

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? American Song During The Great Depression

American society was much less homogeneous during the Great Depression (1929–1941) than it became after World War II. There were still quite sharply defined classes, divided along economic, geographic, and ethnic lines. There were the literate, largely urban whites of the East, North, and pockets in the rest of the country; there were the rural whites of the South, Midwest, and Southwest, mostly of English, Irish, and Scottish descent; there were the blacks of both urban and rural areas. Each group was affected by the Depression, but in different ways and to different degrees. Each had its own tradition of popular song, and a sampling of these from the thirties can give a vivid picture of how each fared and how it reacted to the almost universal adversity of that decade.

The financial boom of the decade following the end of World War I can be seen in retrospect as too speculative, based on credit and on paper assets. It was also decidedly top-heavy: sixty thousand families controlled assets totaling those of the twenty-five million families at the bottom of the economic ladder; seventy-eight percent of America's families had a yearly income of less than three thousand dollars. The Roaring Twenties roared for only a fraction of Americans; even at the peak of the apparent prosperity of the decade, genuine poverty was a hard fact of life for many millions.

Within a year of the overwhelming election victory in 1928 of Herbert E. Hoover, Secretary of Commerce under Coolidge, financial disaster struck the country. Warning signals of economic softness appeared in the summer of 1929. Then, on October 29, the New York Stock Exchange experienced its greatest single-day decline in history. Paper profits vanished overnight, and in desperation sixteen million shares of stock were thrown on the market for whatever they would bring. Within weeks the effects of the crash were felt throughout the country. Desperate individuals and corporations rushed to retrieve money from banks before it disappeared. Banks, in turn, without sufficient cash to honor the flood of withdrawals, foreclosed mortgages and took other steps to get their hands on cash they had loaned or invested; many could not make good on their obligations and failed. Corporate dividends were suspended, foreign trade fell alarmingly, factories closed, and by 1930 unemployment rose to eight percent.

The Hoover administration chose to regard the situation as merely another in a long series of recessions, and the President announced in March, 1930, that “all evidences indicate that the worst effects of the crash upon employment will have been passed during the next sixty days.” But unemployment climbed at a precipitous rate, and by early 1932 some twelve million Americans were out of work—twenty-four percent of the work force. Breadlines appeared in American cities by 1930 as people lined up for free food doled out by city and state administrations. Apple vendors, many of them until recently men of affluence, appeared on the streets of New York the same year. In 1932 the report of the Emergency Conference on Unemployment in New York stated:

Here on the starving front families are breaking up and homes are being destroyed. More than 20,000 children have passed into institutions and boarding houses because parents cannot provide for them. . . . The depression has swallowed up working girls and is now reaching teachers, college graduates, and trained office workers who have been accustomed to good incomes and comfortable homes.

More than twenty-three hundred banks had failed by 1931, each failure stripping citizens of savings and other assets. Corporate profits, which had been more than nine billion dollars (before taxes) in 1929, had totally vanished; there was, instead, corporate loss of over three billion in 1932. Automobile production had declined sixty-five percent in the same period, iron and steel output fifty-nine percent, shipbuilding fifty-three percent, furniture manufacture fifty-six percent. Despite all this, the federal government steadfastly refused to give relief directly to individuals; the only relief measure enacted, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation Bill of 1932, made loans to banks, railroads, and industry. Congressman Hamilton Fish, Jr., of New York was widely quoted as saying, “If we don’t give it [relief to millions of Americans] under the existing system, the people will change the system. Make no mistake about that.”

When the Depression began, the popular-music industry of white urban America was large, prosperous, and dedicated to the proposition that Americans turned to song for amusement, entertainment, and escape.

This had not always been true. For over half a century after the Hutchinson Family came down from the mountains of New Hampshire in the early eighteen-forties proclaiming themselves “more social reformers than entertainers” and Henry Russell began writing and singing songs dramatizing the evils of alcohol and slavery, American popular song had concerned itself with social and political matters. The events leading up to the Civil War, and the war itself, were the subjects of a majority of the songs written in the fifties and sixties. There was some return to simple lyricism and personal emotions after the war, but songs still dealt with alcohol, child labor, and the like.

This all changed in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. A new breed of music publisher—Isidore Witmark, Charles K. Harris, Thomas B. Harms, Willis Woodward—began handling popular music exclusively; their simple goal was to determine what type of song was in most demand and to bring out as many such songs as possible. In his autobiography, Harris, the composer of the tremendously popular “After the Ball,” put it the simplest possible way:

When writing popular songs always bear in mind that it is to the masses, the untrained musical public, that you must look for support and popularity. Therefore, do not offer them anything which in subject and melody does not appeal to their ear. To do that is just so much time thrown away.

Tin Pan Alley, as America’s music industry of this period came to be called, succeeded in spectacular fashion in determining public taste and in finding and encouraging composers of great talent and even genius: Harris himself, Paul Dresser, Gus Williams, Albert Von Tilzer, George M. Cohan, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Harry Warren, and many others.

These men wrote simple yet often sophisticated songs dealing almost exclusively with personal emotions—romantic love, friendship, gentle nostalgia. Their songs were sung in vaudeville or other forms of musical theater and were sometimes recorded, and some sold millions of copies of sheet music from which Americans played and sang in their homes. World War I brought a handful of topical songs, such as “Over There” and “The Rose of No Man’s Land”—not enough to even begin a new tradition of “relevance.” The twenties saw the start of greater exploitation of the media of phonograph and radio. The first licensed station in America, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting in 1920; commercial sponsorship of radio programs began in 1922; and the National Broadcasting System initiated nationwide network broadcasts in 1926. When the Depression began, forty percent of American families owned radios; a decade later the figure had grown to eighty-six percent. But it was a brand-new medium, the sound movie, that was the most exciting new outlet for popular song during the Depression.

The first full-length commercial movie with a synchronized soundtrack, *The Jazz Singer*, was made in 1927 and shown the following year all over the country. Nineteen-twenty-nine brought original productions for the new medium, such as *Sunny Side Up*, with Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, and also productions that were little more than filmed musical revues—*Hollywood Revue of 1929* and *Gold Diggers of Broadway*, for example. By 1930 the industry claimed that there were a hundred million movie admissions each week, despite the economic state of the country. Composers, arrangers, singers, dancers, and producers headed for California in a steady stream, finding there all the money needed for the largest orchestras, the most lavish sets, the largest casts, the most expensive stars. Nothing epitomizes Depression entertainment better than the movie musicals fashioned out of this abundance of money and talent: *Paramount on Parade* (1930), with more than thirty-five stars of music, dance, and comedy signed up by this studio alone; *The Big Broadcast of 1932*, which launched Bing Crosby and featured Burns and Allen and Kate Smith; *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; the Busby Berkeley spectaculars, such as *Forty-second Street* (1933), with Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler; *Bright Eyes* (1934), with Shirley Temple singing “On the Good Ship Lollypop.” Each of these movies fashions a fantasy world of some type—the glittering sophistication of an unreal New York, the carefree world of show people, the make-believe world of childhood.

The music in such movies, and in the revues and musical comedies still popular on the stage, likewise deals in fantasy and escape. And this was apparently just what Americans wanted from their popular music. As Richard Rodgers put it:

Breadlines seemed less burdensome if one could sing. Somehow, political chaos was less unsettling if you hummed through its storms. And Armageddon couldn't threaten us if we kept whistling “Bye Bye Blackbird.”

Bob Dylan has been quoted as saying:

Rudy Vallee. Now that was a lie, that was a downright lie, Rudy Vallee being popular. What kind of people could have dug him? . . . If you want to find out about those times and you listen to his music you're not going to find out anything about the times. (*The Age of Rock*. New York: Random House, 1970)

But one can learn a great deal about those times from the music of Vallee and his contemporaries: that this music served to take people's minds away from the troubles of that difficult period. It was music of reverse social protest, perhaps. It was written and performed by people who were better off financially than most Americans, and its optimistic tone and its reluctance to deal in any way with the state of American society may stem in part from the fact that few successful songwriters found themselves on relief or in breadlines. But anyone who can remember the time can attest that such music most decidedly helped buoy spirits.

And, not incidentally, many of the very best songs in the entire history of American popular music were written during the Depression: “Embraceable You,” “Night and Day,” “Yesterdays,” “Easter Parade,” “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” “Red Sails in the Sunset,” “It’s Easy to Remember,” “In the Still of the Night,” “Love Walked In,” “September Song,” “All the Things You Are,” and many others.

Once Franklin D. Roosevelt received the Democratic nomination for president in the summer of 1932, his victory was guaranteed; he carried forty-two states, with 472 electoral votes to Hoover’s fifty-nine. When he took office in 1933, Roosevelt was prepared to launch his New Deal with a barrage of actions and programs. He declared a bank holiday for four days to forestall further panic and bank failures, proposed the Emergency Banking Bill, reassured everyone in his first fireside chat that the banks would be secure when they reopened, and thus brought at least temporary relief to this critical front. His first hundred days brought the enactment of fifteen major laws and programs, including the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), which eventually employed two and a half million men in its program of conservation and construction projects; the NRA (National Recovery Act), establishing government control over much of major industry and enabling the federal government to set wages and minimum working hours; the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act), raising farm prices and relieving farmers from such immediate pressures as threats of mortgage foreclosures; and the TVA (Tennessee Valley Authority), charged to plan and construct an enormous electricity-producing dam and plant. In November the CWA (Civil Works Administration) was established, with the goal of creating some four million new jobs in a matter of months. Such spectacular engineering feats as Boulder Dam, the Triborough Bridge, and the Golden Gate Bridge are monuments to this program. The WPA (Works Progress Administration) created jobs of many different sorts, including those under the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Writers’ Project, and the Federal Art Program. The Social Security Act of 1935 brought relief to many aged and disabled Americans.

Relief came first to corporate America and to the urban East. Railroads and banks were able to borrow money to solve their most pressing problems, some industries were able to show profits again, some companies resumed payments of dividends, and the financial and industrial worlds took on at least a semblance of business as usual. But even though wages and salaries were up and unemployment dipped, little relief had come to the South, the agricultural West, and the urban poor. The Senate hearings of the Seventy-second Congress, after Roosevelt had been in office for some months, still heard testimony such as:

Every day we find children who come to school without breakfast and who state that they have nothing to eat in their homes. . . . Many of our children are anemic through lack of proper nourishment. . . . Milk is a luxury in most of the homes, where black coffee and bread is a large part of the diet.

Rural and agricultural sections had been particularly hard hit by the Depression. Farm income dropped more than fifty percent in the four years after 1929, and more than half

the mortgaged farms in the Mideast and Midwest were delinquent. An additional strain was put on these regions by a reversal of the migration from rural to urban areas that characterized most of the early twentieth century; in the early thirties more than two million Americans returned from the cities of the East and North to their native regions. A series of natural disasters made matters even worse. Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota were afflicted with a plague of grasshoppers in the late summer of 1931, and that year and the next saw droughts and small dust storms in these and neighboring states. Modern agricultural practices had stripped most of the middle belt of the country of its natural grass cover and with it the moisture normally held in the grass roots. The following years were much worse, with enormous stretches of farmland simply drying up and blowing away as dust. In 1933, 1934, and 1935 much of the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas was arid, choked with dust. Nothing would grow. More than a million people packed up their meager belongings, abandoned their land, and headed west in the hope of finding some sort of work.

Though Tin Pan Alley songs reached millions through records, radio, and movies, this was not the music of all Americans. Other millions had a music descended from the British heritage of rural America and scarcely touched by the style of urban popular music.

Radio tapped this rich vein for the first time in 1922, when WSB in Atlanta began featuring hillbilly singers, fiddlers, and string bands. WBAP in Fort Worth began broadcasting square-dance music in 1923, and within a few years WLS in Chicago was beaming the National Barn Dance all over the rural Midwest and WSM in Nashville began airing the Grand Ole Opry.

Looking for ways to recoup ground lost to radio, the phonograph industry turned to this same music in the early twenties. Ralph Peer of Okeh Records set up recording equipment in an empty loft in Atlanta in 1923; and despite depressed economic conditions among most of the people who responded to performers like Fiddlin' John Carson, this venture proved profitable. Columbia, Vocalion, Brunswick, and even Victor rushed to tap this new market. Before the twenties were over, hundreds of talented hillbilly musicians had been discovered and recorded—Uncle Dave Macon, Riley Puckett, Vernon Dalhart (whose “The Prisoner’s Song” sold some six million copies), Dock Boggs—and the first superstars of this genre, the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers, had begun their careers.

Despite the disastrous effects of the Depression on the recording industry as a whole—sales of individual records fell from one hundred and four million in 1927 to a mere six million in 1932—the market for hillbilly music held almost steady in the early thirties. This music had roots in a tradition, the British ballad, in which tales of personal misfortune, tragic death, and natural disasters held a central position, in which the facts of life were dealt with routinely and directly. Many country songs of the Depression are concerned with cruel working conditions, unemployment, hunger, the loss of members of a family. There is no fantasy, no use of song for escape. The only consolation is in religion, memories of childhood, the support of family and friends—all frequent topics. Listening to a number of hillbilly songs from the Depression is like looking through one of the great collections of photographs from this time showing the bleak faces of country folk, their pitiful clothing and home furnishings, the visible evidence of hunger and need. But there is little protest in the songs or in the faces, only the traditional acceptance of hard times. It would be other people, slightly later, who would appropriate elements of this music for social and political protest.

Conditions even among poor, rural whites during the Depression did not approach those among blacks. The blacks' lot had been bad enough before the Depression; once they had been freed from slavery and the Civil War had ended, most of the northern liberals who had worked so hard for abolition turned to other causes, and white southerners were unable to deal sympathetically with a difficult situation they felt had been forced on them by outsiders, particularly when their own problems were so great. Except for a mere handful of men and women of conscience, whites of both North and South largely left blacks to deal with their own problems, which were desperate and often overwhelming. The Depression did not bring new problems to blacks; it merely intensified old ones. Black unemployment was triple that of the national average; an estimated seventy percent of the blacks of Charleston were without jobs in 1931, and the figure was seventy-five percent in Memphis. The situation was no better in northern cities, where blacks were in competition for work with whites who had much better education and often had job experience. In the rural South, poverty among both whites and blacks under the tenant and sharecropper systems that had replaced slavery approached the intensity and desperation of that in famine-ridden China, in the judgment of the few people who had observed both.

The phonograph industry discovered the music of black America at the same time it began pressing discs of hillbilly music. Okeh brought out a historic record in 1920—Mamie Smith singing “You Can’t Keep a Good Man Down” and “That Thing Called Love”—and the twenties saw a sizable number of blues, jazz, and gospel recordings. The dissemination of this music was almost exclusively in the black world, rural and urban; some major recording companies set up subsidiaries to handle only “race” records, as they were first called. The Depression dealt this branch of the recording industry a severe blow, and many black musicians survived the period only by playing in big bands, which offered a kind of jazz that was more refined, according to white taste, and that became quite popular among affluent white audiences in large cities. But there remained at least a trickle of black-oriented blues and jazz records, and these dealt with the Depression as did the music of rural whites—by taking events of the time as subject matter, by finding

solace in commenting on or complaining about the state of their lives rather than in escaping from reality. Black music of this sort tended to be even more topical, and we find blues dealing not only with the events and effects of the Depression but also with the government's attempts to cope with the disaster. Few of the "alphabetical agencies" afforded much relief to blacks, as we are told in Big Bill Broonzy's "WPA Blues" and Washboard Sam's "CCC Blues." But here too we find complaint and lament, often tinged with humor, rather than protest.

Despite the slow pace of recovery, Americans felt that Roosevelt was doing as much for them as was humanly possible, and he was reelected by an overwhelming margin in 1936 over Governor Alf Landon of Kansas. The President acknowledged in his second inaugural address, "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." Programs of massive federal relief and deficit spending continued, and in the first months of 1937 it appeared that the Depression was coming to an end. Industrial output was up, national income was almost twice what it had been four years earlier, and unemployment dropped to about fourteen percent. But unexpectedly the economic situation worsened again. In the late summer of 1937 industry experienced a slump almost as severe as in 1929–30, and unemployment abruptly climbed back up to ten million, or almost twenty percent of the work force.

Roosevelt's second term was marked by severe labor disorders. Only six percent of the nation's workers had been unionized in 1932. Sustained by federal relief programs and strengthened by provisions of the NRA that empowered workers to organize and bargain with less fear of reprisal, labor became strong enough to fend for itself when the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional in 1935. The first signs of a new militancy had come in 1934, with strikes in Minneapolis and a general strike in San Francisco. The CIO (Committee—later Congress—of Industrial Organizations), organized by John L. Lewis as a sort of superunion for greater strength, encouraged members to use all means at their disposal to press their demands. By 1937 there were many bitter struggles, with management often using force to curb labor, and workers retaliating with the new tactic of the sit-down strike, which effectively prevented management from bringing in nonunion workers. In 1937 alone the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board), established in 1935 to mediate labor disputes, was asked to intervene in more than thirty-two hundred strikes, involving a million and a half workers.

Ravaged by the Depression and torn by the most widespread labor disputes in its history, America in the thirties was ripe for radical political activity. Marxist theorists had long dreamed of a “people’s music” that would unify their movement and carry it to the “masses”—the common people and workers, who to this point had been remarkably indifferent to Marxist overtures. The *Red Song Book* of 1932 was a total failure—not surprisingly, since the songs were European and totally unfamiliar to the American workers. At just this time there was a spontaneous beginning of protest songs in the language of hillbilly music, particularly in areas such as the coal-mining country of Kentucky, where living and working conditions were unusually cruel and labor revolts were frequent and bitter. The Communist Party of America made a first attempt to tap these feelings and the music growing out of them in 1935, when Ray and Lite Auville, a coal-mining couple from West Virginia, were brought to New York and extolled by the *Daily Worker*, and a collection of eight of their songs was published. At this same time John Lomax was bringing “people’s music” to eastern urban intellectual, artistic, and political circles with Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter) and his Texas-Louisiana prison and work songs and blues.

But it was not until late in the Depression that the “proletarian renaissance” brought together elements of the intellectual-radical community with music and musicians of the working class. On March 13, 1940, Will Geer organized a benefit program for migrant workers featuring a mixed group of musicians: Leadbelly, Aunt Molly Jackson (“poetess laureate of the Kentucky miners”), Harvard-educated Pete Seeger, the commercially popular Burl Ives, Woody Guthrie (“folk poet of the Dust Bowl”), and Bess and Alan Lomax. Soon after, the first “hootenanny,” featuring many of these same people, was held during a Democratic fund-raising drive in Seattle. Out of all this activity came the Almanac Singers—originally Seeger, Lee Hayes (once a sharecroppers’ union organizer), Millard Lampell, and Pete Hawes but soon numbering Guthrie, Josh White, Leadbelly, Sonny Terry, the Lomaxes, and others among its sometime performers. The group embarked on a cross-country tour in 1941, singing for union meetings, gatherings of liberal intellectuals, and radical political groups. An album, *Talking Union* (Keynote 304), followed, and the group began achieving commercial success. But their antiwar album, *Songs for John Doe*, was ill-timed, and during and after the war they were attacked by the press for their political affinities and by Congress for their pro-Communist sympathies; soon they could no longer make records or public appearances. In retrospect it can be seen that their chief impact was on a small group of urban intellectuals, not on the working classes.

It will never be known if the New Deal would eventually have brought the country to full recovery. America had been concerned largely with its own problems since 1929, but events abroad brought the Great Depression to an abrupt end. Italy attacked Ethiopia in 1935, and civil war broke out in Spain a year later. After Germany invaded Poland in September, 1939, it was only a matter of time before the United States was actively involved in the spreading conflict. The American arms embargo was lifted in early 1941, and House Bill 1776, making America the “arsenal of democracy,” paved the way for an appropriation of seven billion dollars, then another of six billion, for a massive increase of arms production. Pearl Harbor, the declaration of war, and the mobilization of fifteen million Americans followed in short order. In two years the country went from a depressed economy with a ten percent unemployment rate to full production and employment. The Depression ended so abruptly, and under such dramatic conditions, that its passing was hardly noticed. And as American troops went off to war, it was to the music of the big bands of Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, playing a synthesis of what had been two different strands of American popular music—Tin Pan Alley and jazz.

Popular music served most Americans during the Depression as either escape or complaint. It seems remarkable that so little protest was voiced, so few attempts made to use popular music for political purposes. But, for that matter, there was a remarkable lack of radical political activity for a country going through such hard times. Once Roosevelt had been elected, once the party held responsible for the financial crash had been voted out of office, the country was content to have faith in its new leadership. In the end, the major accomplishment of protest music in the thirties was to lay the groundwork for the much more successful, much more popular protest music of the sixties.

Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?

(E.Y. Harburg and Jay Gorney)

(From *Americana*)

Bing Crosby, with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra. *Recorded October 25, 1932, in New York. Originally issued on Brunswick Br 6414.*

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” is a genuine rarity, a Tin Pan Alley song written during the Depression that speaks directly to the facts of life of this difficult time. The lyrics are bitter: the verse sketches a portrait of a man who has always been “right there on the job . . . when there was earth to plow or guns to bear,” and who is now “standing in line just waiting for bread.” The refrain completes the vignette: after service in the war (“full of that Yankee Doodle-de-dum, half a million boots went slogging through Hell”) and in peace (“Once I built a railroad, made it run”), the protagonist has been reduced to begging in the street (“Say, don’t you remember . . . Brother, can you spare a dime?”). The music is superficially in the stream of popular music of the day, made up of a verse followed by an AABA thirty-two-bar chorus, with ragtime-derived syncopated rhythms. Exceptionally, it is in a minor key, with chains of striking chromatic harmonies. In a good performance, it projects a poignancy more characteristic of such European writers as Kurt Weill than of Americans.

The song was introduced in the Broadway musical *Americana*, which opened on October 5, 1932, and ran for seventy-seven performances, with a cast including George Givot, Peggy Cartwright, Albert Carroll, Lloyd Nolan, and Gordon Smith. Despite the atypical nature of “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”—or perhaps because of it—the popularity of the song long outlasted that of the show.

E. Y. Harburg, born in New York in 1898, has been one of America’s best lyricists of the twentieth century. Among his more memorable musicals and movies are *The Wizard of Oz*, *Finian’s Rainbow*, *Jamaica*, *Bloomer Girl*, and the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1934*, and he wrote the lyrics of such immortal songs as “April in Paris,” “Over the Rainbow,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” and “How Are Things in Glocca Morra?” Gorney, like so many other successful Tin Pan Alley composers of the time, was born in Russia (1896). He went to Hollywood in 1933 and wrote the scores for such movies as *Stand Up and Cheer* (1934).

Bing Crosby has been, quite simply, the most popular entertainer in America in the twentieth century. He began his career as a member of a trio, the Rhythm Boys, singing with Paul Whiteman’s orchestra, recording, and making a movie in 1930, *King of Jazz*. Later that year Crosby made his debut as a solo performer, singing with Gus Arnheim and his Coconut Grove Orchestra; his first big hits were “I Surrender, Dear” and “Just a Gigolo” in early 1931.

Crosby’s first radio show, a fifteen-minute program, began in 1931, and in only a few years he became permanent host of a large network show, the *Kraft Music Hall*. His first

starring movie, *College Humor*, was made in 1933. After this his starring performances in all media—records, radio, movies, stage performances, and eventually television—become too numerous and too well known to require retelling here.

Americans who lived through the Depression think of Crosby with a special affection, not only because of his skills as a performer but perhaps even more because of the affable, unruffled, sympathetic, reassuring personality that shone through whatever song he was singing or role he was playing. It was difficult to lose faith in a country that had produced a Bing Crosby.

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams

(Al Dubin and Harry Warren)

(From the film *Moulin Rouge*)

Deane Janis, with Hal Kemp's Orchestra. *Recorded October 31, 1933, in Chicago. Originally issued on Brunswick Br 6734.*

Moulin Rouge, a 1933 movie musical with a cast including Constance Bennett, Franchot Tone, Russ Columbo, and the Boswell Sisters, made little impact on the history of film (it had nothing to do with the famous film of the same name made some two decades later, which was about the French painter Toulouse-Lautrec), but it did have a splendid score by Harry Warren and Al Dubin. (Another song from *Moulin Rouge*, "Coffee in the Morning, Kisses in the Night," may be heard on New World Records NW 240, *Where Have We Met Before? Forgotten Songs from Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley*.) Constance Bennett, who sang so rarely that she never recorded, sang "The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" in the film. This song is a splendid example of another rather rare type of piece, more somber and serious than most songs of the time, perhaps indirectly reflecting the mood of America during the Depression. "Stormy Weather" (1933), by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, is probably the most famous song of this type.

"The Boulevard of Broken Dreams" had been recorded before the release of the film. Other recordings followed quickly. Benny Goodman brought it out, with Helen Ward singing, as did the Ted Weems band (with vocalist-whistler Elmo Tanner) and Jan Garber's orchestra (Lee Bennett, singer). Frances Langford recorded it with Harry Sosnik's band, and as late as 1950 Tony Bennett made such a popular disc of it that Columbia rewarded him with a long-term contract. The song had a much more distinguished career than the movie in which it appeared.

Hal Kemp formed his first orchestra in the twenties while he was a student at the University of North Carolina. His first bands, recording under such names as the Carolina Club Orchestra, the Southland Syncopators, Hal's Dixie Collegians, and the Carolina Collegians, featured a lively, white jazz-ragtime bounce. After turning to a smooth, sweet sound in the early thirties, the Hal Kemp Orchestra became one of the most popular recording and dance bands of the time, in particular favor for college dances. The band collapsed after Kemp's death in an accident in 1941.

Al Dubin and Harry Warren were one of the best songwriting teams of the thirties. A mere list of a few of their most popular songs, all from movie musicals, will serve as a reminder not only of their talent but of their versatility: "Tiptoe Through the Tulips," "I Only Have Eyes for You," "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," "Lullaby of Broadway," "Jeepers Creepers," "The Anniversary Waltz," "Shuffle Off to Buffalo." And when it is remembered that Warren, in collaboration with other lyricists, wrote such songs as "Chattanooga Choo Choo," "You'll Never Know," and "On the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe," a portrait of him as one of the giants of Tin Pan Alley clearly emerges.

Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries

(Ray Henderson and Lew Brown)

(From *George White's Scandals of 1931*)

Rudy Vallee and His Connecticut Yankees. *Recorded August 1931, in New York. Originally issued on Victor 22783.*

In the early years of the Depression, Tin Pan Alley turned out many aggressively optimistic and cheerful songs as one way to make Americans forget the problems of the times. There were, for example, "Happy Days Are Here Again" (1929), music by Milton Ager and lyrics by Jack Yellen, written for the movie *Chasing Rainbows*, but later put to effective political use, and "Smile, Darn Ya, Smile" (1931), music by Max Rich and lyrics by Jack Meskill and Charles O'Flynn.

The most popular song of this genre was "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries," introduced by Ethel Merman in *George White's Scandals of 1931*. Ray Henderson wrote the music and Lew Brown the lyrics for this show, among whose other hits were "The Thrill Is Gone" and "That's Why Darkies Were Born." Merman recorded several songs from the show with piano accompaniment in 1931, but the version chosen for this record is by Rudy Vallee, with its more characteristic sound of a band backing the vocal. Later that year Brunswick released *Gems from George White's Scandals*, containing the top hits of the show sung by a group of artists including Bing Crosby and the Boswell Sisters, the first album with a group of songs from a single show.

Ray Henderson (born in Buffalo, New York in 1896) worked in New York as a song plugger, arranger, staff pianist, and accompanist for vaudeville shows before he became a successful song writer. One of his first hits was “That Old Gang of Mine” (1923). He and Lew Brown first collaborated in 1922 on “Georgette” for the *Greenwich Village Follies*, and they did their first *George White’s Scandals* in 1925, replacing Buddy De Sylva and George Gershwin.

One of the haunting memories of the Depression period is the song “My Time Is Your Time,” the theme for Rudy Vallee’s hour-long network show for NBC. Vallee formed his band, the Connecticut Yankees, in 1928. They featured college songs (“Maine Stein Song,” “Betty Co-ed,” and later “The Whiffenpoof Song”) and such sentimental love songs as “I’m Just a Vagabond Lover” and “Sweetheart of All My Dreams.” The sound was distinctive: Vallee had a light, high, sweet voice, small enough so that he sang through a megaphone when not using a microphone for radio, and his band used a mixture of brass, winds, and strings, the violins giving it a sound quite different from the later big-band sound of massed brass and saxophones. His radio show was a palatable mixture of easy-listening music and comedy, spiced with appearances by such guest stars as Alice Faye, Frances Langford, and Edgar Bergen. It was sheer entertainment, with no hint of the Depression that was lurking outside the studio.

In the Still of the Night

(Cole Porter)

(From the film *Rosalie*)

Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra. *Recorded March 18, 1932, in New York. Originally issued on Brunswick 6289.*

One important aspect of American popular music at this time has absolutely nothing to do with the Depression or any other events external to music. Quite simply, it was a period when more great popular composers were writing than at any earlier time. Any list of the greatest composers of popular song would certainly include Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Harry Warren, and several others active in the thirties. Furthermore, a basic style of popular music established some thirty or forty years earlier was still perfectly viable for musicians of this generation. There was room within this style for innovations of details of melody, harmony, rhythm, and structure; thus there was no need for composers to search for a radically new musical style, as was to happen in the fifties and sixties. The powerful momentum of a well-established, workable style was enough to sweep aside any thought that music should seek new directions in response to the very new realities of American life brought about by the Depression.

Cole Porter (1893–1964) was a composer and lyricist of enormous gifts whose career spanned the entire Depression but whose music, based solidly on that of an earlier generation of writers, reflected tradition much more than any new aspects of American life. For that matter, Porter was scarcely affected by the misfortunes of the thirties. Born into a wealthy family, educated at Worcester Academy, Yale, and Harvard Law School, married to a woman of means, as much at home in Paris and Venice as in America, he was able to endure more than a decade of slight success. His first publicly performed song dates from 1915, but his first genuine success as a songwriter did not come until the stage shows *Paris* and *Fifty Million Frenchmen* (New World 80417-2) of 1928 and 1929.

Most of Porter's greatest songs date from the thirties. There were "Night and Day" (1932), "I Get a Kick out of You" (1934), "Begin the Beguine" (1935), "Just One of Those Things" (1935), "I've Got You Under My Skin" (1936), and "Easy to Love" (1936). These, and many of his other songs of this time, are masterpieces of popular song. There is nothing in any of them that refers to events of the decade or seems in any way affected by the mood of America. Perhaps this is one reason for their popularity. They are perfect escapist songs and came about in a perfectly natural way, since they were written by a man who had little direct knowledge of the Depression.

Porter wrote "In the Still of the Night" for the movie *Rosalie* (1937), which starred Nelson Eddy, Eleanor Powell, Ray Bolger, Frank Morgan, and Billy Gilbert. Music and lyrics reflect the usual brilliance and sophistication of this great songwriter.

Love Walked In

(George and Ira Gershwin)

(From the film *Goldwyn Follies*)

Kenny Baker, with orchestra conducted by Harry Sosnik. *Recorded April 22, 1938, in Los Angeles. Originally issued on Decca 1795.*

George Gershwin (1898–1937) had been writing songs for more than a decade before the onset of the Depression, and he died before it had run its course, yet his music is strongly associated with this period by those who lived through it. There are several reasons for this: most of his best-known songs were not written until 1929 and after; and his tunes, much more so than those of any other Tin Pan Alley composer, proved to be adaptable to the type of jazz that flourished during the thirties.

Gershwin's first published song, "When You Want 'Em You Can't Get 'Em," was written when he was only seventeen; his first stage song, "The Making of a Girl," was sung in *The Passing Show of 1916*; his first full-length musical, *La, La, Lucille*, opened in New York in 1919; by 1924 he had written music for five annual installments of *George White's Scandals*. He was clearly an enormously talented songwriter from the beginning of his career, and by 1929 he had written dozens of successful songs. Many of these were lively, catchy tunes drawing on ragtime and early jazz rhythms; an example is "Fascinating Rhythm." Though Gershwin continued to write songs of this sort during the Depression, his talent matured and mellowed, and almost all his famous ballads were written in the last eight years of his life: "Embraceable You," "They Can't Take That Away from Me," and "Love Walked In," for example.

These are Depression-era songs, and not only because they belong to that period chronologically. Gershwin's songs are seldom topical, but he somehow caught one of the moods of America in his lyrical, often wistful and sentimental creations. They offer not pure escapism but momentary retrospection, a beautiful reminder of the sort of human relationship that most people had either experienced or hoped to experience and that could make the external events of the world unimportant—at least temporarily. And there was *Porgy and Bess* (1935), whose portrayal of the lives of a group of blacks in Charleston is a sympathetic and memorable sketch of Americans facing hardship and deprivation with humor, courage, and dignity. Though Gershwin was insulated financially from the difficulties facing so many Americans, he nevertheless sensed and captured something of the spirit of the country in those dark days in a way that few other songwriters ever matched.

"Love Walked In" was written for the film *Goldwyn Follies* (1938); the lyrics, as in most of Gershwin's songs, are by his brother Ira. Kenny Baker had a leading role in the movie, and this was one of his first recordings. He had made his first film in 1935, and one of his more memorable roles was in the Marx Brothers' *A Day at the Races*; he made his Broadway debut in 1943 in *One Touch of Venus*.

On the Good Ship Lollypop

(Sidney Glare and Richard A. Whiting)

(From the film *Bright Eyes*)

Shirley Temple, with studio orchestra; from soundtrack of film. *Recorded 1934, in Hollywood. Originally issued on Fox 3006.*

Child stars were popular almost from the beginning of movies. Mary Pickford was the first, appearing in 1909 in a series of short films by D. W. Griffith and following with major roles in silent feature films; Jackie Coogan was a star from his appearance with Chaplin in *The Kid* (1920). But the Depression years were the heyday of child stars. Freddie Bartholomew, Judy Garland, Jackie Cooper, Bobby Breen, Baby Leroy, and Jane Withers are merely the ones who come most quickly to mind.

None approached the popularity of Shirley Temple. From her 1932 debut at the age of five in a minor role through the period of her greatest successes (*Bright Eyes*, 1934; *The Little Colonel*, 1935; *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*, 1938) to her last child's role (*The Blue Bird*, 1940), she was one of the top-drawing stars in American film. She was Twentieth Century Fox's most valuable property. From 1936 to 1938 she was the top box-office attraction in all Hollywood, even against the competition of such giants as Bing Crosby and Clark Gable. The film industry awarded her a special Oscar in 1934 "in grateful recognition of her outstanding contributions to screen entertainment."

It is not necessary to search deeply for the secret of her success. Escape from a troubled present into the innocence, happiness, and optimism of the past has been a perennial theme in American life, from the immense popularity of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* in the first decades of the nineteenth century through the nostalgic minstrel songs of Stephen Foster and his contemporaries to the Gay Nineties songs of "the good old days." Seeing a Shirley Temple movie during the Depression meant leaving the troubled adult world for one seen through the eyes of a child, a world to be viewed with hope because things would always come out right in the end no matter what difficulties might come up along the way.

Nineteen-thirty-four, in the depths of the Depression, was a remarkable year for Hollywood. There were *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Little Women* (starring Katharine Hepburn), *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (with Norma Shearer, Fredric March, and Charles Laughton), and *One Night of Love* (with Grace Moore). Donald Duck made his debut. But it seems fair to say that none of these touched Americans as deeply as *Bright Eyes*, Shirley Temple's first full-length, starring movie.

A high point was Shirley's singing of "On the Good Ship Lollypop." The song is a classic capturing of the innocence and hope of childhood, a wistful dream of a world in which everything is just the way one would wish. In mood it is not unlike the hobo folk song "Big Rock Candy Mountain." Other songs of this genre were to follow: "Over the Rainbow," from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and two classics from films by Walt Disney, "Someday My Prince Will Come," from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1938), and "When You Wish upon a Star," from *Pinocchio* (1940).

Unemployment Stomp

(Anon.)

Big Bill Broonzy. Recorded March 30, 1938, in Chicago. *Originally issued on Vocalion 04378.*

The Depression brought nothing new to the lives or the music of American blacks. The vast majority of them, in the North as well as in the South, lived with poverty and repression as facts of life. Musically they had developed the blues—a sometimes mournful, sometimes bitter, but sometimes humorous expression of the conditions of their lives—before the Depression, which brought no change to the form, merely new subject matter.

William Lee Conley (“Big Bill”) Broonzy (1893–1959) was one of seventeen children born to a sharecropping couple in Scott, Mississippi. “When you work twelve months of the year as a farmer and don’t come out of debt, and the boss has to give you food on credit ’til the crop is sold, you can’t do nothing but get the blues,” he writes of his early days in his autobiography, *Big Bill’s Blues*. Like so many blacks of the time, he made his way north to Chicago, where he recorded his first disc, “House Rent Stomp,” in 1927 for Paramount Records. Before his career ended shortly before his death, he made hundreds of records: alone, with other singers (Bill Williams, Hannah May, Charlie Jackson), and as a member of such groups as the Chicago Black Swans, the Famous Hokum Boys, and the Midnight Ramblers. The titles of many of his songs read like a catalogue of the troubles of blacks during the thirties: “Police Station Blues,” “Bad Luck Blues,” “Mean Old World,” “Hungry Man Blues,” “I’m Just a Bum,” “You Can’t Win” “Friendless Blues,” “Hobo Blues,” “Starvation Blues,” “WPA Blues,” “When I Had Money.” His early recorded country blues are characterized by a powerful singing voice and brilliant and expressive guitar work. Broonzy later enjoyed considerable fame in the white world. John Hammond brought him to New York for the historic “Spirituals to Swing” concert in Carnegie Hall in the late thirties; he played and recorded with Pete Seeger and friends late in his life; and with the help of the French jazz critic Hugues Panassie he toured Europe in 1951. Broonzy influenced such European singers as Lonnie Donnegan, one of the most popular British stars in the early days of rock ’n’ roll.

The Gold Diggers’ Song (We’re in the Money)

(Al Dubin and Harry Warren)

(From the film *Gold Diggers of 1933*)

Dick Powell, with studio orchestra. *Recorded May 25, 1933, in New York. Originally issued on Perfect 12919.*

Warner Brothers brought out three musicals in 1933, all among the top money-makers of that year: *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Forty-second Street*, and *Footlight Parade*. All had lavish sets, production numbers by Busby Berkeley, songs by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, and top stars from the studio’s stable, including Ginger Rogers, Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, Guy Kibbee, and Ned Sparks. All were topical in that they were set in modern, Depression-ridden America. But it was a make-believe America in which problems were nothing more than minor annoyances along the path to the inevitable happy ending.

Visually these films were among the most stunning the industry had produced. The first sequence in *Gold Diggers of 1933* is dazzling, with Ginger Rogers singing and dancing in a costume of gold dollars and a chorus of dozens of other girls in glittering costumes holding huge silver and gold coins. This number is from a show in rehearsal, almost ready to open on Broadway. A sheriff enters with the news that it cannot open because of a bank foreclosure on its backers, and the members of the cast must return to their shabby rented rooms—until they are saved by the clever idea of mounting a new show about the Depression. A later sequence, “The Shadow Waltz,” has sixty violins playing, illuminated so that weaving patterns in the shape of a huge violin are cast against the background. Sequences in the other two films are similarly spectacular, with scantily clad dancers forming symmetrical patterns—often photographed from above in such a way as to appear as abstract, moving designs—against the most spectacular sets yet seen in film.

The philosophy behind these films, and many others like them in the following years, seemed to be that people who are deprived of something are perfectly willing to be entertained by seeing excesses of it. Poor, shabbily dressed Americans crowded into theaters to see films such as these, with scenes in which money was plentiful and clothes and costumes were obviously and extravagantly expensive. More than this, it was common knowledge that movie stars, directors, producers, composers, arrangers—in fact almost everyone connected with the industry—made huge amounts of money and lived lives of luxury in a style unimaginable to most Americans. But there was no resentment, no hint of protest against such a gross imbalance of wealth. Movie entertainment was cheap, and the feeling was that films, and often the people who starred in them, gave people more than their money’s worth. No one wanted to rock the boat; there was no thought of criticizing an industry that made life in the thirties more bearable.

“The Gold Diggers’ Song” is performed during the opening number of *Gold Diggers of 1933*, setting the mood for the entire film: “We’re in the money,/The skies are sunny;/Old man depression,/You are through,/You done us wrong!” Harry Warren’s music, with its jaunty, syncopated rhythms and its simple, easy to remember melody, is just right. After such a beginning, there was no way the movie could turn into a tragedy or even into a serious commentary on the Depression. Or on anything else.

Dick Powell recorded this song and three others from the movie. He had made his film debut only the year before, in *Blessed Event*, and he had made only a few hardly successful records before *Gold Diggers of 1933*, and the songs from it, brought him stardom as an actor and singer.

All In Down and Out Blues

(David Harrison Macon)

Uncle Dave Macon. *Recorded August 3, 1937, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Originally issued on Bluebird 7350-B.*

“All In Down and Out Blues” is a typical response from the world of hillbilly music to the Great Depression.

Anglo-American folk music has a long tradition of speaking directly to the facts of life, whether pleasant or unhappy. There is in much of this music a stoic acceptance of reality, with little trace of anger and often with some of the special brand of humor so characteristic of the people who sang and listened to this music. The present song, for example, begins: “It is hippity hop to the bucket shop, I lost all my money and now I have flopped.”

David Harrison Macon was born in rural Tennessee in 1870. He did not become a professional singer until he was almost fifty, although he had an early acquaintance with show business: when he was three, his family moved to Nashville to run a boardinghouse that became a popular stop for performers on the vaudeville circuit. He learned to play the five-string banjo and developed a unique singing style at an early age. But it did not occur to him to think of becoming a performer. Instead, he established and operated the Macon Midway Mule and Wagon Transportation Company in a small Tennessee town. In his own words,

All my life I had played and sung for fun. My neighbors always asked me to play at picnics and special occasions. Finally one very self-important farmer approached me and asked me to play at a party he was planning. I was very busy and a bit tired, so I thought I would stop him. I told him I would play at his party for fifteen dollars. He said, “Okay, it’s a deal.”

Two important things happened that day: Uncle Dave discovered that performing for a large audience was exciting; and—this being America—in the audience just happened to be a talent scout from Loew’s Theatres who on the spot signed him to appear in a Birmingham theater for several hundred dollars a week.

After establishing himself as a singer and comedian on the vaudeville circuit, Macon began recording for Vocalion, Brunswick, Okeh, and Bluebird. He was one of the brightest stars at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry from 1926 to his death in 1952. He was a master entertainer, combining his talents as a singer and one of the greatest banjo players of all time with his gift for comedy; jokes and humorous anecdotes were always part of his act.

Many of Macon’s hundred-odd records are comic songs, including “Cross-eyed Butcher and the Cackling Hen,” “Two-in-One Chewing Gum,” and “The Gal That Got Stuck on

Everything She Said.” But his repertory was tremendously varied. He was a religious man and performed and recorded such gospel and revival favorites as “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” “Jordan Is a Hard Road to Travel,” “Old Ship of Zion,” and “Just One Way to the Pearly Gates.” Some of his records are of particular interest to scholars of Anglo-American folk music, since his repertory went back well before 1900 and included such pieces as “Arkansas Traveler,” “Old Dan Tucker,” “Tennessee Red Fox Chase,” and “Shoo, Fly, Don’t Bother Me.” He also sang popular Tin Pan Alley songs in his own versions, straightforward (“In the Good Old Summer Time,” for example) or parody (“In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree”). In his early days he also sang such minstrel songs as “New Coon in Town,” “Stop That Knocking at My Door,” and “Pickaninny Lullaby Song.”

Macon also wrote songs, and during the Depression he contributed to the small body of hillbilly pieces that spoke of the effects of that era. “All In Down and Out Blues” belongs to this group and is almost a catalogue of Depression-years woes. Succeeding verses speak of the Wall Street crash, gambling losses, alcohol as an escape from reality (but bootleg liquor is too expensive), problems with the police, and jail (because there is no money for bail). Lack of money is the thread running through the song: each stanza ends with the refrain “It’s hard time, hey, poor boy./It’s hard time when you’re down and out,” and one of the last stanzas sums up matters with “I’ve got no silver and I’ve got no gold,/I’m almost naked and it done turn cold.”

Musically it is a typical white blues like those of Jimmie Rodgers, a blues in sentiment but not in form; it is cast in the square four- and eight-bar phrases and sections of white music, not in the twelve-bar blues form so popular with black musicians. Macon accompanies himself on the banjo, playing figurations suggestive of old-time fiddle and banjo tunes as an introduction and between stanzas but shifting to unobtrusive chordal strumming on the three basic chords when he is singing. An unidentified second singer harmonizes with him on the refrain.

Fifteen Miles from Birmingham

(Alton Delmore)

The Delmore Brothers. *Recorded September 29, 1938, in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Originally issued on Bluebird B-8301-A.*

Alton and Rabon Delmore, born in Elkmont, Alabama, began their recording career in 1931 with Columbia and brought out discs on Bluebird, Decca, and King until Rabon’s death in 1952. They were popular radio performers as well, making frequent appearances on *Grand Ole Opry* and joining forces with Merle Travis and Grandpa Jones to broadcast over WLW in Cincinnati as the Brown’s Ferry Four.

Most country-music performers of the time used string bands, but the Delmore Brothers accompanied themselves on only their two guitars. Their sound was often more like black music; their indebtedness to such blues and jazz musicians as Blind Boy Fuller comes through in their often syncopated rhythms and sometimes in out-and-out borrowing of

material. In their integration of white country and black blues elements, some of their pieces are interesting and important forerunners of the songs of such early rock 'n' roll performers as Bill Haley and the Everly Brothers.

The Delmores' most successful songs were those in a sentimental country style ("Southern Moon") and others in which they reworked traditional pieces into their own style ("Bury Me Out on the Prairie," "Careless Love," "Look Up, Look Down That Lonesome Road"). There are also more lively dance pieces, such as "Step It Up and Down" and "Down Home Boogie." But even such entertainment-oriented performers as the Delmores took occasional notice of the Depression, as in "Fifteen Miles from Birmingham."

The Coal Loading Machine

(George Korson)

The Evening Breezes Sextet. *Recorded 1933, in Vivian, West Virginia. Originally issued on Library of Congress AFS 160.*

The lot of American coal miners had been desperate enough before the onset of the Depression, often made worse by retaliatory actions against their persistent attempts at unionization. Archie Green has devoted an entire book, *Only a Miner*, to the miners' long struggle and to the role music has sometimes played in the epic.

Country music was naturally popular among these people, since the majority of miners in such places as Harlan County, Kentucky, have British ethnic and musical roots. Music played an important role in their churches as well, and white gospel music is also indigenous to much coal-mining territory.

George Korson began recording, for the Library of Congress, among these people in 1935. The Evening Breezes Sextet of Vivian, West Virginia, was not a commercial group; except for Korson's disc of their gospel-style performance of "The Coal Loading Machine," they are unknown. The song is an eloquent and bitter commentary on one of the effects of modern life, and the Depression, on these people.

NRA Blues

(Bill Cox)

Bill Cox. *Recorded August 30, 1933, in New York. Originally issued on Perfect Records 13090-B.*

Not all topical songs protest; some praise. Bill Cox, whose writing and singing style owed much to Jimmie Rodgers, wrote not only such all-time country favorites as “Sparkling Brown Eyes” but also songs like “The Trial of Bruno Richard Hauptmann.” A dedicated member of the Democratic Party, he celebrated Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936 by writing and recording “Franklin Roosevelt’s Back Again” and “The Democratic Donkey Is in His Stall Again.”

Despite its title, “NRA Blues” is not a lament. It praises the agency for its attempts to combat unemployment and other evils of the Depression. Country-music audiences had no objection to such a partisan song, since support for the Democratic Party, and Roosevelt in particular, was strong among people from those regions and classes where country music was the natural musical dialect. The song is a white blues, like Uncle Dave Macon’s song, with structural and harmonic patterns derived from Anglo-American folk music.

I Ain’t Got No Home in This World Anymore

(Woody Guthrie)

Woody Guthrie. *Recorded April 26, 1940, in New York. Originally issued on Victor 26624.*

Woody Guthrie (1912–1967) was born into the rural white tradition that had spawned and nourished hillbilly music. After leaving his birthplace of Okemah, Oklahoma, at the onset of the Depression, he drifted from one town in the Southwest to another for some years, holding a succession of odd jobs and learning to play a few chords on the guitar to accompany his own nasal, country-style singing. He also began writing songs, mostly by fitting new words to familiar tunes.

Guthrie worked his way to California and found a job singing country-and-western music on radio station KFVD in Los Angeles. Several things moved him in directions unusual for someone of his background: he observed the stream of Okies who had fled the Dust Bowl of the Midwest only to find new problems in California; and through actor-singer Will Geer he came to know members of the politically radical community, many of them Stalinists. His own songs became increasingly bitter, and he began writing a column, “Woody Sez,” in the radical journal *People’s World*.

When Geer went to New York to be in the stage version of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Guthrie followed and soon became a contributor to the *Daily Worker*. He was precisely what many working-class intellectuals and urban radicals had been looking for, an honest-to-goodness laboring-class American with a gift for writing and singing in a folk idiom and a taste for protest and for radical politics. He quickly became part of a circle including Pete Seeger, Bess (Lomax) and Butch Hawes, Aunt Molly Jackson, Lee Hayes, and other musicians and intellectuals committed to the idea that the American working classes could be led to revolution by political songs written in an idiom familiar to them.

Guthrie wrote songs detailing the tragic lot of poor Americans suffering the additional burdens of the Depression. His songs dealing with the tragedies of the Dust Bowl were easily the most powerful and moving protest statements to come out of the thirties. He recorded for the National Archives; Victor Records brought out two sets of his *Dust Bowl Ballads*; Folkways issued additional songs; and he wrote *Bound for Glory*, a book detailing his life and his conversion to political activism. As a result of all this, he became a celebrity among the intellectual-political circles of the urban East.

But though many of Guthrie's nonpolitical songs ("So Long, It's Been Good to Know You" and "Oklahoma Hills," for example) were popular among country-music audiences, his protest songs remained largely unknown except among his recent following. His new songs were extravagantly praised as classics of American folk song yet remained unknown among the very folk they were supposed to convert to a new way of thinking. Their greatest popularity has come, ironically, decades after the Depression.

In typical Guthrie style, the strophic text of "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" identifies a protagonist wandering through America during the Depression ("I'm just a wanderin' worker, I roam from town to town; /The police make it hard wherever I may go") and then lays out a protest in hard, clear language ("Rich man took my home and drove me from my door, /And I ain't got no home in this world anymore"). Guthrie's singing and harmonica playing are supported by simple strummed guitar chords reminiscent of the early style of the Carter Family. It is a powerful song, eloquent and moving in its directness. Without such models, the protest songs of the late fifties and the sixties might have taken quite different directions.

The Death of Mother Jones

(Anon.)

Gene Autry. *Recorded February 25, 1931, in New York. Originally issued on Banner 32133.*

Archie Green devotes a chapter of *Only a Miner* to Mary Harris Jones, who as “Mother” Jones was a remarkable and fabled figure in the early days of union history in America. Born in County Cork, Ireland, on May 1, 1830, she came to America when her family emigrated in 1835. Her father found employment in railroad construction. Mary eventually married Frank Jones, a Memphis ironworker. Even while raising a family she was active with the Knights of Columbus labor movement, and after the death of her husband and four children in 1876 during a yellow-fever epidemic, she devoted herself completely to radical and crusading labor movements. She took part in the Pullman strike of 1894, the Pennsylvania coal-miners’ strike of 1902, the 1905 convention that resulted in the establishment of the Industrial Workers of the World, the nationwide steel strike of 1919, and countless other conventions, demonstrations, and strikes. She was an unusual and striking figure, as described by an observer during the coal strike of 1902:

She was . . . nearly 70 years of age, with figure so slight that I doubt if she would weigh 100 pounds, hair white as snow and skin deeply lined with criss-cross wrinkles. But her little blue eyes, deep-set and sparkling, told of mental vigor and dauntless zeal. (Marlen Pew, “Shop Talk at Thirty,” *Editor and Publisher*, December 6, 1930)

Despite her age, size, and sex, she was a fiery speaker. An anonymous witness recorded a fragment from a speech she gave during the bloody West Virginia coal strikes of 1912–13:

You have it inscribed on the steps of your capitol, “Mountaineers are free” [*Montani semper liberi*]. God almighty, men, go down through this nation and see the damnable, infamous condition that is there. In no nation of the world will you find such a condition. (Quoted in Green, p.247).

Mother Jones died at the age of one hundred. Her casket was taken by train from Hyattsville, Maryