CONSTRUCTING THE "PEOPLE'S MUSIC": THE FEDERAL MUSIC PROJECT, NATIONALISM AND THE NEW DEAL, 1935–1939

by J.A. Gronbeck-Tedesco

> *How far the music of the WPA project eased the distress and bewilderment of the depression must, of course, escape exact evaluation, but the contribution to the morale of multitudes certainly was significant.*
>
> Earl Moore, 1939[1]
>
> *Thirteen thousand professional musicians are giving free concerts for the education and pleasure of millions who never before have known such living music. Suddenly America is becoming musically articulate. And why not? Hundreds of young composers now find hitherto undreamed-of opportunities to be heard. No wonder they are laying the foundations of a truly native music.*
>
> Works Project Administration, organization pamphlet, 1936[2]

Prominent studies on nationalism, such as those articulated by Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, tend to focus on European systems of government and their colonial extensions. While used repeatedly by Americanists in cultural studies, the broader arguments of the British school do not always fit the American context. In terms of cultural production, Hobsbawm and Anderson generally speak about the role of the state in nationalist constructions, from "invented traditions" to "imagined communities." They focus on the state apparatus, which is traditionally problematic for the United States. In American cultural studies, there is often little mention of the role the federal government plays in the field of arts and letters.[3] It is therefore useful to historically situate any reassessment of the relationship between government and the cultural industries in the United States.

This paper will explore the role of the U.S. government in creating state-derived notions of American music during the 1930s. The New Deal era, occurring during what Hobsbawm refers to as the "apogee of nationalism," is an exceptional period in twentieth-century U.S. history due to the dominant influence of the state in programs of recovery and relief.[4] Social pacification via the arts became central in this initiative. Music was a special case in the government's promotion of New Deal nationalism, because it was an art form that was seemingly divested from political content. Music fell under the rubric of "leisure;" it was seen as a social placebo rather than "serious" Depression discourse. Yet, with live performances, recordings, and radio broadcasts combined, music was also the most widely distributed and consumed art form produced by the Works Project Administration (WPA), making it an ideal genre by which to analyze U.S.

---

[1] Earl Moore, *Final Report of the Federal Music Project* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 2.

[2] Works Project Administration, *Jobs the WPA Way* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936), n. p.

[3] There are notable exceptions. One could point to restrictive legislation such as the Comstock laws and other censorship policies, or funding institutions such as the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

[4] Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1790: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 131-62.

nationalism during the 1930s. The Federal Music Project (FMP) was a federal organization created under the auspices of the WPA’s Federal Project Number One that illustrates a case in which the U.S. government constructed a nationalist discourse around music.

Specifically, this discussion will trace the bureaucratic lineaments of American classical and folk music by focusing on the underlying nationalist narratives embodied in their production and distribution. By trying to forge a European-derived American classical form on the one hand, and an autochthonous America folk music on the other, the FMP created two diacritical musical visions that contributed to a unifying nationalist discourse embedded in New Deal rhetoric: the projection of a national community experiencing hard times; America as a pluralist collective, one comprised of multiple races and ethnicities; and the paradoxical pursuit of growth and expansion while preserving “cultural traditions” were discursive formations that contributed to a creation of American classical music and the “folk.” Instrumental in this nationalist engineering was how the U.S. government influenced musical culture during the Depression, connecting narratives of democracy and Americanism to definitions of classical and folk music. Important in these nationalist constructions are the music and musicians that the FMP included in its federal apparatus of music education, production, composition, and performance.

FUNDING AN AMERICAN CLASSICAL RENAISSANCE

The WPA was part of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act (1935), a $4.8 billion policy that the Roosevelt administration hoped would revamp America’s economic engine. Its primary task was to employ Americans in various projects such as construction, agriculture, health care, and the arts. In trying to recharge America’s economy and sense of national vigor, the U.S. government promoted a discourse that promised prosperity through community building and hard work. “Work keeps us from going nuts,” one WPA report remarked. “What happens when we’re on the dole? We lose our self-respect [and] loaf on street corners.” Work is salvation, the report promises: “Hard work and common sense” are the two principles that have “made America great.”[5] In 1935 WPA Director Harry Hopkins created the Federal Arts Project, which consisted of art, theatre, writing, and music. Roosevelt initially allocated $27 million for the four branches, $9.6 million of which was portioned for the FMP.[6] Musical creativity was thus salient in the national restructuring effort. Hopkins chose Nikolai Sokoloff to head the FMP. Sokoloff was a Russian-born, Yale-educated violinist who had made his mark in the Boston Symphony and who would direct the Project through most of its existence. During its four-year history, from October 1935 to August 1939, the FMP sponsored an impressive 275,000 live “performances, programs, and recitals” performed before 147,000,000 people in 43 states and Washington, D.C.[7] Peak employee enrollment reached 16,000 in the spring of 1936 but decreased to 9,500 by August 31, 1939.[8]

---

5 Works Project Administration, *Our Job with the WPA* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936) 22, 26-27.

6 Kenneth Bindas, *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), ix-x; Works Project Administration, *Report on Progress of the WPA Program* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936), 33.

7 Moore, *Final Report*, 1.

8 Ibid., 4. The FMP funded various musical initiatives but primarily focused on music composition, performance, and education. University professors, music educators, and professional musicians were all eligible for relief, as long as one was a United States citizen.

Following his mantra, "Music has no social value unless it is heard," Sokoloff and the FMP constructed an American music that contributed to New Deal nationalist rhetoric.[9] Seeking to challenge the division between high and low-brow culture, the FMP mixed experimentation with aesthetics, but usually promoted what it deemed an "acceptable" form of American music. Sokoloff believed that what American needed was a rejuvenation of classical music performed by symphonies and orchestras rather than music played by jazz bands or acoustic guitars. Most reports and reviews noted that the FMP clearly favored "cultivated" music over "vernacular." Despite several references to "negro" music, and other ethnic art forms, symphonies, concert bands, and orchestras were preferred to swing bands, gospel choirs, and blues singers. Sokoloff envisioned a democratization of classical composers such as Bach, Berlioz, and Mozart. In his attempt to blur the line between high-brow and low-brow, he favored production and distribution of "cultivated" music over the vulgar.

America's music, then, would be a continuation of European classics. Millions of Americans saw orchestras, concert bands, and symphonies on tour throughout their states, some lead and performed by local talent, others brandishing the skills of notables such as Paul Hindemith and Arnold Schoenberg.[10] Oklahomans could observe the Oklahoma Federal Symphony in Tulsa, Floridians the Florida Federal Symphony in Tallahassee. An estimated crowd of 55,000 saw a federal orchestra perform in Milwaukee.[11] In its final report, the FMP claimed that it had achieved mass dissemination of high-brow forms: "Great music under the Federal Music Project was no longer the privilege of the more fortunate of the dwellers in cities…"[12] It had become the "people's music," available to urban and rural areas alike.

The FMP claimed that music was socially important: its purpose was to "build music into community life through group participation in enjoyable self-expression, and to lay a foundation of cultural interest through music appreciation."[13] As the FMP's director, Sokoloff believed that Americans were amid a cultural shift, one that would replace their frontier spirit with a craving for musical creativity:

> Until the turn of the century there remained in America much of the pioneer spirit, land and horizon hunger, and there were still frontiers. Our people were too busy, often too emotionally occupied with material advancement, to concern themselves with great music.[14]

With the country in economic limbo, the time was ripe for the U.S. to focus its musical energy toward creating magnificent classical works. Seeking the guidance of superior European classical forms, Sokoloff believed that the United States could now become an artistic center of the Western world:

> Musical leaders have expressed amazement at the number and quality of compositions performed…and there are those who profess to see that long anticipated dawn when a native American music, as distinguished and indigenous as the music of France, Russia, Germany, or

---

9 Nikolai Sokoloff, *The Federal Music Project* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936), 3.

10 Moore, *Final Report*, 7.

11 Ibid., 10.

12 Ibid., 11.

13 Ibid., 17.

14 Sokoloff, *The Federal Music Project*, 9.

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century England, will come into being.[15]

The FMP glorified a high modernist tradition that used European art as the yardstick by which to measure cultural advancement. With government backing, leaders in the FMP hoped that they could distribute classical music throughout the different contours of American society, providing social betterment through artistic integrity.

In addition to an American classical renaissance, the U.S. government sponsored music formed by the aesthetics of patriotism. During its four-year existence, the FMP funded musical initiatives that nourished American nationalism. The FMP funded the first (and only) American Music Festival in 1938, which lasted three days and coincided with Washington's Birthday. People all over the country enjoyed bands playing patriotic favorites such as "Johnny Comes Marching Home," "Star Spangled Banner," and "Yankee Doodle." The music of Stephen Foster and John Philip Sousa took center stage at many of the celebrations.[16] The year was also marked by a national opera, *Gettysburg*, written by Morris Ruger and Arthur Robinson, performed in time for FDR's speech commemorating the seventy-fifth anniversary of Lincoln's original address.[17] The FMP received praise from all over the country for its efforts; many saw it as an institution that reflected government concern for its people. Music was a way to foster solidarity in a difficult era. An article from *International Musician* suggested, "Let us be the same nation that built America—America that was built in song, built by a courageous people, building for the future generations with a song upon their lips and in their hearts—the America of which Walt Whitman wrote…." [18]

The FMP shaped a music discourse that thrived on notions of American nationhood and invented traditions. Eric Hobsbawm maintains that invented traditions are "those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities; those that establish or legitimize institutions, status or relations to authority; and those whose main purpose [is] socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior."[19] By linking themes of European tradition, American democracy, and national recovery, the FMP's discourse around American music became central in the nationalist engineering by the state. The FMP purported America to be a place of "cultivation" in both senses of the word: a place where Americans would grow and improve their economic well being and a country whose high aesthetic tastes effaced the realities of the Depression hardships depicted by images such as in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dorothea Lange's photograph, "Migrant Mother." Symphonies and chorale music offered Americans an alternate identity, which became infused with tenets of European antiquity and bourgeois aesthetics, as well as American patriotism. The federal government believed that a cultural discourse based on European classics and patriotic music would achieve social pacification via the arts.

In the anticommunist climate of the late thirties, music that promulgated American nationalism took center stage. Part of the conservatism in the FMP, as Kenneth Bindas notes, was due to the pervasive political conservatism in the United States. Accordingly, in trying to avoid problems with the Dies Com-

---

15 Ibid., 22.

16 Bindas, *All of this Music*, 42-44.

17 Ibid., 51-56.

18 Andre Polsh, *International Musician* (Dec. 1936), n. p., quoted in Bindas, *All of this Music*, 12.

19 Eric Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 9.

mittee and HUAC, the FMP preferred aesthetic conservatism to experimentalism.[20] HUAC kept a watchful eye over government-sponsored arts, reorganizing, for example, the leadership of the Federal Theatre Project in 1937. During this period even the Left remained distant from radical rhetoric that disparaged New Deal nationalism. The Communist Party USA's General Secretary, Earl Browder, summed up the spirit with his 1937 proclamation that "Communism is 20th-century Americanism."[21] Hobsbawm argues that constructions of traditions occur more frequently "when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed…when there are sufficiently large and rapid changes on the demand or the supply side."[22] Depression America was one such "rapid transformation"—a moment of "conjuncture," in Gramscian parlance—in which the U.S. government assumed control of business and arts in a manner unprecedented in U.S. history.

CONSTRUCTING THE "FOLK"

In promoting its vision of national music, the U.S. government tended to exclude vernacular musical forms that hitherto had enjoyed popular acclaim. The 1920s had witnessed a surge of blues, jazz, and Tin Pan Alley greats. America's leisure culture was largely influenced by black musical traditions; Americans had consumed the music of W.C. Handy, Jelly Roll Morton, and Gertrude "Ma" Rainey. Blues recording by black musicians began to take off in 1920, shifting the music from the domain of juke joints and house parties to mainstream America.[23] Yet these musical traditions took backstage in the nationalist ideologies promoted by the FMP. Attention to African American or other ethnic music did not receive the attention of a George Gershwin or Aaron Copeland. The focus on classical music not only eclipsed the plurality of America's autochthonous musical forms, but it also inherently excluded musicians of color. As the American Federation of Musicians pointed out, symphony and concert music favored musicians who could read music and displayed a certain level of classical sophistication. Many black or Hispanic musicians who were barred from conservatories and classical training could not participate in federal symphonies or orchestras.[24]

As it turned out, Sokoloff's classical vision and distaste for "popular" music would only extend so far. Even though the FMP promoted nationalist music imbued with bourgeois European classical forms, the organization also subsidized the creation of an American folk music. The U.S. government became an active participant in institutions and projects that tracked American folklore. Interest in constructing a usable folk tradition surged in the 1930s, as university anthropology departments across the country pursued the preservation of endangered folk traditions. The work of anthropologists Zora Neale Hurston, Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, Constance Rourke, and other students of Boasian anthropology participated in different forms of folklore preservation during the New Deal era. American folk music became

---

20 Bindas, *All of this Music*, 10-11.

21 Thus, as Bindas argues, the key FMP debates revolved around art vs. politics, cultivated music vs. vernacular, and modernism vs. traditionalism, all in trying to avoid the stigma of radicalism while promoting notions of American cultivation and aesthetics. Ibid., xiii.

22 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 4-5.

23 David Evans, *Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk, Blues* (New York: Da Capo, 1982), Ch.1.

24 Nevertheless, black musicians, though segregated from white musicians and often from white audiences, participated in concert and dance bands around the country: the Los Angeles Colored Chorus, Detroit Dance Band, and the Twin Cities Jubilee Singers were examples of all-black concert units. See William F. McDonald's *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 614n.

part of this scholastic endeavor.[25] Renowned folklorist Charles Seeger joined the FMP in 1938 and administered the Folk and Social Music division.[26] Concern for folk music preservation became enmeshed with the nationalizing project of the U.S. government. Washington promoted the "scientific" pursuit of capturing America's dwindling folk music, and in doing so constructed traditions infused with tenets of nationalism, different but not inextricable from its use of high modernist art.[27]

In 1937 the Federal Music Project published *Spanish American Folk Songs* as part of its anthropological approach to recovery and preservation. The volume reflects the amalgamation of academic inquiry, government sponsorship, and the creation of regional folk traditions. In the book's introduction, A.L. Campa, Director of Research and Folklore of the WPA and a professor of Modern Languages at the University of New Mexico, stresses the importance of folk music in understanding American identity: "No other form of folk production is so revealing of temperament and subjectivism as the folk song." For Campa, the hierarchy of national, regional, and local identities begins with the plight of the individual, located in his or her own folk song: "Since for its presentation a collective endeavor of society is not necessary, in it may be found an individual interpretation and uninhibited expression that other forms of folklore do not possess."[28]

Moreover, Campa states that the popular songs of New Mexico trace back to sixteenth-century antecedents but are still endemic to New Mexico. In locating New Mexican traditions within the larger national rubric, Campa completely elides the presence of Mexico. A subsequent blurb by New Mexico's State Director of the FMP, Helen Chandler Ryan, reiterates the need to create a unique New Mexican folk tradition "to help preserve the almost forgotten tunes and verses for posterity."[29] Also bypassing ties to Mexican or Indian culture, Ryan instead connects New Mexican identity with Spain, writing that the tunes listed in *Spanish American Folk Songs* were in preparation of New Mexico's 400th anniversary commemorating the entrance of Coronado into New Mexico in 1540.[30] Echoing the opinions of Sokoloff, Ryan finds New Mexico's (and thus America's) culture residing in Europe; she celebrates the Spanish roots of New Mexican traditions rather than the Indian and Mexican cultures that would have informed these songs.

---

25 Ruth Benedict, Editor of *Journal of American Folklore*, Charles Seeger, and Frank Dobie sat on the board of sponsors on the National Service Bureau, a branch of the Federal Theatre Project that oversaw publications on folk music. John Lomax and son, Alan, became preeminent folklorists with their publication of *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934), a mix of African American music and cowboy songs. Later, Alan (a student studying Anthropology at Harvard), would receive backing from the Library of Congress to construct the Archive of Folk Song.

26 Bindas, *All of this Music*, 63.

27 Other Federal One programs pursued folk preservation as well. Several collections emerged from the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), which maintained connections with the FMP. The FTP published multiple volumes on folk music during this time: *Folk Music in America* (1939) by Phillips Barry; *Folk Tunes from Mississippi* (1937), collected by Arthur Hudson and edited by noted folklorist George Herzog (another professor from Columbia); *Traditional Ballads Mainly from West Virginia* (1939) by John Harrington Cox; and the *Southern Harmony Songbook* (1939), a reprinted gem originally published in 1835 by William Walker, the man credited with giving birth to Kentucky religious music pedagogy. All of these publications focused on Southern music and its place in American cultural production. Songs such as "Cowboy's Lament" and "Fair Charlotte" became part of America's folk repertoire, spawned by government-sponsored musical initiatives that incorporated various regional and ethnic identities to create an authentically American usable past.

28 A.L Campa, Introduction, *Spanish American Folk Songs of New Mexico, 1936-1937, Unit 1* (New Mexico: Federal Music Project, 1937), n.p.

29 Ibid., n.p.

30 Ibid., n.p.

The thirteen tunes consist of musical transcriptions, followed by their Spanish lyrics and English translations. Songs such as "The Little Tippler," "Three Flowers," "Little Road," and "I Married a Pocha" become representative of New Mexico's folk tradition but simultaneously stripped of any oppositional meaning they may have originally inhered. Their meanings avoid conflict; they are sentimental and humorous, rather than controversial. The song, "I Married a Pocha", serves as an example of this cultural dilution:

> I married a pocha/ in order to learn English/ and after three days of marriage/ I already told her "yes"/ the pochas from California/ don't know how to eat tortillas/ because in their homes they only eat bread and butter.[31]

This song could be read in various ways; clearly for the FMP the song was meant to be humorous and light. However, one may have an alternative reading. "Pocho/a" means faded, discolored or pale. It is also slang for an American citizen of Mexican descent. "Pocha" can be a derogatory term: a Mexican who has lost her origin by becoming Americanized and thus Anglocized. The Mexican-American girl from California, implies the singer, is forgetting her roots, moving from "tortillas" to "bread and butter." The subject's taste for food is indicative of her class; American bread and butter represent a socioeconomic improvement for the singer of the song, who is quick to "marry up."

Both Anderson's imagined community and Hobsbawm's invented tradition are instructive in this case. *Spanish American Folk Songs* contributes to the creation of a folk tradition in New Mexico that makes regional identity part of the purported pluralistic national one. In doing so, there is a process of dehistoricization that makes invented traditions and imagined communities possible. What is unique is that there is a creation of a state-within-a-state identity—New Mexican identity within the larger nation, but one tied to European antecedents. Hobsbawm's notion of invented traditions particularly works well here, especially when considering the role of the state in fomenting a national folk discourse. Hobsbawm writes: "It is clear that plenty of political institutions, ideological movements and groups…were so unprecedented that even historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity…."[32] Invented traditions work both at the national level, with the state's funding of cultural production and its relation to nationalism, and at the regional, with local FMP projects that inject nationalist discourse into community narratives. Due to the FMP's bureaucratic composition, local offices held sway in determining America's folk music. There were nine regional and forty-two state directors, all musicians, which funded local musical programs that informed the creation of a broader national tradition. This administrative make-up in effect created a kind of decentralized nationalism.[33] Because of the power of regional office and state offices, local folk music received quite a bit of attention; each locale created its own regional usable pasts that contributed to a national discourse of American plurality, simplicity, and conventionalism. Thus, part of collective memory is the dehistoricization process that allows for the invention of folk. *Spanish American Folk Songs* contributed to the creation of a folk tradition in New Mexico that made regional identity part of the pluralistic national one.

---

31 Ibid., n.p. Author's translation.

32 Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 7.

33 Moore, *Final Report*, 5.

The U.S. government's use of anthropological notions of "folk" and "culture" and the ethno-racial assumptions they inhered created a usable construction of folk that forged a unique nationalizing discourse. In terms of national folk music, as the previous example attests, acceptable discursive components that remained inside the domain of whiteness were European-derived, but they excluded Indian and Mexican traditions, as well as African American music. These racial formations were generally deemed beyond the normative boundaries of "American music." However, evidence also shows that African Americans participated widely in WPA programs. In 1935 an estimated 12 percent of WPA employees were black, and by 1942 this number rose to 20 percent.[34] Roughly 1 million African Americans were employed under the WPA—1,774 under the FMP—but governmental standards for what constituted "American culture" continually elided contributions from African Americans, including those in musical production. While the FMP did employ blacks, jazz, blues, and gospel took backstage in the national discourse.[35]

Still, the FMP promoted a nationalist discourse that evinced the notion of American ethnic plurality. In its Final Report, the FMP claimed that 2,500 manuscripts belonged to "primitive and indigenous songs and tunes." This brand of ethnic music sometimes included Spanish American or American Indian tunes but rarely mentioned African American music.[36] Mexican, Indian, and other non-white ethnicities were discursively "safer" for the nationalizing project, as they embodied racial formations closer to whiteness than black. In Texas, one could see the San Antonio Tipica orchestra perform songs from Mexico, which, like the New Mexican folk songs, cultivated a regional identity in Texas that informed the larger national community. There were also "Gypsy," "Hawaiian," and "Cuban marimba" groups, all conforming to a discursively safe notion of ethnic plurality under the rubric, "novelty orchestras."[37] By including racially appropriate "others," the FMP purported to blur the line between high-brow and low-brow and white and non-white. In collapsing these social distinctions under a multicultural nationalist discourse, the FMP wanted America to believe that everybody was somebody, so long as the person conformed to a particular type of "everybody." Anderson's articulation of imagined community as it relates to nationalism is useful here: "it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."[38] Both Hobsbawm and Anderson address how the state re-appropriates and reconstructs cultural phenomena in order to be

---

34 Brindas, *All of this Music*, 75; WPA, *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 45.

35 Even though the majority of live FMP performances relied heavily on African American music (the category, "dance orchestras," ranked third in total number of performances after "federal orchestras" and "military and concert bands"), jazz, blues, and black musicals were not mentioned in FMP official reports. One exception was "Run Li'l Chillun" by Hall Johnson, co-sponsored by the FMP and FTP, which ran a year in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, Paul Whiteman, the famous white jazz band leader of the 1920s, sat on the FMP's National Advisory Board as Director of Dance Music. By and large musicians such as Robert Johnson, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Chic Webb, or even Jewish clarinet virtuoso Benny Goldman, though prominent in American popular culture, remained absent from the official American musical discourse. FMP reports rarely highlighted black achievement or jazz and blues; when they did, it was usually about African American musicians who performed classical works, such as the Negro Boys Choir singing Handel's Messiah in Los Angeles or concert bands playing the music of black composers Clarence Cameron White or Nathaniel Dett. For the most part, musical performances remained segregated and black groups played in front of black audiences only. See Moore, *Final Report*, 13, 49.

36 Ibid., 48.

37 Sokoloff, *The Federal Music Project*, 7.

38 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991[1983]), 7; emphasis in the original text.

part of nationalist ideologies rather than the subversive traditions whence they came. Creating a viable, historically-grounded art form can also erase its subversive elements; the formation of collective memory and its relation to historical consciousness produces an inherent amnesia that comprises any nationalizing project. The imagining not only informs the extant nationalist discourse but simultaneously creates the historically silent.

Music and art, therefore, are part and parcel of the normalizing process of nation-building. The FMP maintained that Spanish American folk music was indicative of America's pluralist democracy and held value for future generations: "We have now an endless repertoire dealing with every manifestation of life, expressing every fine nuance of emotion of our American population that now makes its contribution towards a culture that because of its diversity is unequaled anywhere else. The work of the Federal Government in helping to collect, record, and perpetuate the melodies of our Spanish Southwest is making a contribution for which we should be thankful in years to come."[39] America's folk music contributed to the nation-building project by foreclosing difference in favor of the all-encompassing "people." As Michael Denning notes, this rhetorical shift highlighted the politics of the era of the Popular Front from 1934-1939 as well, making Paul Robeson's 1939 rendition of "Ballad for Americans" the anthem for a new historical bloc—"everybody who's nobody," followed by a lengthy list of races and ethnicities that reflected America's melting pot: Irish, Polish, Canadian, Greek, Turk, etc.[40] If "Ballad for Americans" was senseless sentimentality as some Leftist critics of the Popular Front have maintained, it was a cultural product forged out of the nationalizing efforts of the FMP and the rest of the Federal Arts Project. Sokoloff concludes his overview of the FMP with the line, "All of this music belongs to the nation."[41] Despite economic hardships and the fracturing of world stability, the music of the FMP represented a communal and pluralist America, a country whose collective multiethnic and multiracial solidarity would propel the country out of difficult times.

Depression-era nationalism produced a twin message of rustic simplicity and advanced modernization.[42] Studies on nationalism typically argue that post-1870 Western societies became more modernized, urbanized, and technologized, especially with the advent of modern mass media such as cinema and radio. This modernization in turn affected the growth of nationalism worldwide, as both Anderson and Hobsbawm note in their respective studies. Hobsbawm frames nation-building within the cultural intersection of "politics, technology, and social transformation." [43] This idea fits the mold of the nationalist discourse embedded within New Deal thinking. The federal government funded modernization projects, hoping to alleviate America's financial troubles and concluded that the U.S. would emerge stronger than ever. Hobsbawm asserts that the historical juncture of technological and economic development is crucial for the construction of nation-states, which grew worldwide from 1870-1914 due to mass migration and urbanization around the globe.[44]

---

39 FMP, *Spanish American Folk Songs*, n.p.

40 Michael Denning, *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Verso, 2000), 9.

41 Sokoloff, *The Federal Music Project*, 30.

42 William McDonald suggests that "art music" and "folk music" complement one another in American music history, as evidenced by the American musical comedy. See McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 585.

43 Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, 10, 141.

Yet the Depression-era discourse on nationalism found modernization problematic, especially as it related to music. Curiously, the FMP also promoted a discourse of antimodernity, one that challenged the benefits of technology, urbanization, and industrialization. Modern technology had been responsible for widespread musician unemployment before the Depression. Thousands lost jobs with the advent of "talkies." Musicians had fallen on hard times with the invention of sound in films—an estimated 70,000 were unemployed due to technological advancement.[45] Modernity also produced the need for folk preservation. Folklorists crusaded against the disappearance of lived traditions; preservationists such as Phillips Barry and George Herzog found modernization a menace to traditional American art forms. The anthropological pursuit of cultural preservation was born out of modernity and concomitantly threatened by its encroaching presence. In his introduction to *Folk Music in America*, George Herzog notes: "what makes for a traditional song is not its source and origin, or its style, but the mode of perpetuation—oral—through which it survives."[46] For Herzog and others, folk traditions emerged from rural, illiterate populations, which were dwindling due to urbanization and industrialization. The growth of cities stifled folk music and potentially erased autochthonous American cultural forms.

However, some of those skeptical of modernity maintained that technology and urbanization could not harm their American traditions. The editors of the *Southern Harmony Songbook* remarked that a 50-year tradition of "Benton Big Singing" would survive modernization. The community of singers would prevail:

> The oxcart has been superseded by the railroad, the automobile, and the airplane. The packhorse messenger has been discarded for the telephone, telegraph, and radio. The log cabin has been replaced by frame house, brick mansion, and service apartment…These and other changes wrought by modern science have come to Benton, Kentucky. But in this old western Kentucky town there lingers undisturbed a traditional festival known as the "Benton's Big Singing."[47]

Though America was suffering a Depression, modernity would not interfere with the important task of preserving its heritage, as folklorist John Harrington Cox noted: "For old persons…can verify the truth of older happenings. They transmit such traditional lore as proverbs, which help to explain life, and folk medicine, which helps to preserve it." If folklore was medicine, the U.S. government invested in large doses to improve the spiritual health of a country seeking national rejuvenation.[48]

---

44 Ibid., 109. Similarly, for Anderson, print is the primary medium that fueled the emergence of nationalism. The coming of vernacular languages in print, fixity of language, and power of certain language dialects all consolidated into various national languages which helped to solidify social norms. Technology such as print continued to inform tenets of nationalism through the centuries; it, too, informed New Deal rhetoric. America would see brighter days with engineering feats and mass media. Music became a recorded commodity to be exported; radio disseminated politics and arts to the masses. The lineaments of modernity have always been central in the nationalizing project, Hobsbawm and Anderson maintain. Print in the 16th and 17th centuries was akin to radio and records in the 20th. The link between capitalism and nationalism was strong, and it extended well into the twentieth century.

45 Moore, "The Final Report," 4. McDonald states that 20-22,000 professional theater musicians became jobless from 1929-1931; McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration*, 586.

46 Phillips Barry, *Folk Music in America* (New York: National Service Bureau, 1939), xi.

47 U.R. Bell, Preface, *The Southern Harmony Songbook* (New York: Hastings House, 1939), n.p.

48 J. Harrington Cox, *Traditional Ballads Mainly from West Virginia* (New York: National Service Bureau, 1939), xii.

CONCLUSION

By the time of the FMP's termination, Earl Vincent Moore had succeeded Sokoloff as the FMP's final director in May 1939. The Federal Music Project changed to the WPA Music Program in September of 1939 and finally dissolved in 1943. In his "Final Report of the Federal Music Project," Moore described the FMP as an agency that had helped America on the road to recovery. By citing dozens of reviews in periodicals such as *Fortune, New York Times, Harpers,* and *Ladies Home Journal*, Moore deems the Federal Music Project a success. America had grown culturally richer as a result of the FMP, for there was a "notable advance in the interest in and consciousness of music in many parts of the country." [49] He credits the FMP with generating music appreciation across America: "As a matter of attestable fact there has been revealed in America a vast eagerness and hunger for music that was suspected only dimly four years ago."[50]

The federal organization made music a national priority—part of a national identity, a government-subsidized program that heavily influenced the role of the state in cultural production, thereby helping to define America's musical culture. The cultural element was important during the Depression, Kenneth Bindas argues, for the road to economic recovery needed "a reunification of the national 'mission' with the American Dream, a term which came into vogue during the era."[51] The American government fostered an ideological apparatus of self-worth and cultural validity in the arts programs; it defined an American identity that sparked confidence and self-esteem through art and music.[52] Part of this was a nationalizing project based on the invention of American musical traditions that dehistoricized conflict and hardship in order to create an endemic folk culture. The government helped to sculpt a historical continuum that erased the racial and political aspects of the music in order to promote national unity. While these art forms originate in contested traditions and heterogeneous communities, these narratives get foreclosed for the sake of dominant national discourses, which are based on invented traditions and imagined communities and which become normative lineaments of the national culture.

Finally, neither Hobsbawm nor Anderson fully addresses how changing cultural systems perpetuate and transform forms of nationalism. Nationalism is not monolithic; it is always a work in progress. Therefore we must account for the social, political, and economic processes that alter it, and how they work dialectically to form the contours of domination and consent. The intersections between popular culture and the state have historically drawn upon the embourgeoisement of subaltern art forms to establish similar aims for national preservation. As this paper has shown, capitalism and modernization are not enough to describe how nationalist constructions emerge. Rather, successful forms of American classical and folk music derive from perceptions of cultural plurality and national community. The FMP was one state organization that made music part of this nationalizing project.

---

49 Moore, *Final Report*, 1.

50 Ibid., 10.

51 Bindas, *All of this Music*, x.

52 Ibid., x-xi.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Barry, Phillips. *Folk Music in America*. New York: National Service Bureau, 1939.

Cox, John Harrington. *Traditional Ballads Mainly from West Virginia*. New York: National Service Bureau, 1939.

Federal Music Project. *Spanish American Folk Songs of New Mexico, 1936-1937, Unit 1*. New Mexico: Federal Music Project, 1937.

Moore, Earl. *Final Report of the Federal Music Project*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939.

Sokoloff, Nikolai. *The Federal Music Project*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.

Walker, William. *The Southern Harmony Songbook*. Philadelphia: E.W. Miller, 1854. Reprint, New York: Hastings House, 1939.

Works Project Administration. *Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-43*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947.

———. *Jobs the WPA Way*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.

———. *Our Job with the WPA*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.

———. *Report on Progress of the WPA Program*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. New York: Verso, 1991.

Bindas, Kenneth. *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995.

Denning, Michael. *Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. New York: Verso, 2000.

Evans, David. *Big Road Blues: Tradition & Creativity in the Folk, Blues*. New York: Da Capo, 1982.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism since 1790: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hobsbawm, Eric, and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

McDonald, William F. *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1969.