it probably helped that most hillbilly artists came from rural, southern backgrounds and presumably held cultural and religious beliefs in common with members of the community).

Schoolhouse shows remade the economics of concert touring for hillbilly musicians, providing them a stepping-stone to full professionalization. Compared to the North, the South was rural and agricultural; it had a less developed railroad network, higher transportation costs, fewer concert halls, and a smaller and less affluent population, all of which translated into diminished paid support for live music.¹¹ Schoolhouses provided two major benefits for rural musicians: a pre-established network of concert spaces (any location—an upstairs loft, a gymnasium, or a one-room log cabin—could be used as a concert hall), and a built-in audience for the evening concerts, which might consist of school children and their parents, teachers, administrators, and other members of the community. Over time, the network of rural schoolhouses functioned much like a vaudeville theater circuit, allowing artists to easily book shows in several places at once. For instance, schoolhouses in the same county might be governed by a common superintendent, which simplified the booking process for tours. In the later 1930s, the rise of consolidated public schools—mergers of several smaller, rural schools from adjacent districts—streamlined the booking process further and generated even

¹¹ Goodson, *Highbrows, Hillbillies, and Hellfire*, 15–16.

larger audiences for Macon and other artists.¹² Thus, rural schoolhouse shows helped to professionalize southern rural musicians, who, as we have seen, had operated mostly as amateurs or semi-professionals before the First World War.

Over his career, Macon played hundreds, perhaps thousands, of schoolhouse shows across the South. Typically, he charged an admission fee of fifty cents or one dollar.¹³ Although documentation is sparse, especially for the early years, one can gauge how often Macon played at schoolhouses by looking at the business records for Nashville’s Hatch Show Print, the company that produced Macon’s concert posters and playbills. Table 2 presents Macon’s itinerary for October, November, and early December 1938—the earliest dates for which we have records—based on the Hatch Show Print records. The data shows that, in the late 1930s, Macon played several schoolhouse shows a week, and played roughly an equal number of shows at vaudeville theaters and schoolhouses.

Table 2. Concert Schedule, October 24–December 2, 1938¹⁴

Date	Venue	Location
October 24, 1938	Happy Home School	Ruffin, NC
October 25, 1928	Allen Jay High School	High Point, NC
October 26, 1938	Pilot High School	Thomasville, NC
October 27, 1938	Denton High School	Denton, NC

¹² Dorris Macon, interview, MTSU (Wolfe #1).

¹³ Mary Louise Timmons, “Fond Memory of Uncle Dave Macon,” *Nashville Banner*, August 26, 1986.

¹⁴ Hatch Show Print records, microfilm, Country Music Hall of Fame, Nashville, Tennessee. From October 29 to November 19, Macon played ten shows, but these are not included since the records were incomplete (no venue name).

October 28, 1938	King High School	King, NC
November 20, 1938	Hilan Theatre	Kingsport, TN
November 21, 1938	Wallins Creek Theatre	Wallins Creek, KY
November 22, 1938	Palace Theatre	Evarts, KY
November 23, 1938	Black Mountain Theatre	Kenvir, KY
November 24, 1938	Louellen Theatre	Louellen, KY
November 28, 1938	Kentucky Theatre	Whitesburg, KY
November 29, 1938	High School	Pound, VA
November 30, 1938	Novo Theatre	Cumberland, KY
December 1, 1938	Unicoi School	Unicoi, TN
December 2, 1938	Keithley Theatre	Jonesville, VA

Macon's schoolhouse shows usually included around fifteen to twenty songs, and were thus far longer than his vaudeville appearances, which tended to be quick sets repeated several times throughout the evening.¹⁵ Generally, Macon seems to have given his standard show at schoolhouses, but with fewer banjo tricks and comic novelty songs, since rural audiences preferred sentimental and religious material.¹⁶

Vaudeville

Another venue in which southern old-time musicians began to play more during the 1920s was vaudeville theaters. Access to vaudeville, like rural schoolhouses, helped to professionalize country musicians by providing them with a stable network of theaters, and by introducing them to a more diverse, urban audience.

¹⁵ McGee, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00922).

¹⁶ Harkreader, interview, MTSU (1986).

Apart from schoolhouses, Macon played his greatest number of shows at small-time vaudeville theaters. He toured for Loew, and later for RKO-Pathé, in the mid-1920s and early 1930s. By the time he began performing in vaudeville shows in the early 1920s, the industry was divided into two types of vaudeville: small-time and big-time. There were marked differences between the two in terms of the size and luxury of theaters, ticket prices, number of shows per day, and quality of performers. The big-time houses, such as those developed by Keith and Albee, were large, opulent palaces. Such shows featured major stars and more acts in each show.

Macon's involvement with vaudeville came primarily through the Loew chain, the undisputed leader in small-time vaudeville.¹⁷ By the 1920s, Loew had become "one of the largest single bookers of vaudeville acts and perhaps the largest single chain booking films"; they operated hundreds of theaters across the country and maintained business arrangements with various smaller chains, including Ackerman & Harris and Sullivan & Considine. With slogans such as "The best for less" and "The usual 'Loew' prices," Loew, like other small-time theaters, charged significantly less at the door compared to the big-time circuits of Keith-Albee or the Orpheum (25 cents vs. \$1.50). Loew theaters were smaller and less opulent and catered to local, neighborhood audiences, often coupling shows with other events such as amateur contests and

¹⁷ Lawrence Gushee points out that regional chains such as Gus Sun and Butterfield Theaters were considerably smaller, and that therefore Loew might more aptly be called "big small-time vaudeville"; nonetheless, compared to the Keith-Orpheum circuit, Loew was indeed "small-time." Lawrence Gushee, *Pioneers of Jazz: The Story of the Creole Band* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

giveaways.¹⁸ The show format for small-time vaudeville was also different from big-time vaudeville. While the palaces carried eight or nine acts on a bill and presented their shows twice per day, Loew carried only five or six acts on each bill (consisting, usually, of a headliner that remained for one week and lesser-known acts that arrived and departed daily) and had shows that ran “continuously” throughout the day. Some Loew theaters paired each five-act show with a full-length feature film known as a “photoplay.”¹⁹

In January 1923, Macon and Harkreader became part of the growing trend of “rube” characters in vaudeville when they appeared in a rural play entitled “Whoa, Mule” at Loew’s Vendome Theatre in Nashville. The opportunity to appear in “Whoa, Mule” came as a result of Macon’s acquaintance with Vendome theater manager E. A. Vinson, an instrumental figure in Macon’s transition from amateur to professional musician. Vinson first saw Macon perform either at Melton’s Barber Shop or a private party (possibly hosted by Nashville resident and Macon acquaintance Bob Smith). Either way, Vinson, impressed by the act, invited Macon and Harkreader to appear at the Nashville Vendome for one week, agreeing to pay them \$50 apiece.²⁰ The show appears to have been a standard vaudeville sketch: a short scene, without a coherent plot, that provided an opportunity for the performers to demonstrate singing, dancing, and comedy skills.²¹ For

¹⁸ Frank Cullen, ed., *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America* (New York: Routledge), 695.

¹⁹ Drawn from “Dave Macon, Banjoist, Is Loew’s Feature,” *Birmingham Post*, January 3, 1925, and ads from *Birmingham News*, January 5, 1925. The films were shown daily at 2, 4, 8, 10, and the stage acts at 3:15, 6:45, and 9:00 PM.

²⁰ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 10–11.

²¹ Caffin, *Vaudeville: The Book*, 116.

the sketch, Macon drew on his own life. As it began, Macon, dressed in “plow clothes” with “overalls, red shirt, a big straw, broad-brimmed hat and a bandana handkerchief,” stood atop a Mitchell freight wagon, which was pulled by “two little royal jackasses” (mules). As the wagon rolled out on stage, Macon struck a tune on his banjo and began singing. He then stepped down from the wagon and performed for another thirty minutes, accompanied by Harkreader, who was also dressed in farmer’s garb.²² If additional characters, scripted dialogue, or a larger story were part of the program, newspaper accounts do not mention them. The show’s theme was fitting for Macon’s first stint as an “actor”; as he later quipped, he was prepared for the role since he had been driving mules and singing from the top of his wagon for decades.²³

During the 1920s, Macon likely performed at other theaters in Nashville, such as the Princess Theatre, owned and managed by the German immigrant brothers Tony and Harry Sudekum. By 1917, the Sudekums operated at least three Church Street movie houses and vaudeville theaters—the Capitol, the Princess, and the Knickerbocker—and ran the Fifth Avenue Theatre, which booked Fiddlin’ Sid and the Charleston Dancers in the mid-1920s.²⁴ The “Sudekum” theater circuit, the primary Nashville rival to Marcus Loew’s chain, was part of a larger network of small-time vaudeville theaters operated by

²² This account is drawn from two sources: “Unusual Program Offered At Loew’s,” *Nashville Banner*, January 14, 1923; and Harkreader, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs*, 17.

²³ Macon, “Brunswick Topics,” 11.

²⁴ Harkreader, *Fiddlin’ Sid’s Memoirs*, 19.

the Sudekums called the “Crescent Amusement Company.”²⁵ There were other Nashville theaters as well. During the summer of 1922, the *Nashville Banner* announced “Go-To-Theater-Week,” an event sponsored by Nashville theater managers to bring entertainment to citizens “who have not been getting their full share of the recreation offered by the theaters, and the many benefits to be derived from clean, wholesome amusement.”²⁶ The article showed pictures of managers and owners of several Nashville theaters including Loew’s Vendome (Earle M. Fain), the Strand (C. R. McCowan), Princess Theatre (Harry Sudekum), 5th Ave. and Alhambra (C. H. Dean), and the Knickerbocker (Theo D. Mousson). Tony Sudekum and Marcus Loew, pictured side-by-side, are described as “enemies” who, for one week will unite as friends around a common cause. It seems likely that Macon played at several or all of these Nashville spots over the years, although dates have not yet been confirmed. At the very least, we know that he played several times at the Princess Theater and seems to have had a personal acquaintance with both the Sudekum brothers and Loew.²⁷

²⁵ The Crescent circuit is mentioned by Anton Delmore in *Truth Is Stranger Than Publicity* (Nashville: Country Music Federation Press, 1977; repr., 1995), 151.

²⁶ “Friendly Enemies During Go-To-Theater-Week,” *Nashville Banner*, June 25, 1922

²⁷ According to Anton Delmore, Macon played at the Princess many times and helped the Delmore Brothers get a show there; *Truth Is Stranger*, 151. Kirk McGee notes that they played the Princess Theatre the summer before the Opry began, which would have been 1925; Kirk McGee, interview by Charles K. Wolfe on *Bluegrass Express* (radio show), March 14, 1984, MP3, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University. In addition, because George Hay, Macon’s close friend, knew the Sudekums personally, we can safely assume that Macon knew them as well. His relationship with Marcus Loew is discussed below.

The Bijou and Sam McGee

Macon's big break in vaudeville came in January 1925, when he played a series of shows at Loew's Bijou Theatre in Birmingham, Alabama. Once again, the opportunity came courtesy of E. A. Vinson, recently relocated to Birmingham to become theater manager of Loew's Bijou. Vinson wired Macon from Birmingham, inviting him and Harkreader to come down and play at the Midnight Comedy Carnival, the Bijou's New Year's Eve show. He also offered them a spot on the next week's bill, and agreed to pay each musician \$100 per week.²⁸

In the year since "Whoa, Mule," Macon's career had blossomed. After months of playing gigs at rural schoolhouses and theaters, he and Harkreader had recorded for Vocalion Records, in July 1924. By the time Macon reached Birmingham in late December 1924, the local press was touting him—with some hyperbole—as a "world famous phonograph artist."²⁹

The Bijou appearances were a tremendous success. What began as a one-week engagement turned into a five-week residency as Macon captivated the crowds with "homely songs" and "kept them in an uproar of laughter at his antics."³⁰ Each week the

²⁸ "Mountain Farmer, With Banjo, Plays Way into Ranks of Vaudeville Stars," *Birmingham News*, January 8, 1925. A January 1, 1925 article in the *Birmingham Age-Herald* gives a slightly different version of events. It claims that Macon "scored such a hit" at the New Year's Eve concert, that he was subsequently "persuaded to remain over" at the Bijou for the next week; according to both Macon and Harkreader, however, the week-long appearance was pre-arranged. "Four Showings at Loew's Today: Macon and Banjo Look for Next Week's Program," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 1, 1925.

²⁹ Advertisement, *Birmingham Post*, January 5, 1925.

³⁰ "Bijou Banjoist," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 13, 1925.

crowd's enthusiasm grew, and the theater responded by making Macon the headliner and extending his contract multiple times. "For the first time in the history of Birmingham vaudeville houses," reported the *Birmingham Post*, an artist remained on the bill for three weeks.³¹ The excitement reached a fevered pitch in week four. One evening, the group "got a rousing ovation and left the stage amid a veritable storm. [I]t was many minutes before [the next act] could get into their routine."³² Harkreader remembers the theater was so packed that it exceeded occupancy limits, resulting in a fine for the theater manager.³³

The Bijou shows confirmed Macon's talent as a promoter. Already during the Vendome shows, he had shown his gift for humorous self-promotion. For instance, in advertisements and announcements in the *Nashville Banner*, he promoted himself as "The Dixie Dewdrop" and "Rutherford County's gift to the amusement world," and claimed that he would make history onstage by playing two banjos at the same time.³⁴

In Birmingham, Macon and Loew Theaters orchestrated a robust and clever advertising campaign. First, to attract crowds, the Bijou broadcast recordings through the outdoor loudspeakers of the theater, which was located in the heart of Birmingham at 3rd Avenue and 17th Street.³⁵ Second, Macon gave interviews to several local newspapers.

³¹ "Next Week on the Stage and Screen," *Birmingham Post*, January 24, 1925.

³² "Uncle Dave' Again Tops Loew's Show," *Birmingham Post*, January 27, 1925.

³³ This claim was made by Harkreader, *Fiddlin' Sid's Memoirs*, 18. It is not clear whether Vinson was arrested or just fined for the violation.

³⁴ "Unusual Program Offered at Loew's," *Nashville Banner*, January 14, 1923.

³⁵ Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00922).

All three newspaper dailies—the *Birmingham Post*, *Birmingham News*, and *The Birmingham Age-Herald*—wrote articles about Macon’s run and published in-depth artist profiles, a rare honor for any small-time vaudeville performer (or country musician) during the 1920s. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Macon and the Bijou Theatre blanketed the newspapers with advertisements, which, in their use of colorful language and promises of spectacle, novelty, and humor, resembled P. T. Barnum’s promotions. For instance, an advertisement from January 26, 1925 declared Macon to be “The Struttinest Strutter That Ever Strutted a Strutt!” and introduced his band as “Guitarin’ Sam” (“He Climbs All Over A ‘Wicked’ Guitar!”), “Fiddlin’ Sid” (“The Boy Who Pulls A Soothing Bow Over A Hot Fiddle”), and Dancin’ Bob (“The Stepper Who Just Can’t Control His Feet”), who provided dance entertainment during the shows.³⁶ Other advertising slogans and catchphrases included “He struts a wicked banjo,” “It ain’t What Yer Got—It’s How Yer Put It Out!” and “South’s Peerless Banjo Picker!”³⁷ In another ad, Macon billed himself at the “World’s Greatest Banjoist.”³⁸

Such slogans and boasts conformed to the vaudeville and minstrel show advertising practices in which Macon had been steeped, and again demonstrated his connection to nineteenth-century theatrical traditions. Historian Brian Harker notes that many early twentieth-century performers used the title “World’s Greatest” in their advertising, including Lillian Russell (“World’s Most Beautiful Woman”), Eugene

³⁶ Advertisement, *Birmingham Post*, January 26, 1925.

³⁷ Advertisements, *Birmingham Post*, January 5, 8, and 9, 1925.

³⁸ Advertisement, *Birmingham News*, January 5, 1925.

Sandoval (“The World’s Strongest Man”), and Louis Armstrong (“World’s Greatest Cornetist”).³⁹ Such marketing also provided evidence of Macon’s media savvy, talent for self-marketing, and willingness to delight the theater-going public with outrageous and eye-catching statements.

The Birmingham shows were a critical moment in Macon’s career. They established him as a major attraction on the small-time vaudeville circuit and, in a sense, marked his full arrival as a professional musician. Even allowing for the usual newspaper puffery, Macon’s act apparently generated a tremendous amount of interest and excitement. A year later, after the fervor had subsided, a writer from the *Birmingham Post* wrote that Macon had been “the biggest individual vaudeville hit ever appearing in Birmingham.”⁴⁰

The run also showed Macon’s eye for recruiting top talent and producing captivating shows, qualities that served him well in his later radio and recording career. Previously, Macon had shown the good judgment to add Sid Harkreader to his show. In Birmingham, he again brought in two new performers: guitarist Sam McGee in week three; and the buck-and-wing dancer, “Dancing Bob” Bradford, in week four.

The most important addition was McGee, a virtuoso guitarist and banjoist who became the linchpin of Macon’s live and recorded act for the next decade. Born and

³⁹ Brian Harker, *Louis Armstrong’s Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 17. Or, to cite a slightly older example, Billy Carter (1834–1912), a member of the Louisiana Minstrels during the 1860s, and later a popular figure on the northeastern minstrel circuit, billed himself as “King of the Banjo Players” and made challenges to the public, for as much as \$500, to compete with him onstage. “Billy Carter Minstrel Scrapbook,” Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

⁴⁰ Untitled article, *Birmingham Post*, December 31, 1925.

raised in Williamson County, Tennessee, just south of Nashville, McGee learned music from his father, Uncle John McGee, who had won a regional Henry Ford fiddling contest in 1926.⁴¹ Sam's younger brother, Kirk, played fiddle and banjo and also served as a sideman for Macon. Over the years, Macon and the McGee Brothers frequently toured, recorded, and performed together on the Opry.

McGee contributed immensely to the richness and complexity of Macon's sound, both in the studio and on stage. Upon meeting him, Macon had been impressed by McGee's fingerstyle skill, specifically, the way he treated the guitar as a solo instrument by simultaneously producing melody and harmony, a common technique among black Piedmont guitarists such as Blind Blake, but something apparently new to Macon.⁴² In addition to his fingerpicking, McGee could flatpick (i.e., play with a plectrum) with speed and articulation. Macon usually reserved one or two spots in the program for McGee to perform a solo guitar piece such as "The Franklin Blues" or "Buck Dancer's Choice."⁴³ McGee created percussive effects by flipping over his guitar and drumming on the body of the instrument.⁴⁴ He could also play the banjo and six-string banjo-guitar (he and Macon recorded several banjo duets).⁴⁵ Finally, like Harkreader, McGee possessed a

⁴¹ Wolfe, *Tennessee Traditional Singers*, 80.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁴ According to Kirk McGee, the "knocking sound" on many of Macon's recordings "comes from Sam, who flipped his guitar over and knocked on the body of guitar with his picks on." McGee, interview, MTSU (1984).

⁴⁵ They recorded banjo duets for five-string and six-string banjo in Chicago on July 25 and 26, 1928.

natural comedic sensibility and showmanship, which, of course, was essential for playing with Macon. His relationships with significantly younger musicians such as the McGees and Sid Harkreader brought Macon an stronger connection to contemporary popular culture that balanced his regressive and anti-modernist aesthetics and public image. Practically speaking, such collaborations probably enabled him to remain commercially viable far longer than he would otherwise have been able to do.

Loew Southern Tour

Further evidence of Macon's success in Birmingham came at the end of week five of the Bijou run, when Marcus Loew wired Vinson from New York City to ask if he would be interested in playing the entire Loew southern circuit.⁴⁶ Although Macon declined to play the full circuit, citing separation from his family and moral reservations about playing too many theaters, he agreed to play a shortened southern tour.⁴⁷ For the next ten weeks, Macon and Harkreader (and possibly McGee and Bradford) played at Loew theaters across the South including the State Theatre in Memphis, the Crescent Theatre in New Orleans, the Grand Theatre in Atlanta, and the Loew theater in Dallas.⁴⁸ The theater managers eagerly awaited his arrival. During his last week in Birmingham, the *Birmingham Post* wrote, "MEMPHIS loses; Birmingham Wins! 'Uncle Dave's' cross-country tour of the Greater Loew Theaters has been postponed for another week—and

⁴⁶ Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

⁴⁷ Macon reportedly said that playing that many theaters would be "against [his] religion." Harkreader, *Fiddlin' Sid's Memoirs*, 20.

⁴⁸ Harkreader, *Fiddlin' Sid's Memoirs*, 20; Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373); and Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00922).

he'll be steppin' on the gas here for six more short days."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the *Atlanta Constitution*, which got some of the details wrong, anticipated the appearance of "the north Georgia mountaineer who took Birmingham by storm for five successive weeks."⁵⁰

Throughout the tour, Macon enjoyed headliner status. As in Birmingham, he remained at some of the theaters for multiple weeks, and continued to draw large and enthusiastic crowds. The New Orleans' *Times-Picayune*, for instance, reported that he had been "packing" the theater.⁵¹ He shared the bill with other small-time vaudeville acts including comedians, dancers, acrobats, blackface minstrels, song-and-dance teams, and magicians. In New Orleans, for instance, the shows featured among others Vie Quinn and the Sunnybrook Jazz Orchestra, monologist Jimmy Lyons, dancers Bobby Jackson and Ida Mack, the singing team of Frost and Morrison, and a bicycle act called the McDonald Trio.⁵² Although Macon had only just begun to make records—and had not yet appeared on the Grand Ole Opry—his summer 1925 tour established him as a professional vaudeville entertainer capable of attracting and maintaining audiences.

Transportation, Booking, and Advertising

Macon's development from local songster to nationally-known artist occurred not only through his shift to new venues, but also through his changing modes of

⁴⁹ Advertisement, *Birmingham Post*, January 26, 1925.

⁵⁰ "Amusements," *Atlanta Constitution*, March 2, 1925.

⁵¹ Untitled announcement. *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 25, 1925.

⁵² *Ibid.*

transportation, booking, and advertising. Early in his career, he followed what were in essence nineteenth-century business practices. He traveled to gigs via an animal-drawn wagon or train; booked shows by himself through written correspondence or by speaking directly to store owners, theater managers, and school principals; served as his own manager and handled all financial transactions; and did his own word-of-mouth advertising. As his career expanded, however, Macon gradually adopted more modern touring practices. He traveled by automobile, relied more on the Opry's Artists Service Bureau booking services, and employed Nashville's Hatch Show Print to create his posters and handbills. His gradual embrace of these more modern touring practices reflected both the development of new technology and the maturation of hillbilly music and its infrastructure.

Like other hillbilly talent, Macon sustained himself financially through his personal appearances. He earned minimal royalties from records, especially during the 1930s as the record market contracted and he made fewer recordings. The Opry, which Macon joined in 1925, proved useful for building name recognition and advertising upcoming shows, but paid only a nominal weekly fee. Personal appearances, by contrast, brought in a steady and regular income. Macon earned money through ticket sales and from selling his songbooks and records after the show. Concert touring, the lifeblood of the industry, became increasingly profitable for Macon and other country musicians over time.

The revolutions in mass media technology—radio, records, and film—proved important to the growth and maturation of the country music industry before the Second World War. Equally momentous, however, were developments in transportation that

permitted artists to tour more efficiently and profitably, and to reach more people, thereby increasing the popularity of the genre. The spread of railroad networks, automobiles, and hard-surface roads were facilitated by the South's growing interconnectedness with the rest of the nation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the region grew more connected, it became easier and less costly for musicians to play in remote rural areas. Faster travel enabled southern musicians to tour more efficiently and profitably and to reach their rural audiences.

Macon's transportation methods changed over the course of his career. As an amateur performer at the turn-of-the century, and for a time after turning professional in the early 1920s, he preferred to travel by animal-drawn wagon (either mule or horse). Animal-driven transportation was practical for a local musician such as Macon, who performed within a twenty- or fifty-mile radius of his home, and who often needed to traverse rocky and uneven roads, grassy fields, and hillsides. Furthermore, such a primitive method of transportation suited Macon's friendly disposition, allowing him to entertain from the seat of his wagon and meet and greet people as he drove.

In the mid-1920s, as he fanned out across the South, playing vaudeville theaters and schoolhouses, Macon traveled increasingly by train. Sid Harkreader reported that he and Macon traveled mostly by rail during their first years touring, beginning in late 1921. The region's network of railroads, although not as developed as in the North, had been expanding since the Civil War, and by the 1920s, three major railways, all of which linked to other states, stretched across Tennessee: the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway; the Louisville and Nashville Railroad; and the Tennessee Central Railway. Macon regularly traveled on all of these major railroads, in addition to the

“branch” lines mentioned earlier.⁵³ Aside from the obvious practical benefits of railroads, such as faster travel and access to a wider audience, Macon enjoyed riding on trains because it gave him the chance to meet people. He liked to entertain other passengers with jokes and stories, a habit that could be irritating to some. Kirk McGee told the following story:

The first trip that I ever went with him, we was going to Chattanooga on a train. And this drunk was in front of us, and Uncle Dave was telling these jokes, and this drunk got tired of it. And he says, “What are you trying to do, make a monkey out of me?” And he says, “I’ve got more houses and lots in Chattanooga than you’ve got hairs on your head”—and Uncle Dave didn’t have a hair on his head. He pulled off his hat and said, “Brother, if you ain’t got no more houses than I got hair on my head, you don’t even own a chicken coop!”⁵⁴

An equally important method of transportation for Macon was the automobile. Macon purchased his first automobile, a Model-T Ford, with Sam McGee, around 1928, and from that point onward, traveled mainly by car. By the late 1920s, automobiles had become more reliable. At the same time, the spread of hard-surface roads allowed for easier and faster travel. Historian Richard Peterson describes hard-surface roads as one of the three “new media of communication” that facilitated the commercialization southern vernacular music in the 1920s, the other two being radio and records.⁵⁵ The combination of better engineered cars and improved roads meant that Macon could travel farther and

⁵³ According to Sid Harkreader, they rode all three railways; interview by John W. Rumble, May 12, 1986, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

⁵⁴ Carter, Maybelle, Kirk McGee, Sam McGee, and Arthur Smith, interview by Ralph Rinzler and Mike Seeger, Feb 13, 1965 (traveling in a car), “Stories of Uncle Dave,” Reel 721, MP3, Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Washington D.C.

⁵⁵ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 10.

reach deeper into the countryside, reaching remote Appalachian villages and hamlets located miles from the nearest railroad stop that had previously been isolated and inaccessible. During the Second World War, Uncle Dave and Dorris Macon did a three-month national tour, driving from “East coast to West coast, from the Lakes to the Gulf.”⁵⁶

In many ways, Macon’s early touring operations were a throwback to the previous century, when most professional musicians still represented themselves, booked shows, set up travel routes, managed contracts, and did all of their own accounting.⁵⁷ On tour, Macon handled all transactions, including making contracts with theater managers and paying musicians.⁵⁸ He acted as his own booking agent, particularly early in his career, by writing letters.⁵⁹

Macon booked other gigs by word-of-mouth and through personal charm. According to Anton Delmore, wherever he went, Macon introduced himself, whether on trains, in church, or on the street. With his unusual appearance, charm, and sense of

⁵⁶ Dorris Macon, interview (Wolfe #1). Dorris believed the year was around 1941.

⁵⁷ These nineteenth-century practices are discussed in Frank Cullen, ed., *Vaudeville, Old & New: An Encyclopedia of Variety Performers in America*. New York: Routledge), 130.

⁵⁸ Macon was meticulous in his record-keeping, carefully recording show receipts and dividing proceeds to the fraction of a penny. Recalled Anton Delmore, “we simply learned a lot about business, honesty and many, many more things from that fine old fellow.” Delmore, *Truth Is Stranger*, 110, 117.

⁵⁹ He would write to the superintendent of county schools to request the names of teachers and principals; write letters to each school and try to book appearances; and then, once booked, mail out circulars and playbills to all of the principals and teachers for them to post. Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

humor, he “commanded attention”; he was a “walking commercial, advertising himself and making money by the effort.”⁶⁰ Macon devised one particularly clever technique for drawing crowds to his shows. Arriving at a school, he would introduce himself to the principal and ask to play a couple of tunes for the children at recess, and then ask the children to inform their parents that there would be a show later that evening. Many of Macon’s smaller shows—at rotary clubs, radio stations, schools, and restaurants—were probably arranged in this manner. Such a method often attracted large crowds.⁶¹ Macon’s charisma had another material benefit on the road: wherever he performed, hospitable townspeople provided Macon and his musicians free lodging and food after the show.⁶²

By the 1930s, Macon had been playing in the rural South for a decade and had built up a vast network of friends and acquaintances who could supply him with a gig at a moment’s notice. According to Anton Delmore, “If [Macon] wanted to play a week in a certain part of the country, all he had to do was write someone a letter and they would book him up and he always made good money.” He “had people all over the country, school teachers and people in the chambers of commerce in lots of little towns all over the South that knew him personally.”⁶³ “You knew you was a-gonna have a crowd with Uncle Dave ‘cause he’d been in the business so long,” said Kirk McGee.⁶⁴ When the

⁶⁰ Delmore, *Truth Is Stranger*, 116.

⁶¹ Sam McGee, quoted in Wolfe, *Tennessee Traditional Singers*, 96–97.

⁶² Harkreader, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00373).

⁶³ Delmore, *Truth Is Stranger*, 107–08.

⁶⁴ McGee, interview, MTSU (Wolfe 00951).

Delmore Brothers became Grand Ole Opry performers in the 1930s and sought somebody to tour with, not surprisingly, they asked Macon.⁶⁵

As his business grew more complex with record contracts, radio fees, and vaudeville circuit tours, Macon continued to serve as his own manager and promoter. Yet, by the 1930s, he also began to use booking agents such as T. D. Kemp from Charlotte, North Carolina, who booked Macon in larger theaters; and, later, Gene Parish from Stokesville, North Carolina, who booked Macon primarily at high schools.⁶⁶ He also relied on the Grand Ole Opry's booking office, the Artists Service Bureau, founded in the early- to mid-1930s by George Hay.⁶⁷ The Artists Service Bureau provided booking services for WSM performers, and Macon was one of the chief early beneficiaries. In fact, it had been founded in large part to help Macon (and other popular Opry performers) schedule and manage their personal appearances.⁶⁸ The office would receive invitations from schools, local clubs, PTA, country fairs, and other groups asking for Opry (and other WSM artists) to perform; then they would book the concerts, taking approximately 15% of the performer's earnings. The Bureau organized the artists' schedule for the entire week, making sure to leave a spot open for the Saturday night

⁶⁵ Delmore, *Truth Is Stranger*, 107–08.

⁶⁶ Dorris Macon, interview (Wolfe #1).

⁶⁷ George Hay believed it started around 1934 or 1935. Hay, "10 Stories."

⁶⁸ According to former Artists Service Bureau head David Stone, Hay started the service largely to help Uncle Dave Macon, the Fruit Jar Drinkers, and others artists with whom he had a close relationship. David Stone, interview by John W. Rumble, May 25–26, 1983, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Opry program. According to David Stone, who replaced Hay as Artists Service Bureau director, “We just picked out five spots we thought would be well for them to take in one week and get back in time for the Grand Ole Opry—and that was it.”⁶⁹

Macon also used some modern promotional and marketing techniques. For instance, during tours he frequently made appearances on local radio stations to advertise his upcoming shows, a practice described by Richard Peterson as “radio station barnstorming.”⁷⁰ For instance, he would travel to “the Tennessee–Virginia line” (probably Bristol) to play on the local radio station, which broadcast daily at noon, and announce his show happening later that evening.⁷¹ Hillbilly artists commonly used such marketing techniques during the heyday of radio in the 1930s and 1940s.⁷² In addition to local radio spots, Macon advertised shows with posters and handbills, some of which still survive. The records for Hatch Show Print, the Nashville-based company that did his print advertisements, show that he used various types and sizes of advertisements, including “sheet posters,” “one sheets,” “window cards,” and “jumbo cards.” The number of posters he ordered depended on the particular show. For larger venues or multi-day appearances, he sometimes ordered as many as 150 posters per show.⁷³

⁶⁹ David Stone. Interview by John W. Rumble, August 8, 1982. Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

⁷⁰ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 118.

⁷¹ David Stone, interview (1983).

⁷² Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 118.

⁷³ Examples of some of Macon’s larger orders from Hatch Show Print were: Capitol Theatre, Nashville, Tennessee, Saturday night, Dec. 31, 1938 (25 1 sheets, 100

Conclusion

Macon's touring career offers a case study in how rural southern musicians, schooled in the music and business practices of the nineteenth century, were able to transition into successful careers in popular music during the new media age of the 1920s and 1930s. His touring career illustrates the changing economic landscape for country musicians in the first half of the twentieth century. Early in his career, Macon played exclusively in traditional, nineteenth-century venues, often for free or for tips, relying almost exclusively on live performances to generate income. He managed all of his own affairs, booked his own gigs, and advertised via word-of-mouth through an extensive network of friends and acquaintances developed over decades living in the region. In this pre-commercial landscape, Macon resembled a nineteenth-century songster: an itinerant, semi-professional performer known mostly in his local community.

By the late 1920s, however, mass media transformed the touring business for Macon and other country musicians. New venues, chiefly the rural schoolhouse and vaudeville, provided a network of touring locations, making large tours more feasible. The extensive traveling, performing, and promotion undertaken by Macon and others greatly enhanced their exposure and prestige as artists and provided a foundation for building professional music careers, something far more difficult for southern vernacular artists of the 1900s and 1910s to achieve. These new performance opportunities coincided with more efficient methods of travel and the growth of the touring business, as represented by the Opry's Artists Service Bureau and Hatch Show Print, which, by the

window cards); and Roanoke Theatre, Roanoke, Virginia, May 4–6, 1939 (150 window cards).

1930s, helped make concert tours an increasingly profitable venture. They also gave early country artists the opportunity to perform live in front of larger audiences, and in a wider geographical area. Thus, Macon stood at the intersection of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century musical economies: from southern songster to national, mass media based artist. In these respects, and because of his willingness to adapt to the new environment, Macon served as a model for the new economic approach used by early country artists, thereby making him an important transitional figure in the development of his industry.

It is noteworthy that many other hillbilly musicians sought to tour with Macon in the 1930s, including the Delmore Brothers, the McGee Brothers, Bill Monroe, and Roy Acuff. Because Macon was a consummate entertainer from the countryside with tremendous popularity throughout the South, touring with him was a great way to gain exposure to the audiences which Macon had cultivated, and to achieve popularity with those audiences. Their style and repertoire may have greatly differed from his, but Macon's unique entertainment skills helped to expand the popularity of the new artists and the developing genre of country music. These younger musicians also helped Macon remain relevant in the rapidly shifting commercial music scene of the 1930s.

Chapter 5: Macon in Concert

Uncle Dave was the finest showman in the world. If the crowd really wanted him, and he was selling good, he could really turn on, man. He was powerful.

—Bill Monroe¹

To understand how a musician rooted in the nineteenth-century was able to emerge as a star of the new media, we need to appreciate the power of Macon's personality and showmanship. This chapter reconstructs the atmosphere and content of a typical Macon vaudeville theater or schoolhouse concert. The information presented here has been compiled from a variety of primary sources: newspaper accounts and advertisements, interviews with musicians who played with Macon, remembrances by fans, and, most importantly, Macon's commercial recordings. While probably not exact representations of his live shows, his recordings constitute our only source for how his music actually sounded. Furthermore, his recordings, which mixed songs, instrumental numbers, monologues, jokes, and patter, seem to have accurately captured, at least in a condensed form, his live performances from the 1920s and 1930s.

In examining Macon's concerts, several major themes emerge. First, Macon possessed a powerful on-stage personality. He grabbed people's attention with his unusual appearance; drew them in by connecting with them on a personal level; and then captivated them with his music, comedy, storytelling, and physical antics. He would do

¹ Bill Monroe in Pasty B. Weiler, "Monroe Plans Tribute to Dave Macon," *Nashville Banner*, July 7, 1993.

anything to keep them entertained, and audiences loved him for it. Second, Macon was funny, and he incorporated humor into every aspect of his routine. Third, Macon employed a number of tactics that were commonly used by vaudeville and other popular stage performers of that era including novelty sounds, rapid alterations in mood, and instrumental tricks and acrobatics. Ultimately, these performance techniques reveal an artist deeply indebted to nineteenth-century popular stage traditions, but also an artist attuned to the tastes of his rural listeners. Macon mixed familiar nineteenth-century popular variety techniques with an unpretentious personal style that appealed to rural audiences. His star power hinged on his potent blend of rural southern identity and music and the entertainment values of nineteenth-century popular variety music.

“Force of Personality”

Writing in 1914, the journalist Caroline Caffin defined what she believed to be the one indispensable quality of all great vaudevillians: “force of personality.”² Few entertainers had more force of personality than Macon. Sideman Kirk McGee called him the “greatest entertainer.” Brother Sam McGee recalled that Macon did not even need an instrument to entertain a crowd: “He’d just go out there and talk to the audience . . . and they’d like it.”³ He could speak to any audience, and was equally adept at telling bawdy jokes or giving a sermon. Charles Wolfe suggests that Macon was, above all, an entertainer and that his songs were always incidental to the “unique stamp of personality

² Caffin, *Vaudeville: The Book*, 10.

³ McGee, et. al. interview (1965) Smithsonian Folkways, Reel 721.

he put on them.”⁴ There is much truth to this assertion. As Kirk McGee said, he was “strictly an audience man,” a “showman.”⁵ He placed a premium on entertaining and keeping his audience happy at all times.

A vital ingredient for any successful vaudeville performance was making a strong first impression. Caffin explains the importance of making a bold impression:

[I]t is ever the strong personality and the ability to get it across the footlights and impress it upon the audience that distinguish the popular performer. . . . So little time is allowed to each performer that their appeal is necessarily frankly direct. It hides itself behind no subtleties but is personal and unashamed. It looks its audience straight in the face and says, in effect, “Look at ME! I am going to astonish you!”⁶

Macon seemed to understand this aspect of vaudeville intuitively. He would adapt his program to the response of the crowd and change his tactics and approach as needed.

Zeke Clements, who toured with Macon in the 1940s, recalled that in his concerts Macon would cycle through a three-step process in order to win over the audience. First, he began with the standard routine: songs and banjo tricks. Second, if the audience remained cold, he told a few dirty jokes. Finally, if that failed, he preached to them.⁷

Macon’s allure hinged in part on his striking physical appearance. Opry announcer George D. Hay gave one of the first enduring descriptions of Macon: a “grand

⁴ Charles K. Wolfe, “Uncle Dave Macon,” in *Stars of Country Music: Uncle Dave Macon to Johnny Rodriguez*, edited by Bill C. Malone and Judith McCulloh (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975): 43.

⁵ Harkreader and McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922); and McGee, interview (Wolfe 00951).

⁶ Caroline Caffin, *Vaudeville: The Book* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 10.

⁷ Korine and Dunlap, *Uncle Dave Macon*.

Tennessee farmer who has done and is doing good wherever he goes with his three banjos, his plug hat, gates-ajar collar, gold teeth and his great big, Tennessee smile!”⁸

Although Macon sometimes dressed in hillbilly garb, his typical costume, both on and off stage, was more debonair: a tailor-made suit with a pocketed vest to store his pipe, tobacco, and glasses case, a winged (i.e., “gates-ajar”) shirt collar, a red tie with stickpin; a black felt hat; and gold-plated crowns and a goatee.⁹ Alton Delmore noted that Macon “didn’t have a suit that cost less than one hundred dollars.”¹⁰ He always kept his clothes pressed and his shoes shined.¹¹

For Gordon Boger, who saw Macon play in the 1930s or 1940s, the entertainer embodied the contradictory impulses of solemnity and profanity in his appearance:

Nobody who ever saw Uncle Dave could possibly forget him. He was short and stout, with a pink face and a bald head. He had white whiskers that started at the nape of his neck, circled around and about his ears and met in an arch under his nose. He looked like a cherubic old grandfather, but somewhere in his makeup there lurked one of Satan’s own imps.¹²

⁸ George D. Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: G. D. Hay, 1945), 15.

⁹ Macon carried his pipe, tobacco, and glasses case in his vest pocket. Harkreader, interview (Wolfe 00373). McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922).

¹⁰ Delmore, *Truth Is Stranger*, 112.

¹¹ Archie Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 4, 1977, cassette tape (no tape no.), Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.

¹² Gordon Boger, “Opry’s Uncle Dave Macon,” *News Herald* (Morganton, North Carolina), April 17, 1984.

Above all, Macon's appearance was a marker of his eccentric individuality. According to Roy Acuff, he "wanted to be identified by the way he dressed—and he was, wherever he went."¹³ "His dress—and everything—was just different from anybody else."¹⁴

Upon taking his chair, and before striking a note on the banjo, Macon would speak to his audience. According to Kirk McGee, he would "sell himself to the audience." This might involve telling a story, joke, or even "talking some religion."¹⁵ Macon's studio recordings illustrate this technique. In his 1926 recording of "On the Dixie Bee Line (In That Henry Ford of Mine)," for example, he introduces the song with a lengthy and humorous anecdote about liquor:

Hello folks. It won't do to be without hope. Now, I never had to hope to get another good drink of good red liquor. But yesterday evening, I played a few pieces and two gentlemen invited me up to their room, opened up a box, said, "Uncle Dave, here's water, glasses, sugar, lemon, and everything. Now what'll you have first?" I says, "Give me that largest glass, please sir." I pulled her out half-full and begin to stir with a spoon and he says, "Now, what next?" I says, "A little water to make her weaker." "What next?" I says, "A little sugar to make her sweeter." He says, "What next?" I says, "Put in a little lemon now to make her sour." "Now, what next?" "Now," I says, "pour a brim-full to give her the power!"¹⁶

Macon punctuates the joke with his trademark cackle and a sweeping banjo strum.

When playing to a more pious crowd, he might quote a proverb or deliver a brief sermon. "Walking in Sunlight," for example, begins with the following statement:

¹³ Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

¹⁴ McGee, interview (Wolfe 00951).

¹⁵ McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922).

¹⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, "On the Dixie Bee Line (In That Henry Ford of Mine)" (1926, Vo 15320).

Now people, when it comes to the scientific parts of music, I know nothing about it. But I can play. And thank God a man who can't read the Bible can pray. Listen: A man comes to this world naked and bare. He goes through life with troubles and care. He departs this life and goes we don't know where. But he'll be alright there if he lives alright here.¹⁷

Some of Macon's spoken introductions recalled the colorful language and faux-grand invocations of the minstrel show. In his 1925 recording of "Old Dan Tucker," he calls the show to order with a nonsensical but uproarious line: "Now good people, we're going to play this next tune with more heterogeneous constipolacy, double flavor, and unknown quality than usual!" Though found on a 1925 record, such an introduction resembles the words of minstrel interlocutors of the past, for instance: "And now, ladies and gentlemen, I take great delight in introducing our nimble footed and tickle-toed terpsichorean performer."¹⁸

Comedy

The most common type of early twentieth-century vaudevillian was the "story-telling song-singing comedian," which included artists such as Lew Dockstader, Al Jolson, and Bert Williams. All were "fun-makers," or "mirth-providers," who built their acts around getting the laugh, and "what the Vaudeville audience most craves," Caffin observed in 1914, "is a good, hearty laugh."¹⁹

¹⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, "Walking in Sunlight" (1927, Vo 5160).

¹⁸ Dailey Paskman, *Blackface and Music: The Spirit of Minstrelsy, A New Minstrel Book, Complete with Songs, Words, and Music, and A Full Show, Ready for Performance* (New York: E. B. Marks Music, 1936), 38.

¹⁹ Caffin, *Vaudeville: The Book*, 199–200.

Macon followed in this fun-maker tradition. As already glimpsed in his spoken introductions, humor was a central part of his performances. In a Macon program, comedy could take many forms: stock jokes and one-liners, anecdotes or personal stories, banter with side musicians, parodies, sound effects, imitations of animals, comic melodies, surprise dissonances, physical humor, and banjo tricks. His entire routine—from opening joke to closing bow—was infused with humor.²⁰ For instance, Macon loved to make grand comedic entrances. Once, he came on stage dressed in a white nightcap. When the audience began laughing, he acted coyly, as if nothing were out of the ordinary; then, he started laughing hysterically, sending the crowd into further rapture.²¹ Overall, Macon created comedy through his jokes, lyrics, music, and delivery, each of which will be discussed here in turn.

Macon often told jokes in between songs, some of which have been preserved on his commercial recordings. Not all were great, and many were fairly pedestrian, including mother-in-law and wife jokes. Such jokes were standard vaudeville fare and could be found in many joke books of the period, including Thomas Jackson's popular *O U auto C the United States with Jackson*, which Macon owned. An example is Macon's 1927 recording of "More Like Your Dad Every Day," which includes a joke about mothers-in-law:

²⁰ McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922).

²¹ David Ramsey Macon, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, February, 1979, cassette tape (no tape number), Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.

Now people, I just can read and write. But you know, there's a whole lotta' folks that can't read and write. Just natural, like me, got good, sound sense. Now a gentleman that couldn't read and write brought a telegram to me last night for me to read and answer for him. And I broke it open and read it, and it said: "Your Mother-in-Law Dead. Must be Cremated, Embalmed, or Buried." He says, "Tell 'em to do all. Take no chances, whatever." Ha! Ha! Ha!²²

In a similar vein, "Never Make Love No More" begins with a joke about marriage: "Now folks, I'm going to tell you what love is: Love's something [that] comes over a man just before marriage and leaves him immediately afterward."²³ Many of Macon's topics—mothers-in-law, wives, automobiles, women's fashion—were standbys in joke books of the period. Historian Charles Wolfe discovered several joke books in Macon's personal library. The only book I have examined in detail is *O U auto C the United States with Jackson*. No evidence of direct borrowing was found, suggesting that Macon did not learn his routines from joke books, even if they may have provided some inspiration.²⁴

At the same time, like most great stage entertainers, Macon was a sponge who absorbed material from myriad sources, both written and oral. His son Dorris remembered Macon as an avid reader. Some of Macon's jokes came directly from other entertainers. He was never afraid to steal a good bit or routine. Opry announcer and star

²² Uncle Dave Macon, "More Like Your Dad Every Day" (1927, Vo 5172).

²³ David Ramsey Macon, interview. Uncle Dave Macon, "Never Make Love No More" (1926, Vo 15453).

²⁴ Dorris Macon, audio interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 6, 1977. Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University, Charles Wolfe Collection [no tape number]. Comedy books found in Macon's personal library included Thomas W. Jackson's *O U auto C the United States with Jackson* (1914), *Coming with Good Stuff* (1924), and *Thomas W. Jackson Catches a Fish and Tells A Story: For Laughing Purposes Only* (1910, rev.1942 and 1949); and *The Wit and Wisdom of Warren Akin Candler*, edited by Elam Franklin Dempsey (1922). These books are listed in David Ramsey Macon, interview.

performer Roy Acuff, who toured with Macon in the 1940s, fondly recalled how Macon would barely laugh at someone's joke, but then later, would tell the identical joke, punctuated by his infectious belly laugh.²⁵ Kirk McGee tells a similar tale about a Macon appearance at a vaudeville show at the Princess Theatre in Nashville. As usual, it was a multi-act "continuous" show, meaning the performers did their routine several times for different audiences over the course of the evening. During the first show, Macon heard another performer tell a great joke, and in the second show, opened with the same joke, thus preventing the other performer from using it with the new audience.²⁶

Some Macon gags reflected a more brilliant—and original—comedic touch. At the end of shows, he sometimes told his audience: "Folks, it was a pleasure to play for you tonight, and you were a wonderful audience. I may never see you all again, or play for you, but when I die and get to heaven, if you are not there, I will know where to find you."²⁷ Meanwhile, his rich store of anecdotes and personal stories was seemingly inexhaustible. In his 1929 recording of "Tennessee Jubilee" he tells an amusing story about his "cousin's" first experience driving:

I have a cousin, [who] lives down in Rutherford County, Tennessee. She's a woman. And her brother was telling me about her swapping a dry cow for an old, second-hand Ford car last summer. And she learned to run it pretty well, in the wheat fields, after they got done thrashing. And she decides she'd go into the city on Saturday. But she drove out to the highway, and the traffic was so thick [that] she backed out and decided to go in at night. So, when she did drive in, the first thing she done, she run over the signal line, and the traffic officer stopped her.

²⁵ Roy Acuff recalls that Uncle Dave's laugh—apart from any jokes he told—could inspire uproarious laughter from the audience. Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

²⁶ McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922). According to those who knew him, Macon learned new material quickly, and rarely forgot it.

²⁷ Harkreader, *Fiddlin' Sid's Memoirs*, 25.

And there she was, and she stuck her head out the window and said, [in a funny voice] “What’s the matter?” The traffic gentleman says, “Why, you haven’t got your dimmers on.” She says, “Lord, Lord, I reckon I have. I put on everything ma’am laid out for me to wear before I left home.” And she says, “Who is you anyhow?” He says, “I’m the traffic jam man, Mom.” She says, “I’m mighty glad you told me. Ma’am told me to fetch her a quart. Have it ready for me as I go out, will you, please?” Ha! Ha! Ha!²⁸

Not all of Macon’s jokes were so anodyne and inoffensive; he also enjoyed “blue” humor, something that occasionally put him on bad terms with theater managers. At the State Theater in Memphis, in the winter of 1925, he evidently told some off-color jokes; several days later, the theater manager called Sid Harkreader and said, “I don’t want no part of Macon on account of his vulgarity and his jokes.”²⁹ On a separate occasion, a theater manager in Birmingham, Alabama fired Macon after newspaper critics complained about the inappropriate nature of some of his material.³⁰ It is difficult to determine whether such complaints had any basis in fact. His recordings contain few examples of bawdy material. Plus, some vaudeville theater managers may have been grandstanding to impress the public with their morality. Macon’s theater jokes were probably tame by modern standards, even though his sense of humor in private could be quite raunchy.³¹

²⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, “Tennessee Jubilee” (1929, Br 355).

²⁹ Harkreader, interview (1986).

³⁰ Harkreader, interview (Wolfe 00373). This story comes from Sid Harkreader, who believed the controversy occurred in the Fall of 1925 during Macon’s return to Birmingham, after his triumphant Bijou shows the previous winter. However, I was unable to verify, through newspaper articles and advertisements, the authenticity of the story.

³¹ For example, “Smoky Mountain” Glenn Stagner, who toured and recorded with Macon in the late 1930s, attributed the following verse to Uncle Dave: “Here’s to the jack

In addition to jokes, Macon sang comedic songs. One of his best-known songs was “(She Was Always) Chewing Gum,” which playfully satirizes the carefree chomping of a girl eating “Juicy Fruit.”³² Another Macon original, “All-Go-Hungry Hash House,” describes the frightful cuisine at an urban boarding house: the “molasses is made of paint,” the biscuits are “named,” and the “undertaker keeps his job next store.” “I Tickled Nancy,” also a Macon original, is a light-hearted courting song (“I tickled Nancy, and Nancy tickled me”) and one of several Macon songs containing a “laughing” chorus.³³

Macon borrowed some of his comedic songs from contemporary popular music sources. An example is “Down in Arkansaw,” a charming duet that he and Sid Harkreader recorded and performed at their Birmingham theater shows in January 1925.³⁴ Composed by George “Honey Boy” Evans and published as sheet music in 1913, the song became a hit in 1921 for Victor popular artists Pee Wee Myers and Ford Hanford.³⁵ The lyrics, related to the American folk song “State of Arkansas,” provide several comic

that peeked through the crack/His eyes were black as charcoal/He broke his prick a-fucking a mare/and a fire flew out of his asshole.” Glenn Stagner, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, Thanksgiving 1984, Wolfe 01046, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center For Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University.

³² In his biographical entry on Macon in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* (2d. edition, ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett), Bill Malone notes that “Chewing Gum” was one of Macon’s most popular concert songs.

³³ Uncle Dave Macon, “(She Was Always) Chewing Gum (1924, Vo 14847)” “All-Go-Hungry Hash House” (1925, Vo 15076), “I Tickled Nancy” (1925, Vo 15341).

³⁴ Although Macon’s set lists were rarely, if ever, published in local papers, a *Birmingham News* advertisement from January 12, 1925 makes reference to this song. Macon and Harkreader also recorded the song in the studio later that year. Uncle Dave Macon, “Down In Arkansaw,” (1925, Vo 15034).

³⁵ Pee Wee Myers and Ford Hanford, “Down in Arkansaw” (1921, Vi 18767).

vignettes of rural life, describing a slobbering cow, a cross-eyed girl, and a hen who hatches a “coat and vest.” The lyrics played on an old theme—Arkansas as a backward, impoverished state—found in the family of folksongs known as “State of Arkansas,” and catalogued by folksong scholar George Malcolm Laws as “Laws H1.”³⁶ For their rendition, Macon and Harkreader borrowed Myers and Handford’s call-and-response format, with the “Down in Arkansaw” refrain (sung by Harkreader) coming after each line of verse text and a vocal harmony during the chorus.³⁷ In another example of borrowing contemporary material for his comedy, Macon parodied Floyd Tillman’s “I Love You So Much It Hurts,” changing it—much to Tillman’s chagrin—from a honky-tonk tear-jerker into a comedy number.³⁸

Macon’s comedy songs could be funny on a musical level, too. “Tossing the Baby So High,” recorded in 1926, is notable for its comic effects which include an angular, arpeggio melody and a mock yodel that imitates a baby flying through the air. Like so many of Macon’s comedy numbers, it is a mid-tempo, major-key waltz accompanied in a lightly plucked, three-finger, parlor banjo style. The result is a quaint, buoyant musical

³⁶ G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., *Native American Balladry: A Descriptive Study and a Bibliographical Syllabus* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964), 230. The song, to which Laws assigns the name “An Arkansas Traveler,” appears in numerous early folk song collections. A comic tale about a northern man who travels to Arkansas and observes, first-hand, its backwardness and poverty, the song differs from the better-known fiddle tune and skit, “The Arkansas Traveler.”

³⁷ Macon also recorded a version of “State of Arkansas” in 1929 with “Uncle Dave’s Travels, Part 1 (Misery in Arkansas).” His version of “Down in Arkansaw” differs somewhat from the Myers and Hanford recording, suggesting that he either rewrote the lyrics or combined the Myers/Hanford version with folk sources.

³⁸ McGee, interview (Wolfe 00922).

sound perfectly suited to the lyrics.³⁹ “He Won The Heart of My Sarah Jane,” recorded by Macon in 1926, has similar features. The song plays on a common vaudeville theme, a horn player who steals the heart of a girl by his magnificent tooting:

Now I had a girl I’d loved so well,
I’d almost gone insane.
But a man who played a trombone so well.
Won the heart of my Sarah Jane.⁴⁰

The music (see Example 2) exquisitely captures the whimsical, light-hearted mood of the story through its lilting triple meter, dotted rhythmic feel, and melody that descends stepwise through the major scale, prominently featuring the leading tone. In the chorus, Macon does some text painting, setting the words “toodle-dum toodle-dum doo” to an arpeggiated, horn-like melody the first time these lyrics appear. Much of the comedy, however, comes from Macon’s delivery, specifically, the sly, expressive curling of words in his pronunciation and the sharp rhythmic inflections.⁴¹

³⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, “Tossing the Baby So High” (1926, Vo 15452).

⁴⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, “He Won The Heart of My Sarah Jane” (1926, Vo 15322). An earlier vaudeville song based on the same theme was “Roo-Ti-Toot On Your Ragtime Flute” by Dave Oppenheim and Joe Cooper, published as sheet music in 1912 (copy located at Center for Popular, Middle Tennessee State University). Macon’s source for “Sarah Jane” is unclear. It was apparently never published as sheet music and may be a Macon composition.

⁴¹ Roy Acuff makes this very point: Macon could render a heartfelt song such as “The Maple on the Hill” comedic through small expressive tweaks, such as exaggerated articulation of the word “darling.” Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

Musical Example 2. "He Won the Heart of My Sarah Jane" (1926)

Voice

Now I had a girl I loved so well I'd al - most gone in - sane But a

Vo. ⁵

man who played a trom - bone so well won the heart of my Sar - ah

Vo. ⁸

Jane With a too dle - dum too dle dum doo It

Vo. ¹¹

was what he played on his horn too - dle dum too - dle dum doo whoa he

Vo. ¹⁵

played it from mid - night til morn whoa the beau - ti - ful mus - sic he

Vo. ¹⁸

played I don't mind tell - ing you but he won the hear of my

Vo. ²²

Sar - ah Jane with his too - dle - dum too - dle dum doo

Variety and Stage Tricks

If his recordings are any indication, Macon's live appearances were charged by frequent shifts in pace and musical style, and rapid-fire onslaughts of songs, jokes, stories, and sermons. Thus, they fulfilled the requirements of any strong vaudeville performance: they were fast-paced, explosive, and memorable. On some of Macon's recordings, the sectional shifts can be jarring, coming with little or no transition. For example, "He Won the Heart of My Sarah Jane" opens furiously with an allegro fiddle tune ("Black Eyed Susie"), and moments later, eases into a skipping, mid-tempo waltz in a radically different mood. Similarly, "Bile Them Cabbage Down" cycles through multiple, distinctive sections: a fast verse that ends with a *ritardando*; a hard-driving, *forte* chorus; and a spoken word section with a short joke. Other Macon recordings, such as "The Bible's True" and "Backwater Blues," are essentially medleys, pieced together from several musical and spoken word fragments and featuring sudden shifts in style within the recordings.

Perhaps no recording, however, illustrates Macon's penchant for abrupt stylistic shifts more than his "Pickaninny Lullaby Song," from 1927. Based on Edward Harrigan's 1884 minstrel composition "Black Picaninny," the song has no parallel in the hillbilly repertoire. Its rhetoric lies in musical theater, with its extreme musical gestures, harsh and repetitive dissonance, and jarring shifts in rhythm, meter, and key. The piece has three distinct sections: a lively, major-key instrumental in 12/8 that begins the piece; a brooding, minor-key verse in stop time in which the verse is doubled (at the unison) by the guitar and banjo (Musical Example 3); and a joyous string band section in common

time with vocal harmonies and a fiddle backdrop. The sharp stylistic contrasts in key, texture, meter, and mood, and the wide, sweeping vocal melody in the third section, suggest the rhetorical strategies of musical theater and vaudeville from which Macon drew much inspiration.⁴²

Musical Example 3. “Pickaninny Lullaby Song” (1927)

Voice

Hush, Mama! said don't you hear the ba-by cry - ing His

Vo.

eyes shine like a new sil - ver moon.

In his live appearances, whether on the vaudeville stage or in rural schoolhouses, Macon also liked to dazzle his audiences with banjo tricks and other demonstrations of physical skill, an important tactic of popular stage performers from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In her 1914 study of vaudeville, Caroline Caffin devotes a full chapter to the physical tricksters of the stage: acrobats and tumblers, contortionists, high-wire acts, strongmen, cowboys, boomerang artists, and pantomimes.⁴³ Trick musicians who flipped and twirled their instruments as they played, combining the finger dexterity of a trained musician with the coordination and balance of a circus performer, were an essential part of vaudeville.

⁴² Uncle Dave Macon, “Pickaninny Lullaby Song” (1927, Vo 5155). The song was composed by Edward Harrigan in 1884.

⁴³ Caffin, *Vaudeville: The Book*, 168–186.

Onstage, Macon frequently did banjo tricks, our knowledge of which comes from several sources. First, Macon's professional concert posters frequently boasted of his physical abilities, claiming that he "Handles The Banjo Like A Monkey Handles A Peanut" and could play two banjos simultaneously.⁴⁴ Second, during his appearance in the 1940 film *Grand Ole Opry*, Macon spins, flips, fans, and points his banjo like a gun (although this appearance may not fully capture his acrobatic skills given that he was nearly seventy years old at the time). Another source is Sam McGee, who recreated a portion of Macon's stage routine in a humorous film clip from the mid-1960s. McGee does his best impression of Uncle Dave: he strums the banjo high on the neck (over the fretboard), alternates rapidly between melodic thumb picking and full strums, wags his tongue gleefully, and occasionally bursts forth with joyous exclamations such as "Shout if you're happy!"⁴⁵ Sid Harkreader recalls that Macon "had a way of throwing his banjo under his leg and over his head and fanning it with his hat" while continuing to play; he also said that Macon "played two banjos at the same time," a trick that has never been fully explained.⁴⁶ Mary Louise Timmons, who saw Macon and Harkreader play at a

⁴⁴ The monkey with a peanut slogan comes from an undated Hatch Show Print concert poster located at the Country Music Hall of Fame archives in Nashville. The "two banjos" boast also appears in several places, including the article "Unusual Program Offered At Loew's," *Nashville Banner*, January 14, 1923.

⁴⁵ *Legends of Old-Time Music* (Cambridge, MA: Vestapol Productions, 2002, DVD).

⁴⁶ Sid Harkreader, transcription of audio interview by John Rumble, May 12, 1986. Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame.

schoolhouse in Shackle Island, Tennessee in the 1920s, recalled that Uncle Dave would “put his banjo on the floor and spin it around.”⁴⁷

Collector Robert Hyland, from Springfield, Ohio, saw Macon perform several times and recorded this vivid description, which includes many of the same tricks mentioned above:

During the last chorus of songs like ‘Jonah and the Whale’ or ‘Take Me Back To My Old Carolina Home’ he would rise from his chair, take the hat from his head and slap the felt against the strings, holding the banjo by the neck while he went into a clog or buck and wing dance around the instrument and singing all the while. As if that were not enough he would then sometimes do a routine he called ‘Uncle Dave Handles a Banjo Like a Monkey Handles a Peanut.’ He would lift one leg off the floor, toss the banjo under it, under the other leg, twirl it, toss it up, sling it behind him, plunking it, with his foot giving out its loud rhythmic stomp.⁴⁸

To facilitate his tricks Macon used a light, open-backed banjo (i.e., without a resonator) that weighed only three or four pounds. Banjo scholar and Macon interpreter Jeremy Stephens notes that Macon played an open-back Gibson rb1 banjo—probably custom-ordered from Gibson—equipped with a square dial coordinator rod (like the Vega banjo). The single coordinator rod on the back allowed him to grab the instrument easily without touching the strings, thus facilitating his tricks.⁴⁹ Dorris Macon noted that his father frequently practiced his banjo tricks and leg kicks in front of a mirror at home.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Mary Louise Timmons, “Fond Memory of Uncle Dave Macon,” *Nashville Banner*, August 26, 1986.

⁴⁸ Joe Nicholas, “The Grand-Daddy of American Country Music,” *Caravan* 18 (August–September 1959): 36–43.

⁴⁹ Stephens believes that Macon custom-ordered the instrument setup from Gibson since the Gibson rb1 normally had a twin, rather than a single, coordinator rod. Phone interview with Jeremy Stephens, July 2013.

⁵⁰ Dorris Macon, interview (1977).

Conclusion

By all accounts, Macon's live appearances were, for those who saw them, riveting, life-transforming experiences not easily forgotten. In the words of Gordon Boger, "I have never seen a performer who could capture an audience and arouse it to a high pitch of enthusiasm the way that he could." Bluegrass musician Bill Monroe, who traveled with Macon in tent shows throughout the South, called him the "finest showman in the world."⁵¹

Macon succeeded due to his distinctive blend of variety, showmanship, comedy, and force of personality, all of which were partly explained by his background in vaudeville, minstrelsy and related genres and by his experiences as a traveling performer in the countryside. The thousands of performances he gave taught him to work hard to earn the attention of audiences. He developed a strong personality and a variety of personas, showmanship tricks, and jokes to keep them interested. Macon's experience as a live performer positioned him well to become a successful country music radio and recording artist in the 1920s.

⁵¹ Patsy B. Weiler, "Monroe plans tribute to Dave Macon" *Nashville Banner*, July 7, 1993.

Chapter 6: Macon's Repertoire and Banjo Playing

I'se a gwine [goin'] to the hills for to buy me a jug of
brandy/ Gwine to give it all to Mandy/ Keep her good and
drunk and woozy all the time, time, time / Keep her good
and drunk and woozy all the time

—Uncle Dave Macon, “Keep My Skillet Good and
Greasy”¹

We have seen how Uncle Dave Macon's live performances reflected his background in nineteenth-century stage music. Let us turn now to his repertoire and banjo playing, which also showed deep ties to nineteenth-century music. Macon's repertoire stemmed from two main traditions: the black and white “folk” music of rural Middle Tennessee, and the professional urban stage or “popular” music of Nashville. This dual grounding in the music of the countryside and the urban popular stage came from his unique background. Macon was raised in rural Rutherford County, later lived in a downtown Nashville hotel, and subsequently spent over two decades as a freight hauler traversing the rural interior of Tennessee and accumulating scores of songs and jokes. As a result, by 1920 Macon had, in the words of biographer Charles Wolfe, “served a thirty-five-year apprenticeship” in two major musical traditions.²

The depth and breadth of Macon's traditional, folk song repertoire was nearly unmatched among hillbilly artists. It included fiddle-and-banjo dance tunes, African-American folk songs, and ballads of English and American origin. In addition to folk

¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy” (1924, Vo 14848).

² Wolfe, “Uncle Dave Macon” in *Stars of Country Music*, 40–42, 50.

songs, Macon's repertoire included dozens of popular, nineteenth-century stage songs that had originally appeared in minstrel, vaudeville, musical comedy, and Broadway shows, and that, in most cases, were previously published as sheet music. Examining Guthrie Meade's *Country Music Sources*, which contains all pre-1920-composed songs recorded by hillbilly artists before the Second World War, one is struck by the high number of stage-derived songs that Macon was the only hillbilly musician to record: "The Old Man's Drunk Again," "Carve That Possum," "For Goodness Sakes Don't Say I Told You," "Since Baby's Learned To Talk," "They're After Me," and many others.³ Approximately fifty percent of his repertoire derived from popular stage music sources (i.e., vaudeville, minstrel show, etc.), a higher percentage than any other country musician of his era.⁴ This high percentage of stage repertoire was a function of both Macon's relatively old age and first-hand exposure to traveling minstrels and vaudeville performers during the 1880s.

³ Uncle Dave Macon, "The Old Man's Drunk Again" (1926, Vo 15441), "Carve That Possum" (1927, Vo 5151), "For Goodness Sakes Don't Say I Told You (1929, Vo 5374)," "Since Baby's Learned To Talk" (1929, Br 362), and "They're After Me" (1938, BB B-8422). These songs are listed in Guthrie T. Meade, *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁴ This percentage is my own rough estimate based on an examination of Macon's discography. Other country artists of the period, such as Fiddlin' John Carson, the Carter Family, Jimmie Rodgers, and Charlie Poole, had a lower share of nineteenth-century stage material in their repertoires, and a higher share of either traditional folk or recently composed songs.


The Folk/Popular Dichotomy

This division of Macon's repertoire into two major categories—folk and popular—presents some practical and conceptual problems. First, sorting Macon's repertory into two broad categories does not adequately capture the diversity of his songs. As a result, I have included several additional subcategories. For the rural folk songs (i.e., songs circulated through oral tradition), I distinguish between African-American secular folk songs and fiddle-and-banjo string band music, the latter a multiracial tradition that by the 1920s was carried on mainly by white musicians. For the popular songs (i.e., songs derived from northern professional songwriters or popular stage performers), I subdivide the songs into antebellum minstrel songs, Tin Pan Alley "southern-themed" songs, jubilee songs, and "coon" songs. I discuss comedic vaudeville songs in a separate section. Finally, I examine gospel music, which comprised a significant portion of Macon's repertoire, separately, since gospel could be considered either folk or popular music, as it spread both through oral tradition and through commercial songbooks (see Table 3). Other types of rural folk music, such as blues or traditional English ballads, are omitted in the discussion since they constituted only a tiny slice of Macon's repertoire.⁵

⁵ An example of blues or proto-blues in Macon's repertoire is "I've Got the Mourning Blues" (1926, Vo 15319); an example of a traditional Scottish-English ballad is "Old Maid's Last Hope (A Burglar Song)" (1924, Vo 14850).

Table 3. Uncle Dave Macon’s Main Song Categories

Folk	Popular
African-American	Ante-bellum minstrel
String Band	Tin Pan Alley
Blues, ballads (omitted)	Comic vaudeville
Gospel	Jubilee and “Coon”
	Gospel



Second, the folk-popular binary is problematic on a conceptual level. Many of Macon’s songs (e.g., “Uncle Ned”) had commercial or stage origins, but could also be considered folk songs since they circulated in oral tradition before Macon encountered them. Conversely, other Macon songs, published in the nineteenth century as sheet music (e.g., “Old Dan Tucker”) had earlier folk origins. Popular stage performers—especially blackface minstrels—collected songs, dances, and musical styles from folk sources, adapted the material for the stage, and sometimes published the songs as sheet music. Over time, such songs returned to oral tradition, and country and blues artists like Macon subsequently learned and recorded them. This cycle of borrowing, modification, and reuse makes sorting out the origins of many songs nearly impossible, and renders the popular/folk distinction somewhat arbitrary.⁶

In the case of Macon, sorting out a song’s lineage—whether folk or popular—is complicated by the fact that he treated all of his songs, whatever their origin, as folk material: he changed song titles, added new verses, and combined texts from multiple sources. Even songs of newer vintage, such as “Ain’t It A Shame To Keep Your Honey

⁶ The folk-popular problem is discussed by Bill C. Malone in *Singing Cowboys and Musical Mountaineers: Southern Culture and the Roots of Country Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 43–51.

Out In The Rain,” composed by John Queen and Walter Wilson and published in 1901, were subject to radical alteration and reinterpretation by Macon. In his 1926 recording of this song, he stitched together the music and lyrics from multiple sources. He omitted the original verses but left the song’s original chorus, both melody and words, intact, but with a simplified harmonic accompaniment and changed rhythm. For the verse, he used a different melody altogether, close to the traditional tune “Stackalee.” He also inserted new lyrics for the verses. Such compositional or folk arrangement techniques make it difficult to sort out the origins and sources of some of Macon’s songs, or to determine whether he learned the songs through rural folk tradition, sheet music, or professional stage musicians.⁷

For purposes of this study, however, I define “popular song” as material that was commonly played by professional, urban entertainers in the nineteenth century and was published as sheet music, and “folk song” as material that was transmitted orally, especially in rural areas, and not published.

⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, “Ain’t It A Shame To Keep Your Honey Out In The Rain” (1926, Vo 15488).

Overview of Macon's Repertoire

Our main source of knowledge for Macon's repertoire is his records, principally the 180 or so commercial sides he recorded and released during the 1920s and 1930s. Yet Macon's commercial discography provides a somewhat incomplete picture of his full catalog, for several reasons. First, many of Macon's recordings are medleys or composites that combine two or more songs under a single title. One example is "Papa's Billie Goat," which interposes the fiddle tune "Sugar in the Gourd." Another is "Tennessee Jubilee," a track that Macon stitched together with excerpts from two songs, "Turkey In The Straw" and "Ain't Nobody's Business," neither of which appear in the title.⁸

Second, in a number of cases, Macon did not record or release his concert songs. Dean Tudor contends that Macon "rarely recorded his favorite songs, preferring to perform them before a live audience."⁹ While probably overstated, it is true that many songs from Macon's live shows never made it onto commercial disc.¹⁰ Collector and fan Robert Hyland compiled a list of dozens of songs that Macon performed in concert but never recorded.¹¹ Other Macon songs remained on the cutting room floor of the recording studio. "Little Sally Waters," "Let's All Go Home," and "I Wish I Had My Whiskey

⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, "Papa's Billie Goat" (1924, Vo 14848), "Tennessee Jubilee" (1929, Br 355).

⁹ Dean Tudor and Nancy Tudor, *Grass Roots Music* (Littleton, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1979), 137. Tudor does not cite a source for this claim.

¹⁰ Rinzler and Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*, 21.

¹¹ The list is presented in Rinzler and Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*, 21–22.

Back” were all rejected by the record labels, whether due to technical flaws or perhaps record company doubts about their marketability. One can imagine that Gennett considered “Eli Green’s Cakewalk,” which Macon recorded in August 1934 but never released, to be somewhat old-fashioned or out-of-step with the hillbilly brand, as the song had been a hit for banjoist Vess Ossman way back in 1904.¹²

To gather a fairly complete picture of Macon’s repertoire, therefore, I have consulted a combination of sources: Tony Russell’s discography (which includes the names of unreleased tracks); eyewitness accounts of his shows (such as one by Robert Hyland); newspaper articles that mention song titles (such as a series of detailed articles from Birmingham, Alabama in 1925); Macon’s 1950 home recordings, which consist of around twenty songs, most of which he never recorded commercially; and a small batch of Macon’s Grand Ole Opry recordings, dating from 1939 or later.¹³ My definition of Macon’s repertoire is thus broad and all-encompassing: 1) songs Macon recorded, whether commercially or non-commercially; 2) songs Macon performed on the Grand Ole Opry; and 3) songs Macon performed in concert.

¹² Russell’s *Country Music Records* shows these songs were recorded but never released.

¹³ Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921–1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Robert Hyland’s list is re-printed in Ralph Rinzler and Norm Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: A Bio-Discography*, JEMF Special Series, No. 3 (Los Angeles: The John Edwards Memorial Foundation, 1975). Newspaper articles on Macon’s Birmingham run appear in Chapter 4. The home recordings and Opry performances can be found on *Uncle Dave Macon: Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy* (Bear Family Records, 2004), CD boxed set.

Macon's Repertoire by Song Category

Macon learned his songs, most of which had nineteenth-century stage or folk origins, through a combination of oral and written sources. According to his son, he was not able to read musical notation, either standard or shape note.¹⁴ Nonetheless, he gathered many songs from written sources. As discussed in Chapter 1, Macon's older sisters, Annie and Lou, were skilled pianists who helped him learn music by playing through popular sheet music.¹⁵ Macon owned gospel songbooks by James D. Vaughan, from which he may have drawn some lyrics (see "Gospel Songs" below).¹⁶ In addition, Macon may have found material in songsters, minstrel songbooks, and banjo tutors. For instance (as discussed in Chapter 7), Macon's 1926 recording of "Uncle Ned" includes verses apparently copied, word-for-word, from the 1857 minstrel songbook, *Ethiopian Serenader's Own Book*.¹⁷

The bulk of Macon's musical education, of course, came not from reading books, but from hearing and emulating the sounds around him. As discussed in previous chapters, he absorbed material from professional entertainers who boarded at his parent's

¹⁴ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

¹⁵ See "Macon's Early Years" in Chapter 1 for more information about Annie and Lou Macon. According to Dorris Macon, Uncle Dave did not read music himself. Audio interview by Charles K. Wolfe. Dorris Macon Interview #1, Charles Wolfe Collection (no tape number), Center for Popular Music, MTSU, n.d.

¹⁶ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

¹⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, "Uncle Ned" (1926, Vo 15450). *Ethiopian Serenaders, Ethiopian Serenader's Own Book* (Philadelphia, Fisher & Brother, 1857).

Nashville hotel, and from African-American laborers with whom he worked both on his farm and in his freight hauling business.

Macon also picked up songs from commercial phonograph records. According to son Eston, he enjoyed listening to—and actually learned material from—records by minstrel comedy groups such as Amos n’ Andy and Moran and Mack (the “Two Black Crows”). Macon owned gospel records by the Vaughan Family, a group that recorded throughout the 1920s. He also listened to contemporary hillbilly artists. For instance, he admired the singing of the McCravy Brothers, a gospel group that, like Macon, recorded for Brunswick Records’ “Songs from Dixie” series; he considered them excellent religious singers and even wrote down words to some of their songs. In addition, Macon listened to records by Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family, and Riley Puckett.¹⁸

Thus, Macon learned his songs from a variety of sources: sheet music, hymnals, records, and performances by professional and amateur musicians throughout Middle Tennessee. The discussion below focuses on the primary types of songs played by Macon: African-American folk songs, string band tunes, antebellum minstrel songs, sentimental southern and Tin Pan Alley songs, jubilee and coon songs, and gospel music.

Black folk music

The origins of much of Macon’s repertoire can be found in African-American folk songs. The strong African-American character of Macon’s repertoire is actually not that surprising. During the mid-nineteenth century in Middle Tennessee, black and white musicians regularly interacted and exchanged music: on riverboats, along backwoods

¹⁸ Eston Macon, interview, MTSU (1982).

trade routes, at camp meetings, on plantations, and in towns and cities. In the process, they developed common styles and repertoire.¹⁹ White, southern musicians such as Macon absorbed African-American musical styles (e.g., blues and ragtime), repertoire (e.g., “Bile Dem Cabbage Down” and “Motherless Children”), and instrumentation (e.g., banjo and harmonica).²⁰

Macon, who reached maturity in the late 1880s, had many opportunities to learn direct from African-American musicians. By the late 1880s, Nashville had a large black population, especially to the west and south of the city. Macon likely heard black musicians perform in many contexts, including in the fields, at religious revival meetings, and, in downtown Nashville on the Cumberland River pier at First Avenue, where black sidewalk preachers and street singers often played.²¹ Living only two blocks from the river, he likely crossed paths with African-American stevedores and riverboat men who stopped at port. There, he might have learned a song such as “Rock About My Sara Jane,” which Alan Lomax described as perhaps “the best preserved specimen of a riverboat song yet discovered,” and which Macon recorded in 1927.²² As a child on his family farm in Warren County, he worked alongside former slaves. He once told a reporter, “I got all my songs from hearing colored folks sing at their work or when they was restin’

¹⁹ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 259.

²⁰ See Diane Pecknold, ed., *Hidden In the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

²¹ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 9.

²² Alan Lomax, *The Folk Songs of North America* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 516.

after work.” He also claimed that he had picked up the banjo from listening to the “darkies who used to work for my father.”²³

There is other evidence of Macon’s first-hand exposure to African-American folk music. In 1922, the black folklorist Thomas Talley published a collection of African-American secular tunes that he found in Middle Tennessee between 1900 and 1920. Charles Wolfe has noted that many textual and musical fragments in the collection match Macon’s recorded songs texts, suggesting direct contact with African-American musicians in the area.²⁴

A prime example of Macon’s borrowing of a black secular folk song is “Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy,” which he recorded at his first studio session in 1924. During his teenage years in Readyville, Macon befriended Tom Davis, a black man who worked at the Readyville Mill. Wolfe believes Davis may have taught Macon this song.²⁵ Indeed, it matches many of the features of early African-American secular folk song. First, the lyrics are rhythmic and repetitive, a standard feature of black folk songs, which tended to be improvised by singers who valued flexibility and variation over repeatability. The form is strophic with short banjo solos between each verse. The song uses a refrain—a repeated line following each verse that features the same music as the verse—rather than

²³ “Bijou Banjoist,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 13, 1925; and “Mountain Farmer, With Banjo, Plays Way Into Ranks of Vaudeville Stars,” *Birmingham News*, January 8, 1925.

²⁴ Thomas Washington Talley, *Thomas W. Talley’s Negro Folk Rhymes*, ed. Charles K. Wolfe, and Bill Ferreira (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1922; reprinted, 1991).

²⁵ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 9.

a chorus. Melodically, the tune is fairly flat with many repeated notes. The lyrics are rife with sexual innuendo, something also common in black folk songs: “I’s e a gwine to the hills for to buy me a jug of brandy/ Gwine to give it all to Mandy/ Keep her good and drunk and woozy all the time, time, time / Keep her good and drunk and woozy all the time.” The banjo imitates the voice in a call-and-response pattern, with groaning finger slides suggestive of the song’s sexual subtext.

“Death of John Henry (Steel Driving Man),” which tells the famous story of the black steel driver from West Virginia who tried to “beat” a steam drill in a contest of strength, also features characteristic elements of black folk songs. The form, melody, and single-note banjo slides all resemble “Keep My Skillet.” Other African-American folk songs recorded by Macon include “Down By The River,” “Wouldn’t Give Me Sugar In My Coffee,” “Over the Road I’m Bound To Go,” and “Run Nigger Run,” a slave song that appeared in antebellum minstrel songsters and referenced “paterols,” the “roaming southern patrols that monitored the comings and goings of slaves” (see Table 4).²⁶

²⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, “Death of John Henry (Steel Driving Man)” (1926, Vo 15320), “Down By The River” (1924, Vo 14849), “Wouldn’t Give Me Sugar In My Coffee” (1926, Vo 15440), “Over the Road I’m Bound To Go” (1928, Br 329), and “Run Nigger Run” (1925, Vo 15032). Information on the last-mentioned song was found in Claude H. Nolan, *Southerners in Slavery, Civil War, and Reconstruction* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2001), 55.

Table 4. Uncle Dave Macon’s African-American Folk Song Repertoire (selected)

Song Title	Recorded
“Down By The River”	1924
“Run Nigger Run”	1925
“Bile Them Cabbage Down”	1924
“Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy”	1924
“Wouldn’t Give Me Sugar In My Coffee”	1926
“Way Down The Old Plank Road”	1926
“Death of John Henry”	1926
“Rock About My Saro Jane”	1927
“Over the Road I’m Bound To Go”	1928
“Buddy, Won’t You Roll Down The Line”	1928

String Band Music

Throughout his career, Macon was part of another folk music tradition with African-American roots that, by the 1920s, had become associated with rural, white musicians: the country string band. Macon participated in country string bands as a banjoist, singer, and square dance caller. As a young man, he was a member of the Readyville String Band. In 1924 and 1925, he recorded such fiddle and banjo standards as “Arkansas Traveler” and “Girl I Left Behind” with Sid Harkreader.²⁷ In May 1927, Macon and his band, the Fruit Jar Drinkers, which had banjo, fiddle, and guitar, recorded some of the most celebrated string band music in the hillbilly canon in a session that included “Sail Away Ladies” and “Hop High Ladies, the Cake’s All Dough.”²⁸ These

²⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, “Arkansas Traveler” (1925, Vo 15192), “Girl I Left Behind” (1925, Vo 15034).

²⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, “Sail Away Ladies” (1927, Vo 5155), “Hop High Ladies, the Cake’s All Dough” (1927, Vo 5154).

recordings displayed Macon’s deep familiarity with the fiddle-and-banjo dance idiom, as well as his skill as a banjo accompanist (see Table 5).

Table 5. Dave Macon’s String Band Repertoire (selected)²⁹

Song Title	Year Recorded
“Soldier’s Joy”	1924
“The Girl I Left Behind Me”	1925
“Arkansas Traveler”	1925
“Sourwood Mountain”	1926
“Haul The Woodpile Down”	1927
“Rock About My Sara Jane”	1927
“Hop High Ladies, The Cake’s All Dough”	1927
“The Cat On the Gray Tennessee Farm”	1927
“Sleepy Lou”	1927
“Bake That Chicken Pie”	1927
“Walk, Tom Wilson, Walk”	1927
“Tom and Jerry”	1927
“Go Along Mule”	1927
“Rabbit in the Pea Patch”	1927
“Turkey In The Straw”	1929 (as “Tennessee Jubilee“)

Hillbilly string bands specialized in the rollicking, spirited dance songs, mostly inherited from Scotch-Irish settlers, which flourished in rural communities throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Standards included “Soldier’s Joy,” “Old Joe Clark,” and “Sallie Gooden.” As mentioned in Chapter 2, southern fiddlers and string bands also adapted many nineteenth-century minstrel songs, such as “Angelina Baker” and “Buffalo Gals.” Further, the format and instrumentation of the early country string band—fiddle, banjo, and guitar, and sometimes the bones, mandolin, or other percussive

²⁹ Only the 1927 recordings feature the Fruit Jar Drinkers; on the others, Sid Harkreader accompanies Macon on fiddle or guitar.

instruments—was similar to mid-nineteenth-century minstrel troupes, which used fiddle, banjo, bones, and tambourine as their core instruments. Hillbilly string bands, however, owed as much to African-American folk music traditions as they did to the minstrel show, which was itself an imitation of black folk traditions. Black fiddlers and banjo players were originally leading exponents of string band music, although, by the 1920s, the genre was spearheaded by white musicians, as southern black musicians gravitated toward blues music and the guitar.³⁰

Macon's May 1927 string band sessions, as a member of the Fruit Jar Drinkers, were part of a large body of string band recordings made by hillbilly groups in the 1920s. The first wave of hillbilly musicians included such white string bands as Fiddlin' Powers and Family, Charlie Poole & the North Carolina Ramblers, Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters, Earl Johnson and His Clodhoppers, and The Skillet Lickers, the popular North Georgia string band who recorded for Columbia. While only speculation, it is possible that Brunswick arranged Macon's string band sessions partly to capitalize on the recent popularity of the Skillet Lickers.

Even by the standards of 1920s string band music, Macon and the Fruit Jar Drinkers' captured a spontaneous and joyful spirit; their recordings represent some of the most energetic, spirited, and virtuosic string band music of the era. The group featured Sam McGee on guitar, Mazy Todd and Kirk McGee on fiddles, and Macon on banjo and lead vocals. All of the songs are traditional string-band tunes or square dance numbers

³⁰ See Tony Thomas, "Why African Americans Put the Banjo Down," in *Hidden In the Mix: The African American Presence in Country Music*, Diane Pecknold, ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

from the nineteenth century with fast tempos and nonsense lyrics. On several tunes, such as “Tom and Jerry” and “Sleepy Lou,” Macon provides square dance “calls,” displaying his skill in this traditional art form.³¹ Macon’s 1927 string band recordings represent—to many old-time musicians—the definitive recorded versions of some string band tunes, which partly explains his legendary status within the contemporary old-time music community.

Antebellum Minstrel Songs

A number of Macon’s songs came from the minstrel show repertory of the mid-nineteenth-century, including “Old Dan Tucker” and “Jordan Is a Hard Road To Travel.”³² Originally, these songs were likely either folk songs or imitations of folk songs. Bill Malone defines the source material for early minstrel songs: “Minstrel music was an amalgam of all the rural folk styles (Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, German, and African) and urban popular forms to which the minstrels were exposed, plus the original creations they were busily producing.”³³

Early minstrel songs have a distinctive musical profile. Melodies are usually narrow in range, with a flat melodic contour and frequent repeated notes. They avoid the *bel canto* melodic arch and smooth rhythms characteristic of European (and American) parlor music, and instead, favor short, clipped phrases, and uneven rhythms.

³¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “Tom and Jerry” (1927, Vo 5165), and “Sleepy Lou” (1927, Vo 5156).

³² Uncle Dave Macon, “Old Dan Tucker” (1925, Vo 15033), “Jordan Is a Hard Road To Travel” (1927, Vo 5153).

³³ Malone, *Southern Music*, 20.

Harmonically, early minstrel tunes are mostly accessible and diatonic. Such tunes as Dan Emmett's "Old Dan Tucker" have a strongly monophonic character, pointing to the roots of many early minstrel songs in solo fiddle playing or single-line banjo playing rather than harmonic instruments such as the piano or guitar.³⁴

Macon's approach to early minstrel material is well-represented by "Go On, Nora Lee," an unissued test pressing that he made in 1930 (later discovered and released by Charles Wolfe). Mark Wilson writes that the song is "almost certainly personalized from the minstrel tradition," but also has stylistic connections to the black folk banjo tradition. The lyrics consist of couplets recycled from other minstrel sources. Further, the refrain, "All night long and I couldn't get away," is similar to published minstrel songs, and was also a type of shouted chant used during minstrel walkarounds.³⁵ Macon's early minstrel songs are rhythmically vibrant. His solo recordings sometimes evoke a four-part minstrel band—especially the sounds of bones—through their syncopations and strong rhythmic accents. "Sho' Fly, Don't Bother Me," a song composed by Billy Reeves and Frank Campbell and published in 1869, provides an example of such accents in Macon's recorded work.³⁶

Macon favored lesser-known blackface minstrel songs (in the studio at least), such as "Take Me Home, Poor Julia," "Walk, Tom Wilson, Walk," and "Josephus

³⁴ The character of early minstrel tunes is discussed by Jon Finson in *Voices that Are Gone*, 178–82, among other sources.

³⁵ Kerry Blech, *Old Time Music: The Essential Collection*, CD liner notes (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Rounder Records, 2003), quotations from Mark Wilson.

³⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, "Sho' Fly, Don't Bother Me" (1926, Vo 15448).

Orange Blossom” (retitled “Sassy Sam”). He avoided the well-known and often more sentimental Stephen Foster repertory, such as “Old Folks at Home,” and “Oh Susanna,” songs recorded by dozens of early country musicians. One exception is “Uncle Ned,” a well-known Foster song from the 1840s (see Table 6).

Table 6. Dave Macon’s Antebellum Blackface Minstrel Songs (selected):

Song Title	Decade of Origin	Year Recorded
“Turkey In The Straw”	1830s	1930s
“Stop That Knocking At My Door”	1840s	1926
“Jordan Is A Hard Road To Travel”	1840s/1850s	1927
“Old Dan Tucker”	1840s	1925
“Uncle Ned”	1840s	1926
“Listen To The Mocking Bird” (“Watermelon on the Vine”)	1850s	1925
“I Ain’t Got Long To Stay”	ca. 1850s	1926
“Shoo Fly, Don’t Bother Me”	1860s	1926

Sentimental Southern Songs

Jon Finson has written about the “minstrel lullaby,” a late-era minstrel genre that achieved popularity during the 1870s. While Stephen Foster’s songs may have subtly protested slavery by humanizing his subject (e.g., “My Old Kentucky Home”), the minstrel lullaby of the 1870s glossed over the human tragedy of slavery and mythologized the South as a lost rural paradise. In this new breed of plantation song, prominent examples of which included William Shakespeare Hays’s “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” (1871) and James A. Bland’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” (1878), the black protagonist pines for the days of slavery. This romanticizing of slavery reflected whites’ less sympathetic attitude towards African-Americans a decade after emancipation, and mirrors, in song, the era’s often reactionary and violent responses to

shifting racial hierarchies. Minstrel lullabies were not, however, simply racist, but functioned as nostalgic symbols of an “imaginary agrarian past.”³⁷ Historian Bill Malone argues that, in popular songs of the late nineteenth century, nostalgia for slavery probably indicated a yearning for a simpler, pre-industrial past more than a desire to return to slavery.³⁸ While true, such songs also perhaps signified a longing for a time when the racial hierarchies of slavery were legally enforced.

It is perhaps ironic, then, that minstrel lullabies were generally written by professional northern songwriters, many of whom were black. Such songs marked the first stage of Tin Pan Alley, a term referring to the New York publishing industry, which was known for churning out a particular type of song—sentimental and heart-tugging ballads—starting in the 1870s. Some of the most popular nineteenth-century Tin Pan Alley songs included “Down By the Old Mill Stream,” “Baggage Coach Ahead,” “Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane,” and “When You and I Were Young, Maggie.” The sentimental southern Tin Pan Alley song, which achieved tremendous popularity in the South, spread initially through sheet music and minstrel and vaudeville theater performances. Such songs circulated in oral culture decades after being published as sheet music, a fact verified by examining Macon’s, and other hillbilly artists’, song catalogs from the 1920s (see Table 7).³⁹

³⁷ Finson, *The Voices That Are Gone*, 207–208.

³⁸ Malone, *Southern Music*, 21–23.

³⁹ Norm Cohen discusses the dissemination of popular songs in the South in “Roots of Country,” 176–80. For examples of popular songs adopted by early country musicians, see Meade, *Country Music Sources*, “Part II. Songs,” 110.

Table 7. Uncle Dave Macon’s Sentimental Southern and Tin Pan Alley songs (selected)

Song Title	Year Recorded
“The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane”	1925
“Down By the Old Mill Stream”	1925
“In the Good Old Summer Time”	1926
“I’se Gwine Back to Dixie”	1927
“Darling Zelma Lee”	1929
“Over The Mountain”	1929
“Wait Till The Clouds Roll By”	1938

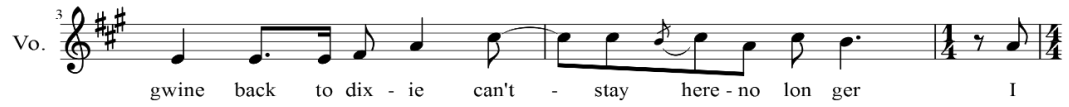
Macon performed and recorded a number of sentimental songs about the South, including “I’se Gwine Back to Dixie” and “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane.”⁴⁰ The popular song, “I’se Gwine Back to Dixie” (Musical Example 4), composed by C. A. White and published in 1874, was widely disseminated years before Macon likely encountered it, appearing in minstrel songsters (i.e., pocket-sized songbooks) such as *Gus William’s Olympic Songster* (1875) and *Haverly’s Colored Minstrel Songster* (1879). The song’s lyrics, like those of “Little Old Log Cabin In the Lane,” contain the musings of an aged, former slave who longs for “the old plantation.” Macon’s recording follows the published version in music and lyrics. Nonetheless, as always, Macon’s stamps the song with his own personality, adding an original third verse that rejoices over the culinary delights of the South:

I miss my hog and hominy, my pumpkin and red gravy
 My appetite is fading, so says old Uncle Davey.
 If my friends forsake me, I pray the Lord to take me.
 My heart’s turned back to Dixie, and I must go.


⁴⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, “I’se Gwine Back to Dixie” (1927, Vo 5157), “The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane” (1924, Vo 14864).

Musical Example 4. "I'se Gwine Back to Dixie" (1927)

Voice 
I'se gwine back to dix - ie, no more I'se gwine to wan - der - I'se a -

Vo. 
gwine back to dix - ie can't - stay here - no lon ger I

Vo. 
miss the old plan - ta - tion, - my home and my re - la - tion My

Vo. 
heart's turned back to dix - ie and I must go I'se

Vo. 
gwine back to dix - ie I'se a go - in' back to dix - ie I'se a -

Vo. 
go - ing where the or - ange bloss-oms grow I hear the chil-dren call-ing I

Vo. 
see the sad tears fall - ing my - heart's turned back to dix - ie and I must go

Another sentimental Tin Pan Alley song recorded by Macon was “In the Good Old Summer Time” (Musical Example 5).⁴¹ The song, which celebrated small-town, rural life but avoided references to slavery, achieved currency among blackface performers in the late nineteenth century and was published in minstrel songbooks.⁴² Written by composer Ben Shields and lyricist George “Honey Boy” Evans and published in 1902, “In the Good Old Summer Time” is a lilting, triple-meter waltz with an arpeggiated melody ranging a full octave. Such meter and range was uncharacteristic for Macon, and was far removed from the earthier early minstrel style discussed above. Macon recorded the song twice: first in 1926, and again in 1938 as the parody “Summertime On the Beeno Line.”⁴³

⁴¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “In the Good Old Summer Time” (1926, Vo 15441).


⁴² For instance, it appeared in Paskman, *Blackface and Music*, 54.

⁴³ Uncle Dave Macon, “Summertime On the Beeno Line” (1938, BB B-7779).

Musical Example 5. “In the Good Old Summer Time” (1926)

Original pitch: approx. B major (probably capo 4th fret). Swing feel.

Voice



In the good ol' sum - mer time, it was on the Bee - no line.

9

Vc.



Ducked my head out at the win-dow to kiss that ba - by of mine. The

17

Vc.



train it runned so quick and fast I missed that ba-by of mine. I

25

Vc.



kissed a cow ten miles a - way in the good ole' - sum - mer time.

“Jubilee” and “Coon” Songs

The minstrel song evolved during the 1880s and 1890s into two new subtypes: the “jubilee” song and the “coon” song. Both genres represented an attempt by songwriters to create more “realistic” representations of African-Americans. As Jon Finson notes, the image of African-Americans as either “religious curiosity” or “violent urban antagonist” replaced the image of the happy or nostalgic former slave in popular minstrel songs of the era.⁴⁴

The first image—“religious curiosity”—is found in the jubilee song, a type of

⁴⁴ Finson, *The Voices That Are Gone*, 201.

popular song with superficial connections to the slave spiritual, a song type that was familiar to northern audiences by the 1870s. Jubilees employed metaphoric imagery of freedom and salvation combined with the standard minstrel lyrical tropes; the result was essentially a parody of black religious folk music. Many jubilees also featured call-and-response patterns like the spiritual. Notable examples of the jubilee genre included Henry Clay Work's "Kingdom Coming" (1862) and James Bland's "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers!" (1879).⁴⁵

Guthrie Meade devotes an entire section in his discography to jubilee songs, suggesting their favored status among hillbilly musicians.⁴⁶ Macon recorded several jubilees, perhaps the best known of which is "Rise When the Rooster Crows," a song from the 1880s.⁴⁷ The song's theme is "the old rural home"; like "Golden Slippers," it nostalgically pays tribute to the rural South, and is infused with religious overtones. Macon begins his 1926 recording with a banjo instrumental that he calls "Sweet Golden Daisies," a bucolic title that is fitting since the melody resembles the tune of the famous nineteenth-century lament, "Home Sweet Home." Next, in a short monologue, Macon tells the listener that he will present "something from the land of hog and hominy, pumpkin and possum, where whiskey is made out of corn, and women don't smell like talcum powder." He then sings the title song, "Rise When the Rooster Crows,"

⁴⁵ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁶ See Meade, *Country Music Sources*, "Jubilee Songs," 572–79.

⁴⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, "Rise When the Rooster Crows" (1926, Vo 15321). Although Meade did not find a printed record of the song, he believes it was composed sometime during the 1880s. Meade, *Country Music Sources*, 576.

employing light minstrel dialect (“I’se a-goin’ back South where the sun shine hot”) with pseudo-religious imagery (“Don’t let old Satan try to fool you/For the gates ‘ell be closed and you can’t get through”).

The flip side of the jubilee was the “coon” song, a popular genre that shifted minstrel song lyrics from the plantation to the city, and often portrayed African-Americans according to negative violent stereotypes. As popular music, the coon song, which superficially exploited the rhythms and style of ragtime, flourished during the 1890s, and was propagated by both white and black songwriters.⁴⁸

Unlike Stephen Foster minstrel songs of the 1850s that portrayed slaves in a more sympathetic manner, or the jubilee minstrel songs of the 1870s that playfully satirized the spiritual, coon songs had a nastier racial edge. Violent, urban scenes of crap-shooting, jealous rivalries, and razor fights replaced earlier minstrel imagery of “happy” ex-slaves; thus, one mythology substituted for another. Hapless and unthreatening rural characters such as Jim Crow and Uncle Tom gave way to a more physical, aggressive, urban protagonist who combined Zip Coon’s foppish dress with African-American outlaw characters such as John Hardy and Stagger Lee. The language of coon songs—starting with the term “coon,” a racial epithet for black Americans—reinforced their noxious racial tone. Ironically, African-American songwriters and minstrels played a leading role

⁴⁸ While the “coon” designation was applied to popular songs as early as 1880, the craze for coon songs did not occur until the mid-1890s with the introduction of ragtime elements and the spread of ragtime to theater shows. Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 11–12.

in popularizing coon songs; “All Coons Look Alike To Me,” by black composer Ernest Hogan, was among the first major hits in the genre.

Musically, coon songs displayed surface similarities to ragtime—most notably, the use of syncopation in many of the songs—although, according to Brandi Neal, “fundamental differences existed . . . in form, style, and mood between the two genres.”⁴⁹ To white audiences of the time, however, coon songs and ragtime both epitomized black musical style. Coon songs were popularized by turn-of-the-century stage performers, sometimes known as “coon shouters,” who sang in loud, untrained voices. Initially, most coon shouters were white women, such as May Irwin and Clarice Vance, although the term was also applied to black singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Occasionally, the term was used for men, such as the African-American singer Charles Wright.⁵⁰

Macon resembled such artists in his repertory and loud and aggressive vocal style. The following is a partial list of Macon’s recordings that could be deemed jubilees or coon songs, based on the title, subject matter, composer, and musical style (see Table 8).

Table 8. Uncle Dave Macon’s Jubilee and Coon Songs (selected)

Macon Recording	Published Title	Pub. Date	Composer
“One More River To Cross” (1935)	“One More River To Cross”	1877	C. R. Blackman
“The Coon That Had The Razor” (1928)	“The Coon That Had The Razor”	1879/1885	William F. Quown, Sam Lucas,
“New Coon in Town” (1929)	“New Coon in Town”	1883	Paul Allen

⁴⁹ Brandi A. Neal, *The Grove Dictionary of American Music* (2d. edition, ed. Charles Hiroshi Garrett), “Coon Song,” 399.

⁵⁰ Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 3.

“Rise When the Rooster Crows” (1926)	NA	1880s	unknown
“My Girl’s A High Born Lady” (1926)	“My Gal Is a High Born Lady”	1896	Barney Fagan
“Mister Johnson” (1929)	“Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose”	1896	Ben Harney
“I Don’t Care If I Never Wake Up” (1926)	“I Don’t Care If I Never Wake Up”	1899	Paul Knox
“Ain’t It A Shame To Keep Your Honey Out In The Rain” (1926)	“Ain’t Dat A Shame”	1901	John Queen, Walter Wilson

“I Don’t Care If I Never Wake Up,” recorded by Macon in 1926, typifies the sort of coon song recorded by Macon.⁵¹ Like most coon songs, it trades in vicious stereotypes of African-Americans as lazy, dishonest, and thieving. In spite of the lamentable lyrics, it provides a brilliant platform for Macon’s dramatic and expressive performance style. The song’s main character is a Zip Coon-like figure who dreams of being rich and running for political office. The verses and chorus alternate between the third-person perspective of a narrator, and the first person perspective of the main character, which provides Macon an opportunity for dramatic interpretation. In each sub-section of the song, Macon subtly shifts his accent and vocal tone—in addition to the rhythm and meter—to indicate the change in perspective. Macon begins the recording with a short monologue, declaring that he will perform a “hot run on the banjo.” Following his banjo run, he gives a funny imitation of a female voice, saying, “Oh my, I’m in love, whoa shucks!” Then, he launches into the main song, featuring a new tempo, rhythm, and meter. Verse 1 gives the frame for the story: “There’s a certain yellow coon in this town . . . he got drunk, went to

⁵¹ “I Don’t Care If I Never Wake Up” (1926, Vo 15446).

sleep, dreamed he was rich . . . and to himself he talked.” From there, the song alternates between first-person perspective in the chorus, and third-person perspective in the verses:

Verse: “[He] went to sleep on election day, dreamed he was a candidate.”
Chorus : “Well, I don't care if never wake up!”

Coon songs, like minstrelsy in general, represented a “cunning amalgam of appreciation and mockery.”⁵² While not all coon songs were derogatory and racist, the term “coon” virtually disappeared from new popular songs by 1910, perhaps due to its overtly racist meanings.⁵³ It seems that by the mid-1920s, when Macon recorded his own versions of coon songs, such language was no longer as widely accepted within mainstream commercial entertainment. Even in country music—which obviously had a white, southern, working-class base of artists and fans—open displays of racism were less tolerated by industry leaders by the late 1920s. For instance, in a 1927 recording session, the sound engineer asked Macon to drop the “n-word” from a verse of “Go Along Mule,” to which he complied.⁵⁴ Also, by 1939, Macon dropped the epithet “coon” from his Grand Ole Opry appearances; “New Coon In Town” morphed into the de-racialized “New Dude In Town.”⁵⁵ Finally, evidence that derogatory racial attitudes were less accepted in country music by the 1930s, or were at least being pushed underground, is found in Macon’s fading from commercial relevance by the late 1920s or early 1930s.

⁵² Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 12.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵⁴ Kirk McGee, interview (Wolfe 00952).

⁵⁵ As heard in the 1939 Grand Ole Opry recording on *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy* (2004).

To be sure, the falling of his star was the result of many factors, including age, repertoire, and outdated musical style and instrumentation. Yet his passing from the limelight may have also been due to slowly changing racial politics, and particularly, Macon's association with an older, racialized minstrel culture that record executives and radio promoters were hoping to shed. With open displays of racism perhaps less viable economically, Macon's old-fashioned racial attitudes—and his repertoire, shaped by the minstrel show—no longer comported with the industry's desired image.

In the hands of white singers such as Macon, coon songs could be deeply offensive, and deliberately so. Yet it would be a mistake to discount the value of the genre simply because of its racially offensive aspects. Prominent black composers and performers such as Bob Cole, Ernest Hogan, and James Weldon and J. Rosamund Johnson started their careers writing or performing coon material. When interpreted by black artists such as Bert Williams and George Walker, the messages of coon songs could be mediated through an ironic play on the surface meaning of the words, turning the songs into subtle vehicles of subversion or protest. Brandi Neal argues that, despite the overtly stereotypical and racist lyrics, the songs were “delivered by comedians and accompanied by music, which, to some extent, sublimated its negative messages.”⁵⁶ Without letting coon song performers off the hook for promoting racist stereotypes, coon songs—like minstrel songs in general—served a comedic or dramatic purpose that extended beyond race.

⁵⁶ Neal, *Grove*, 399.

Macon no doubt gravitated toward coon songs partly for their dramatic and expressive qualities, strong narratives, frequent changes in pace and mood, sharp rhythms, and biting humor. At the same time, one should not discount his evidently racist attitudes. His relationship to black culture, however, was complex, involving an interplay of tribute and derision. Despite his use of racial slurs, he professed deep admiration for African-American music and culture and maintained a close friendship with the African-American Opry performer DeFord Bailey, which should be considered mitigating factors in assessing his repertoire and music.

Comedic Vaudeville Songs

In the 1880s and 1890s, the popular music industry shifted from minstrelsy to vaudeville. Tin Pan Alley publishers from New York who wrote songs for vaudeville stage performers increasingly led the popular song market. Early twentieth-century songwriters avoided racial themes and focused instead on sentimental and comic material. Tin Pan Alley songs of the 1890s and 1900s usually depicted quaint, rural scenes, such as in as Harry Von Tilzer's "Wait 'Til the Sun Shines, Nellie" (1905). Most were waltzes with a lilting feel. As Charles Hamm notes, many of the stories in these songs had undercurrents of tragedy, such as the death of a loved one, as in Gussie L. Davis's "In the Baggage Coach Ahead" (1896), or tragic separations, as in Charles Harris's "After the Ball" (1892). Many of the songs produced by Tin Pan Alley writers, however, were strictly comedic.⁵⁷ Comedy songs, popularized on the stage by vaudeville

⁵⁷ Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America* (New York: Norton, 1979), 284–90.

entertainers, ranged from light-hearted stories to slapstick comedy to self-referential stories about show business or life on the stage. Macon’s vaudeville repertoire included all of these themes.

Table 9. Macon’s Comedic Vaudeville Songs (selected)

Song Title	Year Recorded
“(She Was Always) Chewing Gum”	1924
“I Tickled Nancy”	1925
“Kissin’ On the Sly”	1926
“Never Make Love No More”	1926
“I’ll Never Go There Anymore (The Bowery)”	1927
“The Gal That Got Stuck On Everything She Said”	1928
“For Goodness Sakes Don’t Say I Told You”	1929
“They’re After Me”	1938

As with his minstrel repertoire, Macon avoided the best-known Tin Pan Alley songs. He also tended not to perform songs with tragic or maudlin themes, perhaps because it did not suit his comic persona. For instance, he never recorded such Tin Pan Alley or sentimental standards as “After the Ball,” “Sweet Bunch of Daisies,” or “Darling Nellie Gray,” all songs recorded many times by hillbilly artists.⁵⁸

Macon naturally gravitated toward comedic Tin Pan Alley songs. An example is his 1928 recording of “The Gal That Got Stuck On Everything She Said,” a song about a girl who gets “stuck on” every man she meets (“Got stuck on the mayor, got stuck on me/

⁵⁸ For example, Vernon Dalhart recorded “After the Ball” in 1925 (Br 2924), Al Hopkins and His Buckle Busters recorded “Sweet Bunch of Daisies” in 1927 (Ed 23117), and Carson Robison Trio recorded “Darling Nellie Gray” in 1930 (Co 5110-C).

In fact, she gets stuck on everything she can see”).⁵⁹ Other Macon songs of a similar comedic stripe included “(She Was Always) Chewing Gum” (a Macon original), “Kissin’ On the Sly,” “Never Make Love No More,” and “I Tickled Nancy.”⁶⁰

Many of Macon’s vaudeville songs were comic stories about show business, apparently a topic of some interest or amusement to Macon. The 1929 recording “For Goodness Sakes Don’t Say I Told You,” featuring Sid Harkreader, who sings the refrain, tells the story of a boy who gets bit by the acting bug but is rejected by audiences:

For acting when young I had a terrible rage,
For goodness sakes don’t say I told you.
And determined to go on the regular stage,
For goodness sakes don’t say I told you.
With the talents I thought that I’d make the star,
I was sure the first night the whole world would be there,
And opened the door to a rush of cold air,
For goodness sakes don’t say I told you.

Another example of a show-business comedy song sung by Macon is “I’ll Never Go There Anymore (The Bowery),” a song composed by Charles H. Hoyt and Percy Gaunt and published in 1892. The song is a humorous cautionary tale about a man who visits the Bowery District in New York City (“Oh the night that I struck New York, I went out for a quiet walk”), but gets robbed and scuffles with locals, has his “whiskers and most of my chin” shaved off at the barber shop, and gets thrown out of a music hall.

⁵⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, “The Gal That Got Stuck On Everything She Said” (1928, Br 266). The song was published in the songster *Wehman’s Collection of Songs* (1891) as “Gal That Got Stuck On the Country.” Meade, *Country Music Sources*, 446.

⁶⁰ “Kissin’ On the Sly” (1926, Vo 15452) “Never Make Love No More” (1926, Vo 15453), and “I Tickled Nancy” (1925, Vo 15341).

The protagonist sums up his story in the final verse: “There was the Bowery ablaze with lights/And I had one of those tough old nights/I’ll never go there anymore.”⁶¹

“They’re After Me,” composed by Frank N. Scott and Monroe H. Rosenfeld and published in 1890, is another show business song sung by Macon. Although he did not write the song, Macon likely added original verses; moreover, the song’s theme had an autobiographical element to it. Recorded late in Macon’s career, in 1938, “They’re After Me” concerns a popular banjo player whose fans are “after” him. The original sheet music cover, which aptly describes the lyrics, shows a finely dressed city man dashing down the street to get away from a crowd of people chasing him (Figure 3). The chorus reveals the protagonist’s frenzied state: “For they’re after me, they’re after me / To capture me is everyone’s desire / They’re after me, after me / For I’m the individual they require!” The verse lyrics differ in Uncle Dave’s version, suggesting that he wrote them himself. One verse comments wryly on the comic banjo persona: “Some people go to college in order to go to school/ But it takes a smart man to play the banjo fool.”⁶²

Among early country musicians, only Macon recorded the three comedic songs discussed above, with the exception of “The Bowery,” which was recorded by Macon’s musical partner, Sid Harkreader, although he likely learned it from Macon.⁶³ Macon’s uncommon stage song repertoire confirms what we already know from biographical evidence: that he learned many of his songs first-hand from professional stage

⁶¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “I’ll Never Go There Anymore (The Bowery)” (1927, Vo 5149).

⁶² Uncle Dave Macon, “They’re After Me” (1938, BB B-8422).

⁶³ Sid Harkreader and Blythe Poteet, “On The Bowery” (1928, Pm 3183).

entertainers rather than second-hand from rural musicians (as many other commercial country musicians did). Macon preserved, through his recordings, songs unrecorded by any other country (or, in some cases, popular) artist. His rich stage repertoire lends support to the notion that he was, indeed, an essential musical link between nineteenth-century stage music—especially the minstrel show and vaudeville—and the mass-media-based country music of the 1920s.

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Figure 3. Sheet music cover of "They're After Me" (1890)

Gospel Songs

Finally, gospel music made up a large part of Macon's repertoire, whether in records, radio, or live appearances. Macon was baptized around age thirty-eight.⁶⁴ Thereafter, he became a devout—if somewhat flawed—Methodist. Even with his flaws, however, Macon was a devoted Christian. He attended weekly services at Haynes Chapel United Methodist Church in Murfreesboro. He helped raise money for his church's first organ, and after it was installed, played "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" on the instrument. While on the road, Macon would go to church, wherever he happened to be. He cut short his Loew tour in 1925 because touring made it difficult to attend weekly church services.⁶⁵ At times, he even took on preaching duties: according to George Hay, Macon "many a time has put down his banjos . . . to preach a sermon in some community miles from the beaten paths."⁶⁶

Such religious devotion was reflected in Macon's repertoire, which included dozens of gospel or sacred songs. Although he did not play sacred songs in his Opry appearances until about 1930, thereafter, he always included a sacred selection in his Opry shows.⁶⁷ His personal favorite sacred song was, "How Beautiful Heaven Must

⁶⁴ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1977).

⁶⁵ Harkreader, interview (Wolfe 00922).

⁶⁶ Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*, 13.

⁶⁷ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1977). His son Archie told him, "God gave you that gift, why don't you play something for Him in your Opry performances?"

Be.”⁶⁸ Instrumental renditions of hymns, played on the banjo, are scattered throughout his recordings. For instance, “From Jerusalem To Jericho” begins with a banjo version of “Nearer, My God To Thee,” composed by Rev. W.M. Robison around 1891 and published in the gospel book, *Apostolic Hymns*.⁶⁹ On some recordings, usually after the instrumental but before the record’s main song, Macon included a short sermon, for example, in “Walking in Sunlight.”⁷⁰ Some of Macon’s songs are also homiletic, for instance, his recording of “Jonah and the Whale,” a song popular in Methodist churches, and which was contained in the nineteenth-century songbook *Living Water Songs*.⁷¹

Macon's sacred repertoire, especially, was informed by written sources. We know that he learned some gospel songs from songbooks.⁷² Middle Tennessee led the South in printing religious music. Nashville was home to Southwestern Publishing House (est.

⁶⁸ Archie Macon, interview, MTSU (1974) and Harkreader, interview (Wolfe 00922). Macon never recorded this song. He learned it at a funeral home in Kingsport, Tennessee during a tour stop. A man had been shot, and he and Sid Harkreader decided to go see the body; somebody was singing the song and Macon declared that it was the prettiest song he had ever heard and learned it on the spot.

⁶⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, “From Jerusalem To Jericho” (1925, Vo 15076).

⁷⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, “Walking in Sunlight” (1927, Vo 5160).

⁷¹ Uncle Dave Macon, “Jonah and the Whale” (1924, Vo 14864). Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 17.

⁷² Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*, 31. According to Sam McGee (as quoted in Wolfe), Macon “brought into the studio a couple of copies of the standard Broadman Hymnal and used it to help everyone remember the words.” The well-known *Broadman Hymnal*, however, was not published until 1940. Since the Dixie Sacred Singers’ recording session happened in 1927, it obviously could not have been the same book. Perhaps McGee was mistaken about the name. Or perhaps he was referring to a different Methodist hymnal used by Macon that was a forerunner to the *Broadman Hymnal*. This issue will require more research.

1855), the publisher of the *Tennessee Baptist*, and Southern Methodist Publishing House (est. 1857), which eventually became one of largest publishers of religious materials in the region.⁷³ Macon became friends with gospel publisher James D. Vaughan later in life, and surely would have been familiar with his publications, although whether he consulted Vaughan's shape note books for lyrics is unclear. He likely consulted hymnals and gospel shape-note books strictly for the texts, as he did not read music. But Macon had many opportunities to learn gospel songs: in church services; at Sunday afternoon "singings," informal events usually held at a local church or schoolhouse; and at gospel singing conventions, the multi-day conferences that featured the singing of publishing house quartets.⁷⁴ Macon recorded "Just One Way to the Pearly Gates" and other songs from Vaughan's tune books, although whether he actually consulted the books is unclear.⁷⁵

Macon's sacred records range from solo performances, such as "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," to full string band arrangements with his own band, the Dixie Sacred Singers. Macon's recordings with the Dixie Sacred Singers, made in 1927, featured Macon on banjo, Sam McGee on guitar, Kirk McGee on mandolin, and Mazy Todd on fiddle. The group recorded well-known classics of the southern hymn and gospel literature, including "Are You Washed in The Blood Of The Lamb" (1927) and "In The Sweet Bye And Bye" (1927). Many of same sacred songs recorded by Macon were later performed by post-

⁷³ Sharp, *Nashville Before Country*, 93–98.

⁷⁴ This discussion of southern singing practices is based on the account given by Joe Lee Fleming, in "James D. Vaughan, Music Publisher," 22–39.

⁷⁵ "Just One Way to the Pearly Gates," recorded by Macon in 1935 (BB B-5926) with the Delmore Brothers on harmony vocals, appeared in James D. Vaughan's *New Perfect Praise* (Lawrenceville, Tennessee: Vaughan Music Publisher, 1920).

Second World War country and bluegrass performers, although Macon was not necessarily the point of transmission for these songs to these later artists. It is more accurate to say that Macon, and many other first-generation country musicians, helped carry forward and preserve the nineteenth-century southern gospel music tradition through their records and radio appearances, thus providing a foundation for the continued popularity of gospel in country music.⁷⁶

Table 10. Uncle Dave Macon’s Gospel Songs (selected)

Song Title	Year Recorded
“Station Will Be Changed After a While”	1925
“From Jerusalem to Jericho”	1925
“Old Ship of Zion”	1925
“Deliverance Will Come”	1926
“Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb”	1927
“Walking in the Sunlight”	1927
“Shall We Gather at the River”	1927
“In the Sweet Bye and Bye”	1927
“God Be With You ‘Till We Meet Again”	1927

Banjo Playing

Macon’s banjo playing, in addition to his repertoire, provides further evidence for the idea that he was a transitional artist between nineteenth-century stage music and

⁷⁶ Uncle Dave Macon, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul” (1928, Vo 5316), “Are You Washed in The Blood Of The Lamb” (1927, Vo 5158), “In The Sweet Bye And Bye” (1927, Vo 5162). Later country musicians recorded many of the same songs as Macon—for instance, the Stanley Brothers performed “Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb” and Johnny Cash recorded “In the Sweet Bye and Bye”—although this arguably suggests their shared musical heritage rather than a direct influence.

modern country music. As I will explain, his background and exposure to the banjo was rooted in the early stage music traditions of the nineteenth century. As a banjoist, he helped to preserve vaudeville and minstrel styles and technique, and, because of his proficiency and persistence in playing the five-string banjo during its period of decline before the Second World War, played a part in reviving the instrument during the 1940s and 1950s.

The role of the banjo in American popular music changed dramatically between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1920s, when Macon emerged as a commercial county artist. Karen Linn, in *That Half-Barbaric Twang*, traces the banjo's numerous roles in popular culture. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was tied to blackface minstrelsy and associated with southern blacks living on plantations. In the 1880s, it achieved a more "elevated," high-culture status through the efforts of Alfred Farland and others who championed the instrument as a symbol of upper-class leisure. In the 1890s, banjo playing spread to college campuses through collegiate banjo clubs. During this period, banjo manufacturers "modernized" the instrument by introducing steel parts and inventing new types of banjos (tenor, plectrum, mandolin-banjo, etc.), which gave the instrument an improved sound and a more modern, mechanical image. In the early twentieth century, urban dance musicians from ragtime performers (e.g., Fred van Eps) to orchestral dance musicians (e.g., James Reese Europe) used the tenor banjo as a rhythmic instrument. Finally, after a short period before the Second World War in which the banjo was largely abandoned by popular musicians, the instrument was revived in country

music through bluegrass, and eventually became a recognized symbol of white southern Appalachian culture.⁷⁷

Louise Scruggs, the wife of pioneering bluegrass banjoist Earl Scruggs, offers a complementary narrative in her 1961 article, “History of the 5-String Banjo.” Focusing on the period between 1920 and 1945, she argues that jazz accelerated the decline of the five-string banjo as the four-string tenor banjo—with its shorter neck, larger head, and heavier strings—grew in popularity and undermined the banjo’s distinctiveness. Older picking styles were replaced by plectrum strumming to cut through loud brass sections, turning the banjo into a mere “noise maker.” Scruggs notes that, by 1930, even the four-string banjo had faded in popularity; most people had forgotten the old-time five-string tradition entirely. By 1940, the five-string instrument had largely disappeared from country bands, and “America was on the verge of losing one of its most remarkable folk arts,” she asserts.⁷⁸

Scruggs credits a handful of performers in radio and old-time square dance bands who “stuck stubbornly” to the five-string banjo and kept it alive. Chief among them was Macon, who she calls “the most famous” of the five-string banjo preservationists. As folklorists and urban folk musicians began to revive the instrument during the post-Second World War period, “a few bands, perhaps influenced by the growing interest of folklorists,” took up the instrument again. The most consequential of these bands, of course, was Bill Monroe and The Bluegrass Boys, which featured Earl Scruggs, who

⁷⁷ Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang*, 142–45.

⁷⁸ Louise Scruggs, “History of the 5-String Banjo,” *Tennessee Folklore Society Bulletin* 27, no. 1 (1961): 3.

pushed the instrument in new creative and technical directions.⁷⁹

The argument that Macon helped preserve the five-string banjo just in time for Scruggs to rescue the instrument, while perhaps overstated, has some merit. Macon was indeed one of the few country artists to play five-string (or any type of) banjo on recordings in the 1930s. After the surge of Appalachian country banjoists between 1927 and 1929 (e.g., Dock Boggs, Buell Kazee), the instrument mostly faded from commercial use. Ralph Rinzler writes that “[d]uring the fifteen year period from about 1930 to 1945, the 5-string banjo was not much used in commercial country music, and its use in general was at low ebb.” Not until Scruggs emerged in 1945, with Bill Monroe and Bluegrass Boys, did the five-string banjo gain prominence again in country music.⁸⁰

Like Scruggs, Macon used a three-finger style that allowed him to pick out the melody. Three-finger picking had become virtually extinct in commercial country music by the 1930s.⁸¹ The Macon and Scruggs styles, however, are quite different, and I am *not* suggesting a direct line of influence or that Macon’s three-finger style was a forerunner of bluegrass banjo. Macon’s three-finger playing seems to have been modeled on two different sources: folk sources (especially African American) and minstrel stage or parlor

⁷⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁸⁰ Ralph Rinzler (1957), ed. by Mike Seeger, *American Banjo Three Finger and Scruggs Style*, CD liner notes (Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40037, 1990).

⁸¹ Bill Dillof, “Uncle Dave Macon (#2),” *The Old Time Herald* 9, no. 7 (Spring 2005) (accessed at <https://oldtimeparty.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/uncle-dave-macon-2/>), n.p. According to Dillof, fingerpicked melodic lead was exceedingly rare among old-time banjo players before the mid-1930s: “I can think of but one other artist—Mack Woolbright—who punctuated his songs thus. In fact, I strongly suspect that it was just this—rhythmic, fingerpicked lead—that so attracted the young Earl Scruggs, who has cited Macon and Woolbright as two of his major inspirations.”

sources. According to Art Rosenbaum, "Some old-fashioned three-finger styles are distinctly pre-Scruggs, part of the same linear tradition that Scruggs up-dated. Others are more directly related to popular 19th century minstrel show and parlor varieties of finger-picking, and to largely extinct Negro folk styles."⁸² So, Macon's three-finger style may have come partly from a common folk tradition that he shared with Scruggs, although I am not suggesting that Macon influenced Scruggs directly (even if we do not know enough yet to discount that possibility entirely). Nonetheless, as one of the few country banjoists from the 1920s and early 1930s to use the three-finger style—others included Frank Jenkins (of Da Costa Woltz's Southern Broadcasters), Charlie Poole, and Mack Woolbright (a North Carolina three-finger banjoist who did directly influence Earl Scruggs)—and, indeed, one of the few to play five-string banjo on records and radio during this period, Macon can legitimately be viewed as an important connecting thread between hillbilly and bluegrass banjo playing, as Louise Scruggs suggests in her article.

Macon's banjo playing itself was highly regarded. Banjo historian Bill Dillof describes Macon as "the most versatile, consummate banjo player on record in the pre-war years."⁸³ Charles Wolfe states that Macon used up to nineteen different right-hand picking styles.⁸⁴ While perhaps an exaggeration, Macon commanded a full arsenal of picking and frailing styles, including clawhammer and three-finger style. His specialty was the three-finger style of finger-picking, which was ideal for either accompanying or

⁸² Art Rosenbaum, *Old Time Mountain Banjo*, 64.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Wolfe, "Uncle Dave Macon," *Encyclopedia of Country Music*, 36.

outlining the melody, and allowed for complex right-hand figuration.⁸⁵ For this picking technique, Macon used three fingers (thumb, index, middle) instead of two, the latter being a more common technique for rural Middle Tennessee musicians in the late nineteenth century. Kirk McGee, raised in Franklin, Tennessee, close to Macon's birthplace, said he had not heard anybody play three-finger style like Macon until he got into "show business," implying the style was alien to the region and Macon had learned it from outside sources, possibly the vaudeville and minstrel musicians who stayed at his family's Broadway House hotel.⁸⁶

Macon also played clawhammer banjo, a style sometimes called "rapping" or "frailing." Clawhammer, a somewhat simpler technique than up-picking, involves downward strokes made by the index (or middle) finger, followed by open, fifth-string drone notes played by the thumb.⁸⁷ In a few recordings, Macon alternates between three-finger and clawhammer, for instance, "Uncle Dave's Beloved Solo," and "Goin' Across

⁸⁵ Rosenbaum (*Old Time Mountain Banjo*, pp. 71-73) agrees that Macon played three-finger banjo. He provides a banjo transcription of "Way Down the Old Plank Road," which alternates between three-finger and clawhammer. Until about 1930, nearly all of Macon's recordings showcased his finger-picking (which seems to have included both three-finger and up-picking styles). If you include instrumental songs, approximately 136 of his 163 recorded pieces were finger-picked as opposed to frailed (clawhammer), according to Dillof, "Uncle Dave Macon (#2)," n.p.

⁸⁶ McGee, interview, MTSU (1984).

⁸⁷ Wolfe, *Keep My Skillet*. Jon Pankake makes a distinction between two types of clawhammer: frailing, which involves a straightforward downward strumming motion with the index finger, and double-thumbing, which is frailing but with the thumb occasionally jumping to the high strings to assist with the melody. Macon uses both methods. Jon Pankake, "Uncle Dave Macon—Country Music Immortal," *Sing Out* 13 (Summer 1963): 51.

the Sea”]; in the latter, he refers to his picking technique during a monologue, saying, “Now folks, that’s what’s called ‘banjo picking.’ Now I’m a-gonna give you some old-time banjo racking [i.e., rapping].”⁸⁸ Macon apparently never used a plectrum, a banjo-picking method often associated with jazz.⁸⁹

Conclusion

Macon’s connections to nineteenth-century music, especially urban-based popular stage music such as vaudeville and the minstrel show, were both deep and broad. As I have shown, Macon’s repertoire stemmed from two main traditions: the black and white “folk” music of rural Middle Tennessee and professional, urban stage or “popular” music. Macon was unique in having considerable exposure to both musical traditions. As a result, the depth and breadth of Macon’s traditional, folk song repertoire was nearly unmatched among hillbilly artists. It included fiddle-and-banjo dance tunes, African-American folk songs, ballads of English and American origin, and gospel music. Among Macon’s repertoire were also dozens of popular, nineteenth-century stage songs that had originally appeared in minstrel, vaudeville, musical comedy, and Broadway shows.

⁸⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, “Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo” (1926, Vo 15439) and “Goin’ Across the Sea” (1925, Vo 15192).

⁸⁹ Dorris Macon, interview, MTSU (Wolfe #1). *George C. Dobson’s Simplified Method*, a banjo tutor from 1874, attempts to establish the stylistic difference between parlor and clawhammer style: “The former admits of expression, feeling, a display of taste. The latter is characteristic of the instrument, and much admired by all lovers of the banjo.” A third type of picking—plectrum picking—emerged with jazz bands in the early twentieth century. A plectrum is a plastic, wood, or metal device used to “pick” strings on a banjo.

Macon's versatility as a banjoist, and his diverse repertoire, also shows the influence of nineteenth-century musical traditions, ranging from popular stage genres such as vaudeville and minstrelsy, to more traditional folk styles native to Middle Tennessee. During a time when the popularity of minstrelsy and banjo music had faded, Macon persisted with his banjo repertoire and, in doing so, kept alive a tradition that inspired a new generation of banjo players, who, in turn, made the instrument an integral part of modern country music.

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century influences shown in Macon's repertoire merged with Macon's own creativity as a songwriter and banjo player to produce a compelling commercial product. As such, he provided a musical bridge between nineteenth-century urban popular stage music (especially the minstrel show and vaudeville) and early commercial country music.

Chapter 7: Macon as Hillbilly Recording Artist

Very good for a guitar but I believe I can beat it with my banjo.

—Uncle Dave Macon on first hearing a phonograph record by George Reneau¹

He was an old vaudeville man . . . and he imagined that he was still on the stage.

—Sam McGee²

In July 1924, Uncle Dave Macon and Sid Harkreader traveled to Vocalion Records in New York to record twenty-four sides, making them among the first white southerners to record commercially. Only George Reneau, Eck Robertson, Gid Tanner, Riley Puckett, Fiddlin' John Carson, and a handful of other artists, preceded them.³ This chapter provides a history of the hillbilly music recording industry in the context of early twentieth-century records, and explains Macon's critical role in the development of hillbilly music as a recorded genre.

As a recording artist, Macon fused elements of nineteenth-century stage music, especially vaudeville and the minstrel show, with his own innovations to create a modern, twentieth-century musical product that appealed to rural southern audiences. He was a

¹ Macon, quoted in Hay, "Country Music Sketch #10."

² Sam McGee, interview, UNC (1961).

³ For a discussion of the chronology of hillbilly recording, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 32–50.

transitional figure, whose particular skills and repertoire from these earlier genres were particularly well-suited to developing hillbilly audiences in the new medium as it existed in the 1920s. This musical background, combined with his rural southern identity, resulting in compelling records that enabled him to become one of the first country music stars.

Macon's records from the 1920s shared stylistic traits with popular recordings of the First World War era, including repertoire (e.g., "coon" songs), song forms (e.g., medleys, comedic monologues, banjo solos, descriptive pieces), banjo style (three-finger up-picking), and the emphasis on comedy. In each of these respects, Macon's records resembled the work of mainstream (i.e., non-hillbilly) recording artists such as banjoist Vess Ossman, coon singer Al Bernard, and monologist Cal Stewart, which is perhaps not surprising given these artists' similar backgrounds in vaudeville and minstrelsy.

At the same time, Macon's identity as a died-in-the-wool, rural southerner distinguished him from mainstream, New York-based studio performers who also performed banjo and sang coon songs. As a result, Macon's early records, from around 1924 to 1927, were transitional between the minstrel-based renditions of rural, southern music heard on popular records in the 1910s and early 1920s, and the hillbilly records of the late 1920 by artists such as Jimmie Rodgers and the Carter Family, who presented a folk-based southern music that was relatively unmediated by minstrelsy and the popular stage.

Hillbilly and Race Records: A New Industry

Old-time or hillbilly records emerged as a distinctive genre in June 1923, when Okeh Records producer Ralph Peer held a field recording session in Atlanta. This session

resulted in the first vocal record by a white, rural southerner: Fiddlin' John Carson's "Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane" / "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow."⁴ The success of Carson's record set in motion an effort by phonograph companies (initially, Okeh and Columbia, and then Victor and Edison) to identify and record white, rural musical talent across the South.⁵ The shift to recording rural white musicians was part of the industry's reaction to the growing economic pressures of the early 1920s, including stagnant sales and increased competition among labels. To reverse such economic trends, major phonograph companies, and their upstart competitors, looked to new markets and artists—namely, southern old-time and blues musicians—and created two new marketing categories: hillbilly and race records.⁶

The embrace of southern vernacular music by phonograph companies transformed the recording industry. Since its inception in the late 1880s, the industry had marketed its products mostly to northern, urban, middle-class, white customers, and had relied on a small number of urban, full-time studio musicians to make records on a contract basis at their studios in New York and New Jersey. Professional studio artists, such as Billy Murray, Ada Jones, and Al Bernard, appeared on hundreds of popular records through the early 1920s (often under pseudonyms to avoid overexposure) and played everything from jazz and fox trots, to Broadway, vaudeville songs, marching band music, and "coon" and

⁴ Fiddlin' John Carson, "Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane" and "The Old Hen Cackled and the Rooster's Going to Crow" (1923, OK 4890).

⁵ Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, 37.

⁶ Sutton, *Recording the Twenties*, 279–81.

banjo songs.⁷ By contrast, the new race and hillbilly records of the 1920s targeted regional, racially segmented markets. Hillbilly records, for example, were “designed to be sold principally to a market identified by the sellers as largely white, initially southern, and substantially composed of rural or small-town dwellers.”⁸ Hillbilly musicians, like their African-American counterparts, came mostly from rural, working class backgrounds (although some had college educations or formal training in music).⁹ They played their own instruments, wrote their own songs (or arranged traditional material), and had few prior connections to the New York-based music industry of publishing, theater, and recordings, allowing them freedom to break away from stylistic conventions.

The emergence of hillbilly music as a distinctive musical and cultural brand, however, did not occur when Fiddlin’ John Carson recorded “The Old Hen Cackled” in 1923, but rather, came about gradually. At first, record companies seemed to view old-time or “mountain” music as a continuation of the rural-themed music that had long been part of record catalogs, and not as a new or separate genre. Evidence for this comes from

⁷ Sutton, *Recording the Twenties*, 149–160, 107. A perusal of the 1923 Columbia *Record Catalogue* shows how much traditional or southern repertoire was already a part of record catalogs. See *Columbia 1923 Record Catalogue. Containing all Records up to and including December thirty-first MCMXXII* (New York: Columbia Graphophone Company, 1923).

⁸ Russell, *Country Music Records*, 3. That market, which was never uniform, become increasingly diversified over the next two decades, reaching new demographics and regions of the country.

⁹ The early industry included classically-trained musicians such as Buell Kazee, college educated musicians such as Vernon Dalhart and Bradley Kincaid, and country lawyers and doctors such as Bascom Lamar Lunsford and Humphrey Bate.

the fact that record companies' initially placed the music in their preexisting record categories, such as Dance, Sacred, Minstrel, Novelty, and Banjo songs.¹⁰

In late 1924 and 1925, however, record companies shifted to a new marketing strategy for old-time records, recognizing them for the first time as belonging to a distinct musical category. To market the new category, phonograph companies set aside special blocks in their catalogs, a practice known as sectional marketing, which had originated with the marketing of "ethnic" records in the early 1900s. By reserving special catalog blocks for records based on the racial or cultural characteristics of the performers and supposed audience, phonograph companies allowed record dealers to easily identify records types for their customers, and helped the industry to present a consistent, focused marketing message tailored to specific audiences based on race, geography, and class. Among the hillbilly catalog blocks were Columbia's 15000-D series, Victor's V-40000 series, Okeh's 45000 series, Paramount's 3000 series, and—Macon's primary labels—Vocalion's 5000 series and Brunswick's 100 series. Most hillbilly record blocks also had descriptive names such as "Old Familiar Melodies" (Columbia), "Old Southern Melodies" (Vocalion), and "Songs From Dixie" (Brunswick). By the mid-1920s, both old-time and race records were increasingly marketed with separate brochures, pamphlets, and newsletters, suggesting a coherent vision and strategy for advertising the music. Instead of marketing old-time songs to everyone, by 1926, record companies were

¹⁰ Archie Green agrees that in their marketing of traditional fiddle tunes such as "Arkansas Traveler" and "Soldier's Joy," phonograph companies did not initially think of hillbilly records as belonging to a distinct category apart from popular records. Archie Green, "Commercial Music Graphics #13," *JEMF Quarterly* 6, part 2 (Summer 1970): 70–73.

directing their pitch to a specific segment of the population—rural, working-class, white southerners in the case of hillbilly music—and making the assumption that the musical tastes of their customers were narrow rather than broad.¹¹

Macon's first label, Vocalion Records, followed exactly this path of development. The company began recording old-time, southern musicians in the spring of 1924; early members of its roster included Macon and George Reneau, the performer whose records inspired Macon to begin recording (see quote above). At first, Vocalion released the records in their "popular" 14,000 series. In December of 1926, however, they decided to dedicate an entire block of their catalog to old-time or hillbilly music, calling it "Old Southern Melodies" and numbering it in the 5000s.¹²

As attempts to market hillbilly and race records grew more sharply defined in the mid-1920s, the recording industry segmented records into three main categories: popular, hillbilly, and race. For phonograph companies, the social identity of the artists and audience mattered more than the music for determining an artist's category. Describing hillbilly music marketing, Jocelyn Neal writes,

To the record companies, the factors that differentiated this music from other genres were neither the songs nor the musical performances themselves, as many of the same songs had been recorded earlier, but by trained classical singers. Instead, the record companies considered the music different because of the identity of the performers (poor, mostly self-taught musicians with rural Southern connections) and the intended audiences, whom the record executives assumed were much the same as the musicians.¹³

¹¹ Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 188–90.

¹² Russell, *Country Music Records*, 12.

¹³ Jocelyn R. Neal, *Country Music: A Cultural and Stylistic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

Thus, during the first phase of hillbilly and race records, around 1923 to 1926, phonograph companies viewed hillbilly records as essentially a continuation of popular record traditions. This is not entirely surprising given that, since the 1880s, recording companies had been selling rural or southern-styled records of various stripes, including banjo solos, coon songs, sentimental southern ballads, comedic rube monologues, instrumental medleys of southern favorites, vaudeville rube skits, and minstrel show routines. One category of stylized rural music often released by the recording industry early in the century was the “coon” or “Negro dialect” song. Southern-themed songs about “mammy” and the “ol’ banjo,” usually sans blackface and sung in a minstrel dialect, were a cottage industry in the 1910s and early 1920s. Popular coon singers from this era included Harry C. Browne, Vernon Dalhart, and Arthur Collins.¹⁴ In many of these coon records, the banjo figured prominently, for instance, on Arthur Collins’s ragtime-inflected “When Uncle Joe Plays a Rag On His Old Banjo” (1912), Al Bernard’s comic banjo song “Old Uncle Bill” (1925), and Harry C. Browne’s coon song “Carve dat Possum” (1917). Several virtuoso popular banjoists of the era also recorded minstrel or coon songs on the banjo. For example, Vess Ossman (1868–1923), “The Banjo King,” recorded southern-themed minstrel songs such as “The Darkie’s Awakening” (1904), and “All Coons Look Alike to Me” (1902); and banjoist Fred van Eps (1878–1960) recorded “Dixie Medley” (1911) and “Old Folks Rag” (1914).

¹⁴ Coon songs reached their height of popularity in 1907 with May Irwin’s “The Bully” (originally performed by Irwin in *The Widow Jones*, which opened in Boston in 1895), although they continued to be recorded by popular performers through the 1910s and 1920s.

As we can see, then, there was some continuity in repertoire between early-twentieth century popular recording artists—minstrels, banjoists, and “coon” singers—and hillbilly musicians such as Macon. Indeed, hillbilly artists from the mid-1920s, including Macon, Charlie Poole, and Buell Kazee, often recorded songs that had been part of popular record catalogs for decades. In this way, much early country music fit the recording industry’s template for what constituted rural, southern music.

Stylistically, however, there were stark differences between hillbilly records and the rural music produced by northern studio artists in the 1910s and early 1920s. Records by hillbilly artists used relatively simple arrangements, rough vocal and instrumental textures, a nasal vocal tone, and stripped down instrumentation that consisted of fiddle and guitar or banjo.

The rural, southern records of the 1900s and 1910s, by contrast, were essentially second-hand representations of rural southern music, rendered by northern, urban musicians and producers, and based on minstrel show and vaudeville stage formulas. Len Spencer’s vaudeville-like skit “Cy Perkin’s Barn Dance,” from 1909, typified the industry’s pre-hillbilly approach to representing rural music. The recording contained corny rural jokes, rooster sound effects, a droning fiddle, and, for the musical interludes, a brass orchestra (actually, not something usually associated with rural barn dances). Another sketch, “The Rube and the Country Doctor,” by Byron G. Harlan and Frank C. Stanley (1910, Ed Amberol 383), consisted of cornpone dialogue between a doctor and an elderly man (sample joke: “Hey doctor, are you treating Bill Spriggs’s boy? “I did ‘till he died”) and quaint, stylized country dance music with fiddle, piano, vocals, and a cheering crowd that is evidently supposed to suggest a hoedown. Popular artists who

recorded coon songs and other rural-themed material in the 1910s, such as Vernon Dalhart (an artist who incidentally had one of the first major hillbilly hits), approached their music like actors. Dalhart moved opportunistically from genre to genre, recording the same songs numerous times for any label who would hire him. He began in light opera, became known for singing black dialect songs, and in 1924 switched to hillbilly music. His musical personality was amorphous and impersonal; he performed in different genres—hillbilly, minstrel, or light opera—depending on the market need.

By the early 1920s, however, the era of popular studio recording artists of the northeast who produced southern, old-time music had begun to pass. Artists who merely pretended to be rural or southern gave way to truly rural, southern artists who conveyed distinctive and consistent artistic personas and attempted to forge a personal connection with their audiences by revealing their thoughts and emotions on recordings. Such personal directness intensified as the genre developed throughout 1920s, moving further away from its theatrical roots. The Carter Family's direct expressions of religious faith and Jimmie Rodgers's poignant commentary on tuberculosis are two well-known instances of this movement toward a more personal, direct approach in country music recordings (even if we acknowledge that these artists presented a stage artifice as well).¹⁵

Macon as a Transitional Figure in Commercial Recording

As a recording artist, Macon stood midway between the two eras. On the one hand, Macon's recordings showcased the minstrel-coon repertoire, comedy, and live-

¹⁵ Examples include Carter Family, "When the World's On Fire" (1930, Vi-V-40293), and Jimmie Rodgers, "Whippin' That Old T.B." (1932, Vi-23751).

stage approach characteristic of nineteenth-century popular stage entertainers. In his repertoire, minstrel-derived humor, and banjo playing, Macon conformed to the recording industry's pre-1920 conception of the rural, southern musician, and his recordings drew on established repertoire and forms that were in many ways rooted in nineteenth-century stage music. On the other hand, Macon was part of a new generation of genuinely rural southern artists. Unlike the popular musicians who interpreted southern folk material, Macon performed in a rough-hewn, direct style with stripped-down instrumentation. He also personalized and adapted his songs for his audiences, making him more like the country musicians who emerged later in the late 1920s, even if he was also constructing a persona based on the minstrel and vaudeville characters of the nineteenth century, as I have argued elsewhere in this dissertation.

Record companies seem to have perceived Macon as fitting comfortably within the pre-existing category of stage-trained popular artists who played rural or southern material. Macon's mixed background as a vaudeville stage artist with rural southern roots likely made him appealing to record industry leaders. Record company executives at that time, while enamored with the idea of the new hillbilly music genre, were likely still unsure of its viability or the exact form in which the music could sell. Because Macon conformed to the conventional classifications of "popular" music that had been used for decades by the record companies, but was authentically rural and southern, it is possible that record companies identified him as someone who could help them experiment with the new genre in order to find the right mix. Indeed, his unique blend of experience and artistry as both a popular and rural southern musician made him the perfect vehicle for carrying earlier popular music traditions into the new hillbilly music era.

There were many reasons why record companies might have viewed Macon as a continuation of pre-existing categories, and therefore, as someone likely to facilitate a smooth transition to the new marketing category of hillbilly music. In many respects, Macon differed from other country musicians of the period. During the music's first phase of commercialization, from around 1923 to 1927, most artists were either solo fiddlers or leaders of a string band: John Carson, Fiddlin' Powers, Ernest Stoneman, The Skillet Lickers, and Charlie Poole. Although Macon did eventually record with a string band, his main identity was as a solo banjoist ("voice and banjo" was the exact phrase used by Vocalion in their catalog).¹⁶

Macon differed markedly from the prototypical solo hillbilly banjoist, who tended to be Appalachian (e.g., Doc Boggs, Clarence Ashley, Buell Kazee, Bascom Lamar Lunsford), sing traditional British and American ballads (e.g., "Pretty Polly," "The Cuckoo") and pick in a clawhammer or frailing style rather than the three-finger up-picking style (Boggs and Lunsford were notable Appalachian exceptions to this rule). Macon, of course, did not come from Appalachia, rarely sang traditional ballads, and generally used the three-finger, up-picking style.¹⁷

¹⁶ *Alphabetical Catalog of Vocalion Records for 1927–28* (Chicago: Brunswick-Balke-Collender, 1928).

¹⁷ A few other notable hillbilly banjoists used up-picking style: Uncle Tom Collins, a solo banjo player and singer who recorded a session for Okeh in June 1927, which was filled with minstrel and "coon" material such as "Taint No Lie" and "Chicken, You Can't Roost Too High For Me"; Chubby Parker, a whistling, up-picking stage entertainer best known for his recording of "King Kong Kitchie Kitchie Ki-Me-O" (1928); and Charlie Poole, the banjo player and leader of The North Carolina Ramblers.

Recording companies may have viewed Macon's music as a continuation of previous popular styles due to his repertory and banjo style. As discussed in Chapter 6, Macon played a wealth of coon songs composed in the late nineteenth century: "The Coon That Had The Razor," "My Gal Is a High Born Lady," "Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose," and "The Preacher and the Bear," Arthur Collins's mega-hit from the 1900s, which was part of Macon's live shows.¹⁸ In terms of banjo playing, there is a direct line of stylistic influence from the popular recording banjo virtuosos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Vess Ossman and Fred van Epps, to Macon and a few other hillbilly banjoists, such as Charlie Poole. Macon's picking, while considerably less complicated than that of Ossman or Eps, similarly used an up-picking, three-finger banjo style. Further, Macon recorded some of the same ragtime banjo standards, such as "Eli Green's Cakewalk," as these earlier popular banjo virtuosos.

Record companies' view of Macon as fitting a pre-existing niche was suggested in how they marketed him as an early-twentieth-century popular banjoist specializing in southern minstrel fare. In catalogs, Macon is described simply as a "banjo player," linking him to a well-established (since the 1890s) popular record classification. For instance, Brunswick's 1927 catalog describes Macon as "The South's Greatest Banjo Picker," a slogan connoting both his southern heritage and his banjo virtuosity in the tradition of Eps and Ossman. In another example, Vocalion-Brunswick's 1927-28 catalog cross-lists Macon's songs in "Old Southern Melodies"—the 5000 record block

¹⁸ Knowledge of Macon's performance of this song comes from the song lists compiled by Robert Hyland and re-printed in Rinzler and Cohen, *Uncle Dave Macon: Bio-Discography*.

generally reserved for hillbilly artists—and “Banjo Solos,” an older category long featured in mainstream catalogs. Such simultaneous marketing suggests that Brunswick was either genuinely not sure how to categorize Macon, or, perhaps, viewed him as a stylistic throwback to an earlier era who could therefore provide a marketing bridge to the new hillbilly genre. By 1927, Banjo Solos had nearly disappeared as a category, with Macon being one of the last vestiges; the only other artists listed in the Banjo Solos category that year were popular (i.e., not hillbilly) musicians such as Moore and Free (“Banjo Blues”), Fred Van Eps (“Cocoanut Dance” and “Dixie Medley”), and Harry Reser (“Heebie Jeebies” and “Oh, Boy! What a Girl”).”¹⁹

Macon’s recording approach was also in many ways traditional, which may have attracted the attention of record companies. Like other acoustic-era performers, Macon treated the media of recording as an extension of live performance. He communicated directly to his audience with a steady stream of stage patter, jokes, sermons, spontaneous instrumental solos, and songs, generating an atmosphere of familiarity and intimacy. As Tony Russell has noted, Macon structured each recording as a miniature performance—a condensed three-minute version of his stage act—replete with songs, jokes, stories, instrumentals, banter with sidemen, and humorous plugs for Nashville businesses.²⁰

It should be noted that Macon was not the only hillbilly or blues musician to simulate a live event in his recordings. John Minton has noted dozens of examples of blues and country records from the 1920s in which the artists created an imaginary live

¹⁹ *Alphabetical Catalog of Vocalion Records for 1927–28* (Chicago: Brunswick-Balke-Collender, 1928).

²⁰ Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 12–13.

show. For instance, Gid Tanner and the Skillet Lickers recreated rural barn dances and fiddling conventions in their recorded “rural dramas.” According to Minton, old-time and blues records were very often “framed as functional equivalents of live performances” in which “artists extended their personal invitations to listeners, encouraging them to participate in records as immanent, eminently accessible events.”²¹

The creation of live scenes in the recording studio, by Macon and other country musicians, was both a continuation of pre-existing popular recording conventions, and a function of the developing recording technology. Early twentieth-century minstrel and vaudeville performers often created recordings that resembled stage shows through their use of spoken-word comedy and vaudeville routines. In the first decades of commercial records, phonograph companies actually favored such stage material for two reasons: audiences were familiar with the routines, and it was technically easier to record voices than to record instruments.²²

Macon’s recording career reflected the changing technology of record-making. When he began recording in the early 1920s, the acoustic, or mechanical, method of recording was still being used. In the acoustic process, musicians performed loudly into a large horn, or sometimes multiple horns, transmitting sound waves into a glass or mica diaphragm, which in turn, triggered a stylus that cut wax masters. Compared to electrical recordings that came along later, mechanical recordings suffered from low volume, a

²¹ John Minton, *78 Blues: Folksongs and Phonographs in the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 15.

²² Andre Millard, *America On Record: A History of Recorded Sound*. 2d. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84.

diminished frequency range (in which highs and lows were cut off), and a lack of presence.²³ As a result, phonograph companies frequently recorded monologues, dialogues, and other spoken word passages that could be more accurately captured by the acoustic recording technology, as the speaking voice generally fell in the middle range of the pitch spectrum. This did not change until 1925 or 1926, when studios adopted electrical microphones, which greatly improved fidelity and expanded the range of instruments and vocal styles that could successfully be recorded.

In many respects, Macon's musical style, honed from his years as a live performer, was particularly well-suited to the limitations of acoustic recording technology. His voice was loud and relatively high-pitched and he often spoke during his performances, both of which helped his performances cut through to the wax. The banjo was ideally suited for the early acoustic technology; its sharp tone could be easily picked up by the acoustic horn, a fact that partly explains the high percentage of banjo recordings made in the early twentieth century.²⁴

Electrical microphones, which arrived on the scene at Vocalion-Brunswick and the Grand Ole Opry around 1926, presented special challenges to Macon because he was so accustomed to performing on the stage. There is some evidence that he had trouble adjusting to microphones. According to Opry director George Hay, "When Uncle Dave came on we moved him back so that he would have plenty of room to kick as he played. He has always been an actor who thought the microphone was just a nuisance. It took a

²³ Sutton, *Recording the Twenties*, 4.

²⁴ See Heier and Lotz, *The Banjo On Record*.

long time to ‘hitch’ him to it.”²⁵ In the recording studio, Kirk McGee remembers, Macon would not stay on his mark—he would “keep getting closer and closer to the mic”—which sometimes disturbed the mix and forced the performers to do another take. Macon’s incessant foot stomping on the wooden floor of Vocalion’s studios caused another problem. He had a “big foot” and would sometimes “get to reeling and rocking and stomping, and shake the floor.” In response, producers would place a pillow beneath his foot, a solution that Macon disliked because he could no longer hear his rhythmic pounding.²⁶

More generally, Macon suffered from nervousness due to being in the unfamiliar environment of the recording studio. In early studios a red light prompted the performer to move into position, while a green light signaled the performer to start playing. According to Kirk McGee, Macon would “get shaky, waiting, watching for that light. He was hard to start off right, you know. He was tense.”²⁷ All of these recording quirks McGee attributed to Macon’s stage background: “He was an old vaudeville man . . . and he imagined that he was still on the stage . . . that he could see you.” The producer would complain, saying, “Now, Uncle Dave, you’re not before an audience now. We’re puttin’ this on the wax!”²⁸

²⁵ Hay, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry*, 12.

²⁶ Sam McGee, interview, UNC (1961).

²⁷ Kirk McGee, interview, MTSU (1984).

²⁸ Sam McGee, interview, UNC (1961).

In his recordings, Macon adapted and reused various other early twentieth-century record-making forms and techniques, including descriptive pieces, novelty sound effects, medleys, comic monologues, parody, and burlesque. The following section describes each of these forms and techniques in turn.

First, among Macon's recordings are several descriptive pieces, musical depictions of nature with spoken word sections and sound effects. Descriptive records had reached their height of popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century with the Columbia Orchestra's "The Limited Express" (1904), the Haydn Quartet's "New Year's at Old Trinity" (1904), and Jones and Spencer's "Zeb Green's Airship" (1909).²⁹ Macon recorded several descriptive instrumental pieces, most notably "The Fox Chase," a piece he introduces at the beginning of the record as a "true and a correct imitation of a hound kicking a red fox around Pilot Knob, way down in Tennessee." Macon depicts the chase with graphic musical images, including repeated rhythmic figures, chromaticism (in the banjo), and—rare for a hillbilly record—a section in minor mode.³⁰ In 1930, Macon remade "The Fox Chase" as "Tennessee Red Fox Chase" with Sam McGee on second banjo. On the record he narrates the action with short phrases in the manner of a square dance caller: "pup can't get through the wire fence"; "picking up the trail now"; and "I

²⁹ Richard Martin and Meagan Hennessey, *Before Radio: Comedy, Drama & Sound Sketches, 1897–1923*, CD liner notes (Champaign, IL: Archeophone Records, 2008), 5–6 (general discussion), 7–25 (artist and song notes).

³⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, "The Fox Chase" (1924, Vo 14850).

think he's turning, coming back." As the piece unfolds, it picks up speed, cycling through several musical sections as Macon whoops, hollers, and banters with McGee.³¹

Second, Macon's stage orientation as a recording artist, and his indebtedness to earlier popular recording acts, is evidenced by his frequent use of novelty sounds in his records: female impersonations, animal noises, baby cries, whistling, idiom transfers (i.e., imitating another instrument), and abrupt shifts in musical texture, rhythm, and style. Such novelty techniques, which became a staple of radio shows such as the Grand Ole Opry in the 1920s, were a hallmark of both vaudeville theater and early recordings.³² Jazz historian Brian Harker notes that novelty stage tricks and sound effects were part of a "larger entertainment culture in the north that prized mimesis, parody, and illusionism." Beginning in the late nineteenth century, popular music acts were generally classified as either "straight" (i.e., descendants of the European classical music tradition) or "novelty," meaning that they employed novelty sounds. Such gimmicks were an accepted part of the entertainment business and most early twentieth-century popular musicians, including Louis Armstrong, used them to one degree or another.³³ Macon's recordings are chock full of sound effects including animal noises ("Whoa Mule," "Braying Mule," "Go Along Mule"), laughing choruses ("I Tickled Nancy"), kissing sounds ("I'm Going Away to Leave You"), lip smacking ("Chewing Gum," "Two-In-One-Chewing-Gum"), female impersonation ("I Don't Care If I Never Wake Up"), and banjo imitations of such

³¹ Uncle Dave Macon, "Tennessee Red Fox Chase" (1930, OK 45507).

³² Martin and Hennessey, *Before Radio*, 6.

³³ Brian Harker, *Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

instruments as chimes (“Uncle Dave’s Travels, Part 4 (Visit At The Old Maid’s)”) and bugle (“Uncle Dave’s Beloved Solo”).

Third, several of Macon’s recordings are instrumental medleys of old-time or southern songs, the southern medley being a common trope in early twentieth-century popular records.³⁴ Macon’s “Rooster Crow Medley” from 1925, combines vocal and instrumental portions of several old-time songs: “Rooster Crow,” “Old Dan Tucker,” “Sally Goodin” and “Grey Cat On The Tennessee Farm.” Among his other medleys are “Muskrat Medley” (1925), an *mélange* of light-hearted country songs such as “Old Brown Jug” and “Muskrat,” and “Sourwood Mountain Medley” (1926), a recording that alternates between two fiddle tunes, “Sourwood Mountain” and “Jenny Put the Kettle On.”³⁵ Macon was not the only hillbilly artist to record medleys—Eck Robertson (“Brilliancy Medley”), Charlie Poole (“Southern Medley”), the Crockett Family Mountaineers (“Buffalo Gal’s Medley”), and others did as well—but his consistent use of the form suggests the degree to which his music was grounded in earlier popular recording forms.

Fourth, Macon wrote and recorded several comedic monologues, a common format for popular records during the 1900s and 1910s. Comedic monologue records were essentially joke-laced narratives featuring musical interludes. Early popular recording artists who used this format included Cal Stewart, who played the New

³⁴ Many popular, pre-country artists recorded medleys of southern songs, including Fred van Eps (“Dixie Medley,” 1911), Manuel Romain (“Hippodrome Minstrel Melody,” 1916), and The American Quartet (“Farmyard Medley,” 1918).

³⁵ For a complete listing of Macon’s recordings, see Russell, *Country Music Records*, 573–78.

England hayseed “Uncle Josh,” and Joe Hayman, who recorded immigrant-themed skits such as “Cohen Telephones From Brighton” (1916, Co A2192).³⁶ An example of Macon’s use of the comedic monologue format is “Bile Them Cabbage Down,” a record that alternates between a singing chorus and humorous spoken monologues to evoke visions of the rural South:

While I was down home with my girl we was walking around the yard. They had a little dog that had been sucking eggs and killing young chickens. And they’d hung him. He’d been a-hanging about three days. But he did hang [singing slowly] just as loose, as loose as a goose. [Chorus]³⁷

For rural listeners, Macon’s barnyard references and exaggerated vocal delivery would have probably been quite funny.

Macon’s most extensive foray into the comedic monologue genre came with his four-part record series “Uncle Dave’s Travels” in 1929. Each record chronicles one of his journeys, through Arkansas, Louisville, Indiana, and Nashville, providing anecdotes about the local people and culture. “Uncle Dave’s Travel’s - Part 2 (Around Louisville, KY)” is essentially a stand-up routine or series of jokes with short musical interludes, much in the style of Cal Stewart. The jokes are corny and old-fashioned, fitting an established theatrical model:

One time I was riding over that big bridge from New Albany, Indiana to Louisville, Kentucky. And I asked a man sitting beside me, “How deep is the Ohio River here?” And he says, “Stranger, I can’t tell you, but I know one thing: It’s water clear to the bottom.”³⁸

³⁶ For a discussion of “Cohen Telephones From Brighton,” see Richard and Hennessey, *Before Radio*, 18.

³⁷ Uncle Dave Macon, “Bile Them Cabbage Down” (1924, Vo 14849).

³⁸ Uncle Dave Macon, “Uncle Dave’s Travel’s - Part 2 (Around Louisville, KY)” (1929, Br 349).

One can hear elements both of the comedic monologue and the descriptive novelty on “Uncle Dave’s Travels, Part 4 (Visit At The Old Maid’s).” On this record, Macon tells the story of a recent trip to Indiana, when he was invited to the home of a “beautiful old maid” who played piano and sang such “pieces” as “Trovatore.” He begins by making fun of the concept of a “descriptive” piano piece that is inspired by nature. Strumming his banjo, he says, “Now I’ll just give you a little imitation of how she was imitating the dew dripping off the eaves of the porch into the wash pan on the shelf, surrounded by fragrant honeysuckles all in bloom. She played it thusly.” He proceeds to play a lovely banjo interlude. The Old Maid then agrees to sing a “beautiful little love song” and Macon, doing his best impression of a pretentious female opera singer, breaks into a nineteenth-century parlor ballad, “Come Dearest, The Daylight is Gone.”³⁹

Finally, Macon’s recordings included other theatrical comic techniques—such as parody and burlesque—commonly found on popular records early in the century, and which were part of the vaudeville and minstrel show heritage. For instance, in 1926, he parodied the sentimental plantation genre with his recording of Stephen Foster’s iconic nineteenth-century minstrel song “Uncle Ned.” For the first verse and chorus, Macon sticks closely to Foster’s 1848 published version (also, unfortunately, retaining the racial slurs):

³⁹ Uncle Dave Macon, “Uncle Dave’s Travels, Part 4 (Visit At The Old Maid’s)” (1929, Br 362). The song was composed by Welshman Brinley Richards and published in 1853. Meade, *Country Music Sources*, 224.

There was an old Ni****, and his name was Uncle Ned,
And he died long ago, long ago.
And he had no wool on the top of his head,
The place where the wool oughta' grow.

Then lay down de shovel and the hoe,
Hang up the fiddle and the bow:
There's no more work for poor Old Ned—
For he's gone where de good Ni***** go.⁴⁰

Also, for the second verse and chorus, he remains faithful to the original. In the third verse, however, Macon turns the nostalgic sentiment on its head by giving a comic “paraphrase,” or translation, of the song’s first verse and chorus:

There formerly might have been seen an aged individual,
Whose cognomen was Uncle Edward.
He departed this life sometime since, sometime since.
And he had no capillary substance, on the substance of his cranium,
The place designated for the capillary substance to vegetate.

Chorus:

Then lay down the agricultural implements,
Allow the violin and the bow to be pendent on the wall.
For there is no more physical energy to be displayed,
By indigent, aged Edward,
For he has departed this life and gone to a kind,
Providence for all pious, humane, and benevolent colored individuals.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, “Uncle Ned” (1926, Vo 15450).

⁴¹ As it turns out, Macon did not write this parody text but learned it from a printed source, most likely *Ethiopian Serenader's Own Book* (Philadelphia, Fisher & Brother, 1857) or a later reprint. I have not yet examined *Ethiopian Serenader's Own Book*, but the reference comes from Newman Ivey White, who reprinted the *Ethiopian* text in full in his *American Negro Folk-Songs* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1928), 166. Most likely, White was unaware of Macon’s use of the same “paraphrase” text (which Macon follows essentially verbatim) from two years prior.

Some of Macon's parodies were quasi-theatrical performances, designed—in their original theatrical contexts—to be performed by several actors. For example, in 1926 he recorded “Stop That Knocking At My Door,” a minstrel show standard, published in many songbooks and songsters in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁴² In most of these minstrel songbooks, “Stop That Knocking” is presented as an ensemble piece or musical skit; it requires spoken dialogue between two or more characters, and is labeled “original burlesque” or “operatic burlesque,” suggesting a comic play.⁴³ The scene, which is performed in African-American dialect, involves an unidentified protagonist who is in love with a beautiful “colored girl” named Susie Brown,” who is also being pursued by another man, Jim (and possibly by Sambo, whose name is mentioned). The protagonist sings the verses, while Susie and Jim engage in dialogue during the chorus. The chorus itself is a rhythmically vibrant call-and-response that probably would have been ornamented by knocks on a door. For his version, Macon sings both parts of the chorus—the call and the response—in a seamless melodic line, using the following text (the implied characters are given in parentheses):

(Susie) Who da? Who da? Who da? And a-who ‘dat knocking at my door? Am dat you Sambo?
(Jim) No, it am Jim
(Susie) Oh, you’d better stop your knocking at my door

⁴² Uncle Dave Macon, “Stop That Knocking At My Door” (1926, Vo 15444). The song was composed by A. F. Winnemore and Charles T. White. Guthrie T. Meade lists several later published versions in *Country Music Sources: A Biblio-Discography of Commercially Recorded Traditional Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 469.

⁴³ It appears as “original burlesque” in *Christy’s Plantation Melodies* (1851) and “operatic burlesque” in *White’s New Illustrated Melodeon Song Book* (1851), both located at the Center for Popular Music, MTSU. Macon’s lyrics are similar to the *Christy’s* version.

(Susie) Stop that knocking
(Jim) Let me in!
(Susie) Stop that knocking
(Jim) Let me in!
(Susie) Oh, you'll never stop your knocking at my door!⁴⁴

Macon as a Modern Recording Artist

Although Macon relied on recording techniques and formats commonly used during the acoustic era of recording, he was also a thoroughly modern recording artist. We can gain an appreciation of Macon's recording style by comparing him to the popular minstrel banjoist and singer Harry C. Browne (1878–1954), who recorded during the 1910s. Born in Massachusetts, Browne was an actor who played banjo in the classic style popularized by Vess Ossman. He made around twenty recordings between 1916 and 1923, most of them backed by orchestra or arranged for banjo and piano. He also accompanied the minstrel duo Golden and Hughes, and made spoken word records with Cal Stewart (e.g., "Uncle Josh At The Dentist"). Browne's songs show the continuity in repertoire between popular catalogs of the 1910s and the early hillbilly catalogs of the mid-1920s. Browne recorded such songs as "Old Dan Tucker," "Uncle Ned," "Carve dat Possum," and "Jordan Is A Hard Road To Travel," all songs that Macon later cut.⁴⁵ In many ways, Browne's recordings fit the stylized, stage-based representations of rural southern music made by the phonograph industry during the First World War era.

⁴⁴ Macon, "Stop That Knocking."

⁴⁵ Uli Heier and Rainer E Lotz, *The Banjo On Record: A Bio-Discography* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993).

The differences between Browne and Macon’s renditions of minstrel songs are instructive in understanding the stylistic shift represented by hillbilly music. Aside from the different banjo styles and arrangements (e.g., Browne is backed by an orchestra), Browne treats his songs as staged set pieces, or novelties, calculated to evoke nostalgia. Like a minstrel actor wearing a mask, he stands detached from the material and performs it ironically. By contrast, Macon’s renditions of minstrel songs are vital, personal statements. He inhabits his minstrel characters—if you can call them characters—directly and without irony. Whereas Browne always adheres to the standard or published lyrics, Macon personalizes his recordings of minstrel songs by altering the music and lyrics. He inserts political commentary and humor (e.g., in “Jordan Is a Hard Road To Travel”), thus realizing a core minstrel tenet: that a song should belong to its time and place by lampooning current affairs and, thus, not be a museum piece. As Robert Cantwell has noted, by the late nineteenth century, the minstrel show in northern theaters had become a “polite and highly conventionalized theatrical tradition with little connection to folk culture, black or white.”⁴⁶ Such a description held true for Browne and other popular recording artists who recorded minstrel songs in the early twentieth century. Macon, however, treated such songs in a more modern way.

Macon’s recordings were modern in other respects. He extended pre-existing recording techniques by devising new formats and structures and by innovating in the studio. As Tony Russell has observed, Macon recognized more quickly than most

⁴⁶ Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 258.

hillbilly artists the musical and dramatic possibilities of record-making.⁴⁷ On some recordings, Macon created thematically unified tracks comprised of several musical and textual sections, a technique that I have labeled “pastiche.” In his pastiches, Macon fused several short, distinctive segments—sung, spoken, or instrumental—into a single recording in order to tell a story or relate an overarching, usually political message. Macon’s pastiches simulated the pace, variety, and intimacy of a radio barn dance or a vaudeville stage show and offered commentary on social and political issues of the day, all within the tight space of a three-minute recording.

Macon’s pastiches may have been partly inspired by minstrel show records of the early 1900s, which often mixed songs, monologues, and instrumental segments, and were sometimes stitched together according to a particular theme. Early minstrel records, by such groups as the Columbia Minstrels and the Victor Minstrel Company, were usually condensed versions of the minstrel show First Part divided over multiple discs or cylinders.⁴⁸ The format of such early minstrel records was virtually identical to Macon’s later pastiche records. It consisted of a salutation (“Gentlemen, be seated”), an instrumental overture, a dialogue with jokes, a solo vocal song, and a finale chorus with several voices. An example is “Old Log Cabin” (1902), a multi-disc record series by the Columbia Minstrels (George Gaskin, Billy Murray, and Len and Harry Spencer). Part five of this six-part record series presents a form that, in its basic outlines, is remarkably

⁴⁷ Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 13.

⁴⁸ The earliest recordings of the minstrel First Part were made in the early 1890 by Spencer, Williams, and Quinn’s Imperial Minstrels. Debus and Martin, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, CD liner notes.

similar to Macon's pastiches: a salutation, curtain-raising chord, instrumental overture, monologue and short dialogue, spoken transition, and, finally, the main song of the record, "The Old Log Cabin In the Dell." Another example of the form is the Edison Minstrels' "At the Minstrel Show" (1906) in which endmen Len Spencer and Billy Murray tell several jokes followed by tenor Harry Macdonough's singing of the ballad "A Lighthouse by the Sea." A later popular example of the minstrel First Part—again, almost identical in form to Macon's pastiches—is Tom Lewis's "Old Time Minstrel Scene," recorded for Brunswick (Macon's eventual label) in 1924; the record includes a salutation, instrumental overture ("Turkey in the Straw), jokes between the endman and interlocutor, and a closing ballad ("Sweet Antoinette").⁴⁹

Macon's pastiches, each of which were contained on a single side of a 78 RPM, had the following structure: 1) an opening banjo strum that draws the curtain; 2) a short spoken monologue that introduces the piece and is often humorous or moralistic in tone; 3) a banjo instrumental that comments on the theme; and, 4) the record's main song, which is sung by Macon. Each part transitions seamlessly into the next, and each part comments on some theme—which is usually political in nature—either directly or through musical allusion.

An example of Macon's pastiche technique is his 1927 recording, "Backwater Blues."⁵⁰ The song, which is about the disastrous flooding of the Mississippi River Valley earlier that year, exhibits all the standard elements of Macon's recorded pastiches.

⁴⁹ Examples drawn from the CD compilation *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*.

⁵⁰ Uncle Dave Macon, "Backwater Blues" (1927, Vo 5164).

It begins with a crisply strummed banjo chord, cueing the audience that the performance is ready to begin. In each segment that follows, Macon addresses the Mississippi flood in some way. The opening monologue philosophically laments the awesome power of nature, which he compares to a runaway train:

Well, good people. You all know water will put out fire. But when water backs up, it makes you put out—right up the mountain, just like the Old Wreck of 97, going down the grade 90 miles an hour. Now I’m a-gonna give you a little imitation of how that old train was a-going.

Macon then performs an instrumental version of “Wreck of the Old 97,” a song that had been a major hit for fellow hillbilly artist Vernon Dalhart and which Macon’s audience surely would have known. It is a “disaster” ballad about a railroad engineer who crashed on a trip from Washington D.C. to Monroe, Virginia in 1902, killing 17 people. Hoping to “make up time,” and going “down the grade 90 miles an hour,” the conductor lost control of the train. In Macon’s recording, the “Wreck of the Old 97” instrumental serves as a metaphor for the out-of-control river. The third segment of “Backwater Blues” is another short monologue that provides a bridge between the instrumental and the main song; Macon humorously exclaims: “Hot Dog! I’m old but I’m round here!” Part four consists of the main vocal and song, “Backwater Blues,” a harrowing depiction of the flood, interspersed with romantic verses laced with sexual innuendo:

Verse 1: Backwater’s up and the people are a-running /
I’m a-going bounding, I’m a going hunting

Verse 2: I love you and you can’t help it /
You love me but you won’t confess it. . . .

Verse 3: Two little children lying in the bed /
The water was a-rising over their heads /
The mother’s uptown, was never found. . . .

Another example of Macon's pastiche structure can be heard in his recording, "The Bible's True."⁵¹ In this song, Macon uses the medley form to comment on a contentious issue of the day: the teaching of evolution in the public schools. Recorded in 1926, the song addresses the Scopes "monkey" trial. In the science versus religion debate, Macon was a traditionalist who came down firmly on the side of the Bible. In "The Bible's True" he creates a church-like atmosphere by playing an instrumental hymn on the banjo, "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown," and delivering a short sermon on his opposition to the theory of evolution: "Now I don't believe in evolution nor revolution. But when it comes to the good old Bible, from Genesis to Revelation I'm right there!" The main song, apparently composed by Macon, mocks the idea that "man came from a monkey," and supports traditional, Bible-based instruction in school.

Although Macon's pastiches may have been partly inspired by minstrel records, Macon's minstrel "first parts" are distinct and original: the outrageous humor, stop-and-go pacing, and diversity of banjo styles are all personal trademarks. In addition, Macon's adds depth through his mixture of comedy and serious political and social topics.

Conclusion

Macon served as one of the primary transitional figures between the pre-hillbilly commercial recording artist, rooted in minstrelsy and vaudeville, and the kind of hillbilly artist that emerged in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Macon's approach placed him within an established record making tradition that had come out of vaudeville and the minstrel show.

⁵¹ Uncle Dave Macon, "The Bible's True" (1926, Vo 15322).

Yet Macon was no mere imitator. Although his recordings borrowed from the conventions and styles found in early popular recordings, he was also an innovator who imbued such techniques and forms with his own personality, extended them, and tailored them to appeal to his audience. His studio work, like his radio work (discussed in the next chapter), showed that he was more than a vaudeville stage performer who transplanted his act into new media. With the rise of hillbilly music, songsters and small-time stage performers such as Macon morphed into radio and recording stars, fundamentally changing the relationship between performers and audience. For the first time, listeners experienced the music remotely, through media, rather than in person. Performers were forced to adapt by altering their stage shows to fit the format and restrictions of radio and recordings. Macon found creative solutions to connect with his audience through the media, helping him to become one of country music's first stars. He overcame the limitations of the technology, manufacturing a style and a tone, and using musical forms, which allowed him to effectively communicate with his listeners.

Chapter 8: Macon on the Grand Ole Opry

I looked at Macon as the star of the show, and he was up until possibly the day that he died.

—Roy Acuff¹

Jewel Fagan Haynes, a ragtime pianist from Murfreesboro, Tennessee, recalled performing with Uncle Dave Macon on WSM's Grand Ole Opry in July 1932. During one broadcast, they performed "Bully of the Town," May Irwin's popular ragtime number from 1895. During the performance, Macon ran around the piano several times, "hollering" the lyrics and strumming his banjo with joyful intensity as Haynes pounded out an "um-pah" bass pattern and a syncopated right-hand melody. According to Haynes, Macon loved having a piano accompaniment because it added a rhythmic drive necessary to play old-time rags or breakdowns such as "Bully," "Dill Pickles Rag" and "Alabama Jubilee."²

This anecdote illustrates, first, Macon's knowledge of ragtime and the other popular dance music from the late nineteenth century. Like many early country musicians, Macon had a high level of comfort and familiarity with this repertoire and musical style. Ragtime instrumentals were cut from a similar stylistic cloth as traditional, old-time breakdowns, being up-tempo, syncopated, multiple-strain instrumental dance

¹ Roy Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

² Jewell Fagan Haynes, interview by Charles K. Wolfe, June 6, 1977, Wolfe 00372, cassette tape, Charles Wolfe Collection, Center for Popular Music, MTSU.

songs.³ Macon had little trouble interacting with a musician trained in syncopated, piano-based, popular music of the 1880s and 1890s, which makes sense given his musical background.

Second, the story disproves the idea, promulgated by Opry founder George D. Hay—and now part of the show’s mythology—that the Grand Ole Opry during the 1920s and early 1930s was essentially a traditional barn dance consisting of rural folk songs and old-time string bands. As the Haynes story suggests, the Grand Ole Opry also featured other musical styles, such as ragtime, derived from northern, urban-based, popular music. Indeed, the Opry, while marketed as a rural barn dance by Hay, retained a number of musical and performance conventions from the popular stage. From the minstrel show, it inherited elements of humor and drama, including burlesque, caricature, the use of “masked” characters (including whiteface and blackface), and the comedic repartee between interlocutors and endmen. From vaudeville, the Opry borrowed the principle of variety, with a mix of skits, humor, and songs, and the scheduled appearance of performers in fifteen- to thirty-minute time slots.⁴

For audiences bred on vaudeville and other stage genres, barn dances provided a smooth on-ramp to radio. In the early 1900s, at the dawn of the phonograph industry,

³ Actually, “Bully of the Town,” though a ragtime (or coon) song, is still performed by old-time, country musicians today and, thus, is an example of how artists like Macon fused pre-mass media popular music and traditional rural music to form a new commercial genre.

⁴ The influence of vaudeville on the Opry and other radio barn dances is explored by Richard A. Peterson and Paul Dimaggio in “The Early Opry: Its Hillbilly Image in Fact and Fiction,” *Journal of Country Music* 4, no. 2 (1973): 39–51. Robert Cantwell discusses the idea the Grand Ole Opry as descendant of the minstrel show in *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 249–74.

record companies gave preference to music that was broadly known to the public such as military band arrangements, light opera, comedy, and vaudeville. “Faced with the novelty of the machine,” writes historian Andre Millard, “listeners were reassured by music that they already knew.”⁵ Similarly, in early radio, stations programmed familiar material such as minstrel shows, barn dances, comedy routines, monologues, and dramatic scenes. Asking audiences to take a leap of faith by using a new technology, radio stations served up familiar musical sounds and scenes, which helped them envision shows they could not see, and perhaps eased listeners’ transition to the new technology.

The Grand Ole Opry was uniquely positioned to make a successful transition to the new technology because of two individuals, both of whom had a background in the traditions of nineteenth-century minstrelsy and vaudeville: George D. Hay, the Opry’s creator and announcer; and Uncle Dave Macon, the Grand Ole Opry’s first star. Hay began his career as a reporter for the Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, where he developed a column that played on minstrel show stereotypes; later, he moved to radio, becoming the first host of WLS’s National Barn Dance in Chicago. Macon, the Opry’s marquee star through most of the 1930s, had an intuitive knack for how to adapt older musical forms to new media. To succeed in the new mass media era, Macon adapted entertainment techniques that had commonly been used by popular stage performers of the past, including comedy, political commentary, jokes, novelty sounds, rapid alterations in mood, instrumental tricks, and storytelling. Blending a stage-based showmanship rooted in nineteenth-century vaudeville and minstrelsy with a rural southern charm, Macon

⁵ Millard, *America On Record*, 84.

attracted audiences to the new hillbilly genre and became the first star of the Grand Ole Opry. Through his on-air presence—which included a booming voice, storytelling and comedic abilities, and a kinetic performance style—Macon forged a personal bond with radio audiences. Together, Hay and Macon repackaged nineteenth-century vaudeville and minstrelsy for radio, providing an entertainment bridge between popular, nineteenth-century stage music and the mass-media-based country music emerging in the 1920s.

Grand Ole Opry: Origins and Background

The Grand Ole Opry was born on November 28, 1925, when George D. Hay, WSM's newly hired director of radio programming, invited Uncle Jimmy Thompson, a 76-year-old fiddle player from Smith County, Tennessee, to WSM's studios in Nashville to play a set of "old familiar tunes" over the air. With Hay announcing, and Jimmy's niece Eva Thompson accompanying on the piano, Uncle Jimmy played traditional fiddle tunes over the air for two hours. Positive fan mail poured in, and several weeks later, on Saturday, December 26, 1925, a second broadcast of old-time music took place. This second broadcast, which was listed as "An Evening with WSM," again featured Thompson and his niece, as well as Uncle Dave Macon.⁶ The December 26 show inaugurated a weekly Saturday-evening program of old-time music on WSM directed by Hay. Initially called the WSM Barn Dance, Hay rechristened the show The Grand Ole Opry in 1927.⁷

⁶ Apparently the two acts performed separately.

⁷ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 24.

WSM was owned by the Nashville-based National Life and Accident Insurance Company. With the call letters WSM (“We Shield Millions”), its purpose was to provide advertisements for the parent company, National Life Insurance, much as WLS (“World’s Largest Store”) promoted the catalogs and products of their parent company, Sears and Roebuck.⁸ The Grand Ole Opry was part of a broader cultural movement, the context of which included: 1) the rise of commercial radio and creation of other barn dances on radio stations nationwide including WLS in Chicago, WSB in Atlanta, WBAP in Fort Worth, and WDAD in Nashville; 2) the vogue for old-time fiddling and square dancing, as seen in the proliferation of regional and national competitions; 3) the entry of phonograph companies into the old-time music market in 1923 and 1924; and 4) a growing fascination among middle-class Americans with native folk music traditions, spurred by, and reflected in, the songbooks of such folklorists as John Lomax, Dorothy Scarborough, John Jacob Niles, and Carl Sandburg.⁹

WSM’s most important early acquisition was George D. Hay, who in November 1925 became the station’s “radio director in charge.” Born in Attica, Indiana in 1895, Hay got his start in the newspaper business, working as a court reporter for *The Commercial Appeal* in Memphis. In 1923, the paper hired him as an announcer for their new radio station, WMC, where he developed a trademark announcing style that featured humor and a homespun folksy manner; Hay began each show by blowing a toy steamboat

⁸ Charles K. Wolfe, *The Grand Ole Opry: The Early Years, 1925-35* (Old Time Music, Booklet 2. London: Old Time Music, 1975), 12–13.

⁹ For a general overview of these topics, see Malone, *Country Music U.S.A.*, chapters 1 and 2.

whistle (nicknamed “Hushpuckiny”) and inviting listeners to take an “entertaining trip down the Mississippi.” In early 1924, Sears, Roebuck, & Company lured Hay away to announce for their flagship radio station, WLS, in Chicago. At WLS, Hay emceed several programs, most importantly the National Barn Dance, considered by historian Charles Wolfe to be “the first totally successful radio show featuring old time music.”¹⁰ He also assumed the colorful title “solemn old judge,” a name he carried with him to the Grand Ole Opry. In 1924, Hay received the *Reader’s Digest* award for most popular radio announcer. Later that year, WSM brought Hay to Nashville to become director of the station. About one year later, Hay put Uncle Jimmy Thompson on the air and created the first version of the Grand Ole Opry.

From the beginning, Hay was the axis on which the Grand Ole Opry turned. As the show’s announcer and creative director, Hay determined the content and format of the shows during the 1920s and early 1930s. He hired the performers, decided what they would wear, and gave them stage names. He was also the Opry’s chief media consultant and press agent. He crafted the show’s image in press releases and newspaper articles and wrote the show’s first history, *A Story of the Grand Ole Opry* (1941). Hay invented the name “Grand Ole Opry,” a mock reference to classical music. Finally, he played a significant role in shaping the careers of Opry artists outside the program. Besides organizing and serving as announcer for the Opry’s traveling tent shows, he founded and directed the Opry’s artist booking agency, the Artists Service Bureau.

¹⁰ Wolfe, *Opry: The Early Years*, 13.

The Opry Format: Barn Dances and String Bands

The Opry modeled itself, first and foremost, on the rural barn dance, a well-known event in small towns and villages throughout the United States. The barn dance, a rural gathering that took place in a barn or other large building, traditionally involved string bands, square dancing, and comedians. The musical core of a rural barn dance was the string band, a group typically consisting of fiddle, banjo, and guitar, and less frequently, mandolin, ukulele, bones, piano, and other string and percussion instruments. Nearly all of the best-known Opry acts during the 1920s and early 1930s were solo fiddlers or string bands: Uncle Jimmy and Eva Thompson, Dr. Humphrey Bate and His Possum Hunters, Bert Hutchison and the Fruit Jar Drinkers, The Binkley Brothers Dixie Clodhoppers, Blind Joe Mangrum and Fred Shriver, Paul Warmack and His Gully Jumpers, Theron Hale and His Daughters, and the Crook Brothers String Band. In fact, among the Opry regulars of the late 1920s, only two were not primarily members of string bands: DeFord Bailey, the African-American harmonica player who typically played solo; and Macon, who also often played solo, although he also appeared in various string band lineups with the McGee Brothers, Sid Harkreader, Mazy Todd, and others.

The centrality of string bands on the early Opry was evidenced by Victor Records' field recording expedition to Nashville in September and October 1928, where, among the many Opry acts recorded, nearly all were string bands.¹¹ Opry guidebooks from the 1950s and 1960s confirm the preeminence of the string band format in the early years of the show. *WSM's Official Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book* (1957) notes

¹¹ Discographic details can be found in Russell, *Country Music Records*.

that in the 1920s, “the basic talent was the old-time band. The singer was a part of the band—but he was subordinate to the musicians.”¹² In press releases and other marketing materials, Opry promoters framed the show as something traditional and wholesome, describing it as “the homespun voice of America speaking to the homespun heart of America, through the new invention of radio.”¹³ The show’s founder and announcer, Hay, also promoted the Grand Ole Opry as a radio “barn dance.” He evoked the spirit of barn dances when he marketed the show as a “big get-together party” that brought “old friends and even members of families together after absences of many, many years.”¹⁴

In keeping with the barn dance theme, Hay “rusticated” the show by having the artists play the roles of country rubes. The process of “rustication” (Charles Wolfe’s term) began around 1927, but was not complete until the early 1930s.¹⁵ Hay dressed the artists in “rube” attire such as straw hats, baggy pants, and overalls, and gave them colorful names that suggested the backwoods or mountains, such as the Fruit Jar Drinkers or Humphrey Bate and The Possum Hunters. Macon, too, assumed a regular nickname on the show, “The Dixie Dewdrop,” although evidence suggests Uncle Dave had actually created the nickname several years prior.¹⁶ In press releases and articles, Hay stressed the

¹² *WSM’s Official Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book 1, no. 1* (Nashville: WSM, 1957), 17.

¹³ Harris, “The Story of the Famous WSM Grand Ole Opry,” 30.

¹⁴ Quoted in Wolfe, *Opry: The Early Years*, 18.

¹⁵ Wolfe, *Opry: The Early Years*, 24.

¹⁶ “Dixie Dewdrop,” contrary to Wolfe’s claim, could not have been given by Hay, who arrived at WSM in 1924, since Macon was using it by the time of his Nashville

rural character of the show and asserted that the Opry presented genuine “folk music” rather than “popular” music. He articulated his vision for the show: it would “present the folk music of America, particularly of the South” with “just enough production or dressing to make it palatable to our audience.” The programming philosophy would be to “keep the show simple and friendly,” and to be as “neighborly” as possible.¹⁷ Like a real barn dance, the Opry would be an impromptu and unrehearsed gathering in which musicians casually stopped by, and artists were rural, unsophisticated, and amateur.

There were several possible reasons for Hay to push the show in a rustic direction. First, and most obviously, he was shaping the show to appeal to the rural population of farmers that surrounded Nashville and listened to WSM, a core customer demographic for the National Life and Insurance Company. Second, by the late 1920s, Opry performers had become more visible to audiences, necessitating some kind of visual branding. Initially, Opry artists were mostly unseen by audiences since the show was broadcast from a recording studio.¹⁸ In the late 1920s, however, the show moved to a theater and was done before a live audience. As Opry members began to appear in front of live audiences, their visual image became more critical. Evidence for this claim comes from Alcyone Bate Beasley, daughter of Humphrey Bate, and a pianist and ukulele player

Vendome show in 1923, as reported in the *Nashville Banner*, "Unusual Program Offered At Loew's," January 14, 1923.

¹⁷ George D. Hay, “Strictly Personal,” *Rural Radio* 2, no. 2 (March, 1939): 30.

¹⁸ The first studio, Studio A, was a small airtight room with large plate-glass windows that looked into a control room and an outer hallway. From the hallway, a small group of fifteen or twenty spectators stood and watched through the windows and applauded after each song; a new group of spectators would be shuffled through the hallway every few songs. Kirk McGee, interview, Country Music Hall of Fame (1973).

in his band, who noted that Opry members adopted rube costumes once they began touring with the Opry Tent shows in the 1930s.¹⁹

The process of rustication also helped Hay distinguish the Opry from its popular music competitors, including vaudeville, and the popular genre of jazz. As hillbilly music took root, record company executives and radio station programmers worked to develop a marketing image for hillbilly performers. In general, promoters cast the hillbilly industry in opposition to the dominant popular music trends of the time, especially jazz and other popular dance-based music. Seemingly, this was to appeal to audiences that were believed to be predominately rural, southern, and working class. Peterson states that “it was in the interest of the early promoters to accentuate the differences between country and popular music and to fashion a distinctive image for the country performer in order to attract the committed allegiance of the people who did not like the more urbane popular music of the time.”²⁰ Jazz, largely a product of urban African-American culture, had associations with dance-halls, liquor, and unrestrained sexuality. Hillbilly and barn dance music, by contrast, was produced largely by white, rural, southern musicians. Anglo-American fiddle music was perceived by many to be morally wholesome and a representation of traditional, white American values. Henry Ford, for instance, held annual local, state, and national fiddling championships that celebrated the agrarian lifestyle and promoted traditional Anglo-Saxon, rural folkways, including fiddle playing

¹⁹ Alcyone Bate Beasley, interview by Bill Williams, March 5, 1970, transcript, Country Music Foundation Oral History Project, Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

²⁰ Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 14.

and traditional round and square dancing (as opposed to the modern “couples” dances of jazz).²¹

Hay’s claims about the rural, amateur nature of the Grand Ole Opry were, of course, somewhat exaggerated. Looking at Opry log books of the 1920s, Richard Peterson has determined that many of the musicians who performed on the Opry came from urban, middle-class backgrounds, or had at least some experience playing professionally in vaudeville, medicine shows, and fiddle competitions (and Macon, of course, was already a professional musician with training in vaudeville when he arrived on the Opry). Charles Wolfe has shown that early Opry shows were not actually impromptu, but rather, were carefully planned affairs with acts scheduled several days in advance.²² Further, the notion that the early Opry revolved almost entirely around string bands was an oversimplification. Peterson finds that while string bands were common on the early Opry, the show featured many other types of ensembles, including Hawaiian singing groups, pop groups such as the Vagabonds, and even choirs such as the Fisk Jubilee singers.²³ Macon’s centrality on the show also presents a challenge to the idea that string bands were dominant, since Macon often appeared as a solo act.

²¹ Ibid., 59–62.

²² Newspaper radio announcements compiled by Wolfe show that the Opry lineup was set days in advance of the Saturday night show. See Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot: The Birth of the Grand Ole Opry* (Nashville: Country Music Foundation Press and Vanderbilt University Press, 1999).

²³ Peterson and DiMaggio explore misconceptions about the Opry in “The Early Opry,” 39–51.

Despite the similarities between the Opry and popular variety shows, Hay did his best to distance the show from vaudeville and other forms of “popular” music. The show unashamedly promoted small-town, rural values. It claimed to be good-natured, wholesome fun for the family. The Opry offered itself as a traditional—yet still modern—antidote to the perceived scourge of urban popular culture embodied by the term “vaudeville,” and even more so, by “jazz.”²⁴ Hay worked hard to distance the Opry from jazz and other popular music of the day. In his first public press release about the show, he made a distinction between old-time and popular songs:

Old tunes like old lovers are the best, [and] at least judging from the applause which the new Saturday night feature at Station WSM receives from its listeners in all parts of the country, jazz has not completely turned the tables on such tunes as “Pop Goes the Weasel” and “Turkey in the Straw.” America may not be swinging its partners at a neighbor’s barn dance but it seems to have the habit of clamping on its ear phones and patting its feet as gaily as it ever did when old-time fiddlers got to swing.²⁵

Hay publicly rejected any comparisons between the Opry and vaudeville, jazz, or other popular genres, claiming that the Opry was “closer to the ground”:

The show business is full of variety entertainment such as vaudeville, and we have nothing but the kindest feeling toward our contemporaries who present this type of entertainment, but we believe that we have something a little bit different, a little bit “closer to the ground.”²⁶

Hay labored behind the scenes to keep the Opry’s music sounding traditional. In one Opry songbook from the late 1930s, he is credited with supporting the show’s musical

²⁴ This cultural point of view was articulated most prominently by automaker Henry Ford, a critic of jazz and a supporter of old-time, rural fiddle and dance styles. Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 59–62.

²⁵ Hay, quoted in Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 12.

²⁶ Hay, “Strictly Personal,” 30.

“old-timers” over the past decade. Hay, the book claims, “has fought against the advice of many so-called experts to turn the Grand Ole Opry into a Vaudeville show and up to the present has succeeded.”²⁷

Uncle Dave Macon: A Perfect Fit for the Opry

The early Opry’s greatest ambassador was Uncle Dave Macon. An artist rooted in both nineteenth-century stage music and rural Tennessee folk traditions, Macon was the ideal partner for Judge Hay to market an old-time barn dance on the radio. When Macon joined the Opry in December 1925, he was the only performer with an established professional record; by that point, he had already toured Loew’s small-time vaudeville circuit, made dozens of records, and earned a measure of national recognition.²⁸ His powerful personality, knack for recruiting talent, and close friendship with Hay made Macon an indispensable figure in the show’s early development, and a key to its enduring popularity.

Macon perfectly fit the show’s ethos. His image was that of a small-town, rural, and religious man. As a native rural southerner, he related easily to WSM’s audiences of farmers and working-class people. He was, in his own words, “a farmer who plays the banjo, not a banjo player who owns a farm.”²⁹ Like Hay, Macon publicly disassociated himself from jazz and other types of popular music. According to Sid Harkreader, Macon

²⁷ Curt Poulton and The Delmore Brothers. *Sweet Sentimental Songs From the Heart of the Hills* (Nashville: Radio Station WSM, 1936), 3.

²⁸ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 102.

²⁹ Quotation from *Purina’s Grand Ole Opry*, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

never liked jazz.³⁰ When asked how he felt about sharing a bill with female jazz dancers during his tour, he said: “Far as these here flappers go, I reckon they are all right for these times but I like long haired girls and long skirts on ‘em. My wife’s hair is four feet long and pretty as a picture.” He ascribed similar virtues to the five-string banjo, which had fallen out of fashion due to the rise of the four-string tenor banjo in jazz ensembles, saying, “[I play] an old fashioned five string banjo, and I like it. Once a feller asked me to play a tune on one of these here tenor banjos as he called it and I told him it would be like spooning with a gal with short hair—there wasn’t no place to ketch hold.”³¹

On the surface, Macon presented himself as a rural, homespun, southern musician. Yet he brought musical sophistication and a professional background from his experience in vaudeville. From years of playing outdoors, or in small rooms, as a “traveling troubadour,” he had developed the ability to quickly capture an audience’s attention. Further, with his stage-derived repertoire, musical style, and performance techniques, Macon provided an artistic counterweight to the country string bands who towered over the show at its inception.

Macon’s abilities were particularly well-suited to radio. As an aural medium, radio compelled listeners to visualize or imagine the performers. Unlike 78 RPM discs, which emitted a soft, scratchy, hollow tone and required re-cuing every three minutes, radio had a relatively loud and clear sound and lengthy, uninterrupted broadcast segments. It transmitted a reasonable facsimile of a live event, and therefore, could

³⁰ Harkreader, interview (Wolfe 00922).

³¹ “Tennessee Banjoist Reminisces,” *Birmingham News*, January 1, 1926.

engage the listener directly and viscerally. The most successful radio programs stimulated the imagination, allowing barn dance listeners to shut their eyes and transport themselves to the rural barn or music hall. Barn dance listeners might even physically participate in the broadcast by clapping, dancing, and singing along. Such visualization was facilitated by strong, evocative characters: the more vivid a character's personality, the easier it was to conjure a mental image. Richard Peterson argues that George Hay understood the importance of creating strong radio characters, and this may have been one of the factors that led him to rusticate the show in the first place.³² Macon, with his special blend of entertainment skills and strong personality, was the ideal partner for Hay in making the Opry a successful radio program.

In creating vivid aural scenes, Macon, Hay, and the rest of the Opry cast benefited from WSM's powerful broadcast signal. During its first months, WSM had a 1,000-watt signal, making it one of the strongest in the South. By 1928, the station gained clear-channel status, meaning broadcasts could be heard for hundreds or even thousands of miles without interference from other stations. With a strong, uninterrupted signal, the Opry could broadcast to a national audience and deliver superior sound quality compared to its competitor stations in the region.³³

Radio barn dances, in general, flourished during the 1930s as radio became more accessible. During the decade, the average price of receivers dropped from about forty to ten dollars. Household ownership of radios jumped from forty percent in 1930 to over

³² Peterson, *Creating Country Music*, 70–71.

³³ Wolfe, *Opry: The Early Years*, 14.

eighty percent by 1940, although the rural South still lagged behind other parts of the country.³⁴ As the Great Depression descended on the country, people turned to their radios for comfort and entertainment. They listened at home, often in groups, gathered around the receiver. Among working- and middle-class listeners, the most popular programs tended to be comedies, variety shows, barn dances, and dramatic serials such as soap operas.³⁵

Radio listeners in the 1930s forged personal connections with on-air personalities and characters, and in this sense radio fostered community. For instance, WLS, which catered especially to Midwest farmers, described their station as a large family and they sold a *WLS Family Album*. Bruce Lenthall argues radio listeners embedded themselves in a community of like-minded people who often lived far away but could relate to one another through shared values or economic circumstances.³⁶ In the public sphere of radio, listeners created private, intimate relationships: “In the end, listeners could imagine concrete personal relationships through the air because many listeners believed radio enabled them to get to know a performer directly: the mass medium, many felt, conveyed

³⁴ Only forty-eight percent of households in the Southeast owned a radio in 1935 versus approximately eighty-one percent of households in the Northeast. Bruce Lenthall, *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 56–59.

³⁵ Bruce Lenthall, *Radio's America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 56–59.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

not only sound, but authentic personality.”³⁷ The desire of listeners to forge connections gave performers like Macon an advantage in building an audience.

As we have seen, Macon was particularly adept at establishing connections with his audience, especially rural audiences. On radio, as in the recording studio, he displayed an intuitive grasp of how to reach his audience. He did this partly by the force of his sound and personality. Charles Wolfe argues that Macon “made little effort to adapt his older vaudeville style (born from years of doing live shows) to the new radio medium, unlike most other singers.”³⁸ Even in the broadcast studio, he performed as if he were onstage. In particular, he declined to adjust his volume or singing tone to the microphone. By the mid-1930s, two of the Opry’s marquee acts—The Delmore Brothers and the Vagabonds—were singing softer harmonies crafted for the microphone; like crooners Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee, they used a dynamically restrained approach to microphone singing.³⁹ Macon, like several of the show’s earlier performers, including Roy Acuff who joined in 1938, retained the louder, earthier, pre-microphone style of singing.

The need for strong musical characters surely drew Hay to Macon as well. As shown in Chapter 2, Macon used several personas in his stage routine. The success of his recordings demonstrated his ability to rouse excitement in an audience, even when they

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

³⁸ Wolfe, *A Good-Natured Riot*, 102.

³⁹ Mark Katz discusses how popular artists adapted to the microphone in *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 103–06.

were listening through a machine. Macon delivered a high energy act with comedy, stage patter, jokes, religious sermons, instrumental flights, and a wide-ranging mix of songs. On his recordings, he reproduced the intimate atmosphere of a live performance, addressing his listeners as if he were playing a fireside concert. Such qualities made him a perfect candidate for radio, a medium that thrived on creating the illusion of intimacy. Radio also fostered communities of listeners who shared a sense of cultural identity. The Grand Ole Opry cultivated an identity that was rural, working-class, and southern, all traits native to Macon and his cast of personas.

As a performer, Macon had a built-in advantage. His performances were vivid enough to suggest to listeners his physical appearance, facial expressions, and onstage movements. In 1937, a fan named M. A. Cowdery sent in caricature sketches of Opry performers based only on his aural impressions. Cowdery's sketch of Macon and his son Dorris, while not entirely accurate, portrayed a remarkably vibrant and kinetic performance.⁴⁰ Such physicality may partly explain Macon's tremendous success on radio.

With his musical and personal relationships to Hay and other cast members, Macon shaped the show during its formative years, influencing both its format and style and making him a key partner with Hay in developing and popularizing the new show. Not surprisingly, Macon influenced other Opry artists. He shaped the repertoires of fellow cast members, for example, the Binkley Brothers, who in their sole recording

⁴⁰ These sketches were later published in Charles K. Wolfe, "Gallery: The 1937 Opry: A Fan's View," *Journal of Country Music* 7, no. 3 (December, 1978): n.p.

session in October of 1928, recorded mostly Macon songs.⁴¹ Several Opry regulars—Sam and Kirk McGee, Sid Harkreader, the Delmore Brothers—were Macon’s sidemen and protégés. He toured, recorded, and played on the radio with them. Although he did not appear on the show every Saturday night due to his touring schedule (generally, he played on the Opry only during the winter and toured the rest of the year) Macon played on the show regularly throughout the late 1920s and 1930s, certainly enough to influence the other musicians in a significant way.⁴²

Macon was also critical to the success of the Grand Ole Opry because of his ability to tour, which no doubt increased the popularity of the show. Macon’s extensive traveling throughout the South enabled him to build an ever larger following, eventually making him the Opry’s first star. Certainly, the star power he developed as a touring musician in the 1920s and 1930s contributed to the development and commercial success of the Opry show. His popularity as a touring artist was so great that future stars of the Opry often toured with Macon and, thus, used him to build their own popularity.

Conclusion

Today, the Grand Ole Opry is a place where anyone who has, or wants to have, a connection with country music goes to perform. When it first aired in the 1920s, however, the idea of hillbilly music was new and unproven. Although radio barn dances

⁴¹ Songs previously recorded by Macon included “Watermelon Hanging on De Vine,” “Little Old Log Cabin In The Lane,” “All Go Hungry Hash House,” “It’ll Never Happen Again,” and “I’ll Rise, When the Rooster Crows.”

⁴² Wolfe mentions Macon’s seasonal touring schedule in *A Good-Natured Riot*, 108.

showed promise, most notably the National Barn Dance on Chicago's WLS radio station, it was still unclear how a radio program focused on old-time music might succeed. When the Grand Ole Opry began broadcasting in 1925, it was only one of several barn dance programs marketed to rural listeners and rural people who had been transplanted to cities. Yet ultimately, it survived as the leader in country music radio. Its stiffest competitor was WLS in Chicago, but that station eventually discontinued its National Barn dance program, in 1957 (although it continued for a few more years on another network).

As the Opry's first big star and someone who performed on the show for roughly twenty-five years, Macon had significant influence on the show during its formative decades. His unique blend of showmanship, acquired from his vaudeville and minstrelsy background, initially helped capture rural audiences. His special ability to adapt many of the elements of popular music to country music contributed to his popularity as a performer and helped the Opry grow to become a pillar of the country music industry. He set the tone for making comedy an important part of the Opry during the 1920s and 1930s, using many of the tricks and comedy acts that he had learned from his vaudeville days. His ability to provide entertainment that went beyond pure barn dance music was one of the factors that likely helped build the early audience of the Opry.

Indeed, it can be fairly asked whether WSM's barn dance show would have achieved the popularity and staying power it did without having the advantage of Macon's special showmanship.

Chapter 9: Macon's Legend and Legacy

He would have liked that he was part of the foundation of country music, which is now so big and prosperous, and that country musicians are now given some respect.

—Roy Acuff speaking about Uncle Dave Macon¹

By the late 1930s, Macon—an ebullient, idiosyncratic, nineteenth-century-trained entertainer—seemed a throwback to another era. He did not listen to the radio, showed little interest in updating his repertoire, and was unreceptive to the new musical fashions shaping his genre. When Macon heard Bing Crosby on the car radio one day, someone asked what he thought, and he replied, “*That* music won’t go very far.”²

During the 1940s, Macon continued to perform at rural schoolhouses, small-time vaudeville theaters, and traditional venues such as markets and public squares. He toured with various artists, including his son Dorris Macon; Roy Acuff, who hired him as the emcee and opening act; Curly Fox and Texas Ruby; and the minstrel duo Jamup and Honey, who paid him \$125 a week to introduce them.³ Macon also kept a regular spot on the Grand Ole Opry, and throughout the decade, toured with the Opry’s tent show.

Nonetheless, Macon continued to exert a strong influence on country music during the 1940s, especially through his role on the Grand Ole Opry. Following his death

¹ Roy Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

² Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

³ Archie Macon, interview MTSU (1977).

in 1952, several of Macon's Grand Ole Opry protégés achieved success in country music television variety shows. Macon's influence also extended beyond commercial country music. During the 1950s, his recordings inspired Folk Revival groups such as the New Lost City Ramblers. In the 1970s, he emerged as an icon of the "old-time music" movement, a traditional offshoot of country music and bluegrass. Thus, by examining the full arc of Macon's career and legacy, we can see the continuing influence of Macon's brand of entertainment—rooted in nineteenth-century stage and folk musical styles—in terms of repertoire, banjo playing, stage technique, and marketing approach.

Grand Ole Man

By age seventy-five, Macon had become the "Grand Ole Man" of the Opry or "dean of the Grand Ole Opry Cast."⁴ According to Acuff, the old man's entertainment skills never really dimmed:

I looked at him as the star of the show, and he was . . . up until possibly the day that he died. Even though my name might have been on the headline, Uncle Dave to me was always the star of the show He would always entertain an audience—I never saw him fail.⁵

Uncle Dave continued to do ten or fifteen minute slots each week on the show, although, as Roy Acuff remarked, it was difficult to convince Dave that twelve to fifteen minutes was a long enough time to be on stage: he wanted to play the entire Opry show and would have played for ninety minutes if allowed.⁶ By 1939, WSM was broadcasting at 50,000

⁴ *Purina's Grand Ole Opry*, Vanderbilt University Special Collections.

⁵ Acuff, interview, MTSU (1977).

⁶ *Ibid.*

watts, making it one of the farthest reaching radio signals in the country; thus, Macon's music was continuously beamed out across the United States and into Canada and Mexico.

Macon also participated in the Grand Ole Opry picnics and tent shows. The first Opry picnic occurred around 1934 or 1935. C. R. Dowland, a federal employee in Nashville, hosted a large picnic at his home in West Tennessee. He rented a grove and erected a bandstand, and Opry artists put on five one-hour shows. They charged a dime for admission and 8,000 people showed up. Macon was then at the height of his fame. According to Hay, "Uncle Dave would play and then he would preach a little sermon. And they loved both of them."⁷ In the 1940s, the Grand Ole Opry also began taking its show on the road and performing under large tents.⁸ Opry tent shows in the 1940s featured, in addition to Macon, Bill Monroe, Roy Acuff, Lasso White, Texas Ruby, and Minnie Pearl, and others. Judge Hay would go on the Opry tours and serve as announcer. Macon played brief sets during these shows, much as he did on the Opry.⁹ The Opry tent shows were an extension of the "tented minstrelsy" that arose at the turn of the century and was a feature of southern entertainment through the Second World War.¹⁰ They were essentially variety, or vaudeville, shows; they toured as a troupe of performers, played in

⁷ Hay, "Country Music Sketch #4" and "Country Music Sketch #9."

⁸ Alanna Nash, "Home Is Where The Gig Is: Life On And Off The Road," in *Country: The Music and the Musicians* (Country Music Foundation, Abbeville Press, 1998), 260.

⁹ Hay, "Country Music Sketch #4" and "Country Music Sketch #9."

¹⁰ Tented minstrelsy is discussed in Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged But Right*, 7.

both tents and theaters, and presented a potpourri of country music entertainment in “character” dress. In that sense, the nineteenth-century legacy that Macon brought to country music and the Opry, carried on.

Macon remained marginally relevant in county music throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, mostly as a member of the Grand Ole Opry. He traveled with the Opry road troupes until 1950; and made his final appearance on the Opry on Saturday, March 1, 1952, three weeks before he died.¹¹

By the late 1930s, however, as the Opry took on a more professional cast and increasingly served as a platform for making new stars and marketing their records, Macon played a less prominent role on the show.¹² Although he retained a short segment until his death in 1952, Macon’s old-fashioned brand of humor and music receded from the spotlight and became increasingly anachronistic. Some standard Macon repertoire was even modified or dropped to reflect new musical fashions and racial attitudes, as discussed in Chapter 6.¹³ A new generation of Opry stars began to eclipse Macon in popularity. In the late 1930s, several new artists arrived who became mainstays of the show: in June 1937, Pee Wee King, an accordion player from Milwaukee, who had a slick, professional band (with Eddy Arnold); in February 1938, Roy Acuff, a rough-edged singer and fiddler (with stylistic affinities to Macon) who headed the Smoky

¹¹ “Macon—Final Days: Died at Rutherford Hospital,” *Nashville Banner*, March 22, 1952.

¹² The rise of the star system, and its effect on the Opry, is discussed in Escott, *The Grand Ole Opry*, 45–67.

¹³ The revised version appears on the CD box set *Keep My Skillet Good and Greasy* (Bear Family Records: 2004).

Mountain Boys and became the Opry emcee; in November 1940: the comedian Minnie Pearl, who often teamed with fellow rube comedian Rod Brasfield; in October 1939, Bill Monroe, who later formed the Bluegrass Boys with Flatt and Scruggs, which played a much faster, driving style of string band music than other groups on the Opry; and, in January 1943, Ernest Tubb, who brought the new honky-tonk style and helped broaden the Opry audience beyond the Southeast to Texas and beyond.¹⁴

Stylistically, a growing gap separated Macon from the new wave of 1940's country artists such as Roy Acuff, Gene Autry, Red Foley, and Kitty Wells. Historian Karen Linn tells the oft-repeated story about Macon's first encounter with bluegrass banjo virtuoso Earl Scruggs. When Macon heard Scruggs play the banjo he exclaimed, "That man ain't one damn bit funny!" This story, while probably apocryphal (as Linn points out), nonetheless illustrates the generational divide in country music between nineteenth-century-rooted artists such as Macon, who viewed themselves primarily as entertainers and comedians, and the newer bluegrass musicians who also prized speed and virtuosity in their performances.¹⁵

In the recording studio, Macon's career followed a similar path. In the mid-twenties, he had served as an older model for some of his hillbilly contemporaries. In 1926, for example, Vernon Dalhart—that weather vane for popular music trends—

¹⁴ Dates provided in Colin Escott, *The Grand Ole Opry: The Making of an American Icon* (New York: Center Street, 2006), 45–67.

¹⁵ Karen Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 140. According to Cleo Davis, Bill Monroe's guitarist, "Roy Acuff, Pee Wee King, and Uncle Dave Macon who were standing in the wings could not believe when we took off so fast and furious. Those people couldn't even think as fast as we played."

recorded a near-exact replica of Macon's "On The Dixie Bee Line," including the opening joke and cackle. By the mid-1930s, however, Macon had ceased making records. His spontaneous approach to recording, with monologues, comic asides, and loosely arranged song medleys, had given way to a far more polished industry standard. In June 1929, he recorded thirty songs for Brunswick, but nearly half were rejected by the label. In March 1930, he attended Brunswick's field sessions in Knoxville, but none of the eight tracks he recorded were issued. Though his recording career revived briefly during the mid-1930s with the rise of the budget label, Bluebird, Macon recorded only sporadically throughout the decade. Very possibly, record producers and executives saw his music as a time capsule from an earlier stage era. Thus, for all his success in the 1920s, Macon largely failed to transition to the next commercial stage of the genre during the 1930s and 1940s.

Macon's Legacy: Grand Ole Opry and Television

Macon died in March 1952, but continued to have a broad and deep influence on folk and country musicians. His most significant influence was on the Grand Ole Opry. For years, Macon unofficially represented the Grand Ole Opry's early years. Guidebooks from the era portray him as a founding father and representative of the show's golden age. For instance, a 1957 Grand Ole Opry brochure displays pictures of Hank Williams and Macon side-by-side with the headline, "Two Opry Immortals." The caption reads: "Many great artists have come and gone during the melody-laden Grand Ole Opry history but two stand out as 'immortals' of the Country Music World—Hank Williams and

Uncle Dave Macon.” Macon came to “symbolize the spirit of the early Opry.”¹⁶ He was among the only early Opry cast members to be inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame.¹⁷

Macon also had a direct influence on the next generation of Opry cast members, including several banjo players and comedians who became major figures on the show during the 1950s and 1960s. Macon’s most significant disciples were David “Stringbean” Akeman and Grandpa Jones. Stringbean, the “Kentucky Wonder,” was a banjo-playing clown who wore a “ridiculous costume of baggy pants with a knee-high waist,” according to a 1950s Opry brochure.¹⁸ Stringbean fell under Macon’s spell in the early 1940s while working with the Opry Tent Show. Macon gradually took Stringbean under his wing and taught him songs, banjo technique, and performance approach.¹⁹ Two of his most well-known songs were “Barnyard Banjo Picking” and “Twenty-Cent Cotton, Ninety Cent Meat,” the latter also a Macon standard.²⁰ According to Kirk McGee, Stringbean even copied Macon’s stage moves such as lifting his foot while he played.²¹ Another Macon

¹⁶ *WSM’s Official Grand Ole Opry History-Picture Book*, 7.

¹⁷ Other than Macon (inducted in 1966), only a few regular Opry performers from the 1920s and 1930s have been inducted into the Country Music Hall of Fame: Roy Acuff (1962), Bill Monroe (1970), the Delmore Brothers (2001), and DeFord Bailey (2005). For more information, see <http://countrymusichalloffame.org/Inductees>.

¹⁸ *The Martha White-Pet Milk Grand Ole Opry Show Souvenir Program-Picture Album* (no date).

¹⁹ Wolfe, *Barn Yard Banjo Pickin’*, CD liner notes.

²⁰ *Martha White-Pet Milk Grand Ole Opry Show Souvenir Program-Picture Album*.

²¹ McGee, interview, MTSU (1984).

heir was Grandpa Jones, also a banjo player and comedian who, like Stringbean, achieved renown for his banjo-based songs and comedy. Among Jones's signature pieces were "Old Rattler," "Eight More Miles to Louisville," and "Mountain Dew, a song also played by Macon."²²

Macon's brand of physical comedy reverberated beyond his immediate sphere of banjo imitators and disciples and helped guide the course of the Opry through the 1940s and 1950s. As the show matured in the 1930s, it moved away from the initial core of string bands and fiddlers and embraced pop singing groups like the Vagabonds, as well as new musical comedy acts. The new comedy acts, which continued the Macon tradition, included Robert Lunn, the "talking blues" comedian who joined the show in the 1930s; Lew Childre, known as "Doctor Lew," a "one-man show" who yodeled, played Hawaiian steel guitar, and danced and told jokes at the same time; Rod Brasfield, a high-stepping, rubber-faced rube character who wore baggy pants, suspenders, and button shoes, and railed against Hollywood "big shots"; and his partner, Minnie Pearl, a guileless lass from "Grinder's Switch," Tennessee, who dressed in her finest Sunday clothes (with the price tag still hanging from her hat) and greeted audiences with a high-pitched "How-DEEE!" These newer comedians all revered Macon. Pearl, one of the most popular Opry artists of her era, called Macon the Opry's "top entertainer" of the 1940s, when he was in his seventies.²³

²² Information from *Martha White-Pet Milk Grand Ole Opry Show Souvenir Program-Picture Album*.

²³ "In '40s, Uncle Dave Macon was Top Opry Entertainer," Sarah Cannon (Minnie Pearl), "Minnie's Memories" series, *Nashville Banner*, July 21, 1986.

Macon's brand of vaudeville-inspired comedy also lived on in country music television shows such as *Hee Haw*, which became popular years after Macon's death. In a biographical letter to George Hay in 1933, Macon wrote about his future ambitions in new media, foreshadowing the emergence of country music television variety shows: "Uncle Dave not yet being satisfied with what he now does, he is looking forward to Television that he might add one more attraction to his Radio Programme."²⁴

For decades, country music's appeal was confined mainly to the rural South. From 1969 to 1971, however, *Hee Haw*, a show centered on rural, southern music and culture, was aired on CBS and continued for another twenty years through local syndication and distribution. The show proved the genre's appeal beyond rural audiences, as it achieved success in all major markets, including New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Its entertainment forerunners were the radio barn dances, and more distantly, the minstrel show. According to Dale Cockrell, *Hee Haw*'s "structure, humor, characterization, and, in many ways, music were like those of a minstrel show [but] in "rube-face."²⁵ Hee-Haw embraced the Opry's combination of music, comedy, skits, and religious revivalism.

As the person most associated with creating and popularizing such elements on the Grand Ole Opry, Macon had at least an indirect influence on such television variety shows. Many of the key performers on *Hee Haw* had a long association with the Opry and, in many cases, knew Macon, who was still performing at the Opry when they arrived

²⁴ Uncle Dave Macon to George D. Hay, May 23, 1933, reprinted in "Commercial Music Documents: Number Four." *JEMF Quarterly* 5, no. 15, part 3 (Autumn, 1969): 92.

²⁵ Cockrell, "Blackface Minstrelsy, 36.

there in the 1940s or 1950s. Roy Clark, an accomplished banjo player and one the principal performers on *Hee Haw*, first appeared on the Grand Old Opry in 1950, when he was seventeen and Macon was still performing on the show. Two other original performers on *Hee Haw* were Stringbean and Grandpa Jones. While I am not arguing that any particular routines from the television show came directly from Macon, the program's outrageous cornball humor and rapid-fire delivery owed much to the tradition established by Macon on the Opry. This brand of humor, of course, had its antecedents in nineteenth-century vaudeville and minstrelsy, thereby suggesting another way in which Macon provided a bridge from minstrelsy to modern country music.

Folk Revival

Finally, Macon's music affected the course of the post-Second World War urban Folk Revival. He influenced the folk music revivalists in at least three ways: his songs (including his political songs); his banjo technique; and his "freewheeling" musical spirit or energy, which inspired groups such as the New Lost City Ramblers.

Revivalist interest in Macon can be traced through a number of sources: folk music journals such as *Caravan* and *Sing Out!*; LP reissues of Macon's original recordings; and the inclusion of Macon's songs in folk music anthologies and collections. The title of an article from *Caravan* in August 1959, "The Grand-Daddy of American Country Music," indicated the growing enthusiasm among folk revivalists for Macon's

music. In the summer of 1963, Jon Pankake wrote a laudatory article for *Sing Out!* entitled, “Uncle Dave Macon—Country Music Immortal.”²⁶

Interest in Macon was fueled by LP reissues of his music. Four Macon songs were reissued on the popular 1952 Folkways collection *Anthology of Folk Music*. In 1963, Smithsonian reissued sixteen Macon songs with liner notes by Pete Seeger.²⁷ Three years later, Ralph Rinzler wrote notes for a Decca compilation of Macon recordings called *Uncle Dave Macon: First Featured Star of the “Grand Old Opry.”*²⁸ Several other LP reissues of Macon’s recordings appeared during this period.²⁹ Numerous Folk Revival musicians also recorded Macon songs on their own LPs. Pete Seeger recorded “Cumberland Mountain Bear Race” in 1949, and “Wreck of the Tennessee Gravy Train” in 1963. He also made “Buddy Won’t You Roll” into a core song in his concert repertory. The influential revivalist group New Lost City Ramblers, comprised of Mike Seeger, John Cohen, and Tom Paley also championed Macon with their recordings. Their first album, *New Lost City Ramblers* (1958), for example, featured Macon’s “Railroading and Gambling.” Macon’s importance to Folk Revival artists and scholars can also be gauged by the frequent appearance of his songs in folk music songbooks. Alan Lomax published

²⁶ Joe Nicholas, “The Grand-Daddy of American Country Music” *Caravan* 18 (Aug.–Sep, 1959), 12–13. Jon Pankake, “Uncle Dave Macon—Country Music Immortal,” *Sing Out* 13 (Summer 1963): 51.

²⁷ Pete Seeger, *Uncle Dave Macon* (Smithsonian RBF-51, 1966).

²⁸ Ralph Rinzler, *Uncle Dave Macon: First Featured Star of the “Grand Old Opry* (Decca DI 4760, 1966).

²⁹ Examples included *Uncle Dave Macon* (Cincinnati, OH: Vetco Records, Vetco 101, ca 1963.), LP liner notes by Bob Hyland; and *Mountain Banjo Songs and Tunes* (New York: County, ca. 1968), notes by John Burke.

“Cumberland Mountain Deer Race” in *Folk Songs of North America* (1960). *The New Lost City Ramblers Songbook* (1964), compiled with annotations by Mike Seeger and John Cohen, included eight Macon songs. Art Rosenbaum also published transcriptions of some of Macon’s banjo parts in his songbook *Old-Time Banjo* (1968).³⁰

Folk Revivalists praised several aspects of Macon’s music. First, such artists were drawn to Macon’s songs, especially the original political and comedic ones. Second, Pete Seeger, Cohen, and other Folk Revival banjoists admired Macon’s banjo playing, which, as discussed earlier, incorporated banjo techniques from nineteenth-century minstrel, vaudeville, and classic banjo playing and differed markedly from the perhaps more widely-known (at least to urban revivalists) Appalachian banjo styles of Doc Boggs, Bascom Lunsford, and Roscoe Holcomb. Finally, folk musicians of the 1950s and 1960s recognized the “exuberant” spirit of Macon’s music, a word used multiple times in the Ramblers’ songbook under the Macon song annotations. The exuberant quality that Seeger, Cohen, and other Revivalists found so attractive, was, I believe, at least partly a result of Macon’s training in theatrical genres. It also reflected, however, Macon’s unique artistic spirit.

Finally, Uncle Dave Macon’s legacy lives on in the current old-time music scene in the United States. Indeed, Macon remains an icon to that movement. Uncle Dave Macon Days is a widely recognized old-time music festival held annually in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and the official site of the National Competitions in Old-Time

³⁰ Mike Seeger and John Cohen, *The New Lost City Ramblers Song Book* (New York: Oak Publications, 1964); and Art Rosenbaum, *Old-Time Mountain Banjo* (New York: Oak Publications, 1968).

Buck Dancing, Clogging, and Banjo, as designated by an act of Congress in 1986. As Robert Oermann wrote in a 1987 article in the *Tennessean*, Uncle Dave Macon Days is a “time to remember a great folk hero and his contributions to music and to this area.”³¹

As an old-time musical festival, Macon Days offers a retreat or refuge from the modern world. It is held in a mock antebellum southern town, Cannonsburgh Pioneer Village, located just blocks from downtown Murfreesboro. In Cannonsburgh, log-cabin buildings are arranged in a large circle around the village and include a blacksmith shop, courthouse, chapel, cotton warehouse, one-room schoolhouse, and dogtrot house.³²

Festival grounds are strewn with banjo pickers, fiddlers, guitarists, and buck dancers who stand on wooden platforms. In the village chapel, visitors line-out hymns and sing gospel songs from shape-note books. Artisans sell arts and crafts, including homemade instruments such as didley bows, jugs, and canjos (a single-stringed instrument made from a broomstick and an empty Spam can as a resonator). An anti-technology spirit—embodied in many ways by the mule-driving Macon—pervades the festival and is symbolically invoked with the Uncle Dave Macon Motorless Parade of horses, buggies, mules, and wagons that occurs on Saturday afternoon. Gloria Wilson, festival director in 1988, said: “We feel Uncle Dave Macon Days in one weekend that turns back the clock to a simpler time of barn dances and jammin’ on the front porch with family and friends.”³³ And Rita Frizzell, one-time publicity director for festival, summed up the

³¹ Robert K. Oermann, *The Tennessean*, July 3, 1987.

³² Some are original nineteenth-century buildings that were moved to the site from other places, others are reproductions of old buildings.

³³ Wilson, *Nashville Banner*, July 3, 1988.

significance of Uncle Dave Macon Days, saying, it is a “tribute to another time and style of life, characterized by the free-wheeling spirit of Uncle Dave himself.”³⁴

Conclusion

Macon’s freewheeling performance style, banjo playing, and comedy—rooted in nineteenth-century stage music—shaped the Grand Ole Opry and country music long after his death. His music survived through the next generation of Opry stars, such as David “Stringbean” Akeman, Grandpa Jones, and Roy Acuff. In the 1950s and 1960s, television country music shows like *Hee Haw* grew in number and helped bring rural-based music and humor to a national audience. Such shows were a direct extension of the Opry and other radio barn dances, and Macon’s protégés played a major part in their success. The urban Folk Revival, which developed after the Second World War, also drew inspiration from Macon’s nineteenth-century stage techniques, banjo style, comedy, and political songwriting. Folk musicians and folk music scholars such as Pete Seeger, The New Lost City Ramblers, and Alan Lomax all cited Macon as an important forerunner and inspiration for the folk music movement. Finally, Macon’s music and personal legacy continue to be vital elements of the current old-time music movement, a “do-it-yourself” community of traditional country music enthusiasts who celebrate the spirit and joyfulness of Macon’s music and life.

³⁴ Rita Frizzell, *Lebanon Democrat*, July 8, 1987.

Conclusion

“The Dixie Dewdrop,” from Smart Station, Tennessee, was a man whose delightful sense of humor and sterling character endeared him to millions. A professional performer on the Grand Ole Opry for 26 years, he was a “Minstrel of the Countryside” prior to that. He was a country man who loved humanity and enjoyed helping others. A proficient banjoist, he was a singer of old-time ballads and was, during his time, the most popular country music artist in America.”

—Macon’s Country Music Hall of Fame plaque¹

Uncle Dave Macon’s career illuminates how the cross-currents of rural and popular entertainment during the nineteenth and early twentieth century interacted to help form the genre now known as “country music.” Though he lived most of his first fifty years in the rural South, and was thoroughly ground in the region’s folk music, trends, and sensitivities, Macon was unusual among the first generation of hillbilly musicians in that he also had a significant urban background that provided him firsthand exposure to various forms of nineteenth-century popular stage music, including minstrelsy and vaudeville. Macon spent part of his formative years living in a hotel in downtown Nashville that was frequented by professional entertainers. Because Nashville was situated on a major river with easy access to multiple areas of the country, Macon enjoyed a rich exposure to many performance styles, songs, and stage practices of the nineteenth century.

¹ Hall of Fame plaque, “Uncle Dave Macon,” Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, Nashville, Tennessee.

At the same time, Macon's music incorporated features from other nineteenth-century musical traditions, including the rural-based folk music of Middle Tennessee, which he mastered through decades of touring the countryside as an amateur musician. During the early 1900s, Macon refined his entertainment skills and developed the ability to attract and quickly engage a crowd, skills he later relied on as a country music radio, recording, and touring artist during the 1920s and 1930s. His connection with the popular music genres of the early twentieth century deepened when, in the early 1920s, at the age of fifty, he became a full-time professional entertainer.

Ultimately, Macon was well-positioned to play a key role in the early development of country music. When he came on the scene in the early 1920s, the "hillbilly music" genre was new. Prior to that time, most recordings marketed as rural or southern were actually stereotyped versions of such material produced by northern studio musicians and sold primarily to northern listeners. Record companies decided that a more authentic sound of the rural South—hillbilly music—might enable them to expand their market to include southern, rural listeners. Yet the precise mix of music and artistry that would become the hillbilly genre was still unclear. Into that uncertain situation arrived Macon, a musician with a unique set of skills and artistry, who was capable of building an audience for the new commercial style.

In the early 1920s, radio and recordings were relatively new media. The record and radio producers knew the public was comfortable with many of the conventions used in the popular stage music of the day, especially vaudeville. Macon was an artist who understood how to engage an audience by adapting the old methods to the new media. To the extent that record companies and radio stations were not sure which elements of

popular music should be included with old-time country songs or motifs, Macon gave them a vehicle to experiment and to thereby shape the developing genre.

In his records and radio appearances during the 1920s, Macon presented himself to audiences wearing a variety of personas derived from vaudeville and the minstrel show, including a variation on the blackface minstrel, the old man, the rube, and the hillbilly. He had the force of personality that was typical of nineteenth-century popular musicians, and he knew how to use his experience and techniques from the old genres to quickly attract and maintain the attention of a new audience. Thus, to succeed in the new mass media era, Macon adapted entertainment techniques that had been commonly used by popular stage performers of the past including comedy, political commentary, jokes, novelty sounds, rapid alterations in mood, instrumental tricks, and storytelling. By using these techniques, he drew audiences to the new hillbilly genre and became a major recording and radio figure.

Thus, Macon, because of his special blend of skills and knowledge, provided a key musical link between nineteenth-century, urban popular stage music and the mass media-based hillbilly music of the 1920s. Through his repertoire, musical style, banjo playing, and approach to performing, Macon preserved nineteenth-century stage material and performance values. At the same time, he incorporated into his music features common to the rural-based folk music of Middle Tennessee. Macon's records have preserved for us a large body of songs, repertoire, and showmanship that had their origins in urban, nineteenth-century vaudeville and minstrelsy. In this sense, by examining Macon's music, which was disseminated primarily through the mass media of the radio and phonograph, we can peer into a remote, murky musical era that is otherwise lost to

history, a pre-recording age that has been, in the words of Tony Russell, “enveloped in silence” due to the lack of sound recordings.²

While Macon’s music offers a window into the past, one should not place too much weight on the archaic, nineteenth-century aspects of his output or assume that his recordings, made in the 1920s, capture the musical styles and sounds of the nineteenth century. This approach has been applied, for instance, to Fiddlin’ Carson, who has been portrayed by some historians as a nineteenth-century relic who developed his vocal style, fiddle technique, and repertoire apart from mainstream urban music and the mass culture of the New South. As Patrick Huber has noted, such a romanticized, time-capsule view fails to make room for Carson’s exposure to myriad musical styles and performers in the twentieth century during the many years he worked and lived in Atlanta. Such a perspective “obscures the more decidedly modern, urban influences” that also shaped his music, which, overall, should be viewed as a “product of the early twentieth-century urban South.”³

The same potential pitfalls apply to the study of Macon. Though I have emphasized Macon’s connections to nineteenth-century stage music, I acknowledge that, by the time he made his first recordings in 1924, Macon had absorbed a wealth of twentieth-century musical style and repertoire. Though in many ways his music remained a throwback to the pre mass-media days, Macon retained his commercial relevance by adapting his material to the new media and musical styles of the day.

² Russell, *Country Music Originals*, 12–13.

³ Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 48–49.

Hillbilly music not was primarily a rural, folk-based music. In fact, much hillbilly music came from urban or industrial areas such as Atlanta, or the North Carolina Piedmont. It sprang from the urban foment of economic dislocation and social upheaval. Charlie Poole, for instance, forged his style in the urban and industrial milieu of the Carolina Piedmont, drawing from both local folk music traditions and national, mass-media-based entertainment. As Huber has noted, “Although it often looked nostalgically to the past, hillbilly music stood firmly rooted in the new social realities of the twentieth-century South.” Hillbilly musicians formed their music by blending styles and genres learned from mass media with traditional local genres such as string band music and fiddle tunes. New technologies and media—phonograph records, radio, the automobile, moving pictures, and mass-circulation newspapers—were all part of a national, mass consumer culture that shaped southern country and blues musicians.⁴ Macon’s music and career should be understood in this context.

As a result of his broad musical background, and, in particular, his exposure to urban, popular variety music in Nashville during the 1880s, Macon developed a unique musical style and artistic persona that preserved the entertainment values and showmanship of nineteenth-century urban entertainers. At the same time, he adapted his material to appeal to rural, southern audiences of the 1920s and 1930s. Performing nineteenth-century stage songs, Macon presented them in a “rustic” style that was more consistent with the new genre and appealed to country music audiences through radio and records. Even while he employed the dazzling stage tricks and marketing slogans of

⁴ Huber, *Linthead Stomp*, 37.

urban, nineteenth-century professional minstrels, Macon made sure he projected a homey, quaint image that conformed to stereotypes of the southern musician—whether the rube, minstrel, or grandfather—constructions that were, themselves, closely related to stage personas developed by urban, nineteenth-century professional minstrels.

Macon also adapted his music to fit new mass media formats, including records, radio, songbooks, and film. As a radio performer, he was integral to the success of the new barn dance show, the Grand Ole Opry. Macon's unique blend of experience, knowledge, and showmanship, as well as his energy and personality, made him better equipped than most musicians of the 1920s to connect with both record and radio audiences. Macon was a key partner of George Hay in finding a winning formula for the Opry. Not only did Macon become the Opry's first star, he remained on the show for three decades, and helped to influence many of the modern Opry and country music performers who followed him. He also expanded his popularity through extensive touring in the 1920s and 1930s, much of which was made possible by the skills and experience he garnered as a traveling troubadour and from his exposure to vaudeville and the minstrel show. This touring experience helped make Macon the Opry's first star and, indirectly, bolstered the show's popularity.

Macon made a similar mark on the recording industry. His studio work, like his radio work, showed that he was more than a vaudeville stage performer who transplanted his act into new mediums. Although he relied on recording techniques and formats commonly used during the acoustic era of recording, he imbued those techniques and forms with his own personality, extended them, and tailored them to appeal to his audience.

As a performer bred in nineteenth-century stage practices who went on to make records, perform in radio, publish songbooks, and even appear in a movie, Macon embodied the transition made by innumerable southern artists—in popular, country, blues, and gospel music—from local musical cultures rooted in live performance, to an increasingly nationalized and professional musical culture powered by the mass media of records, radio, and film.

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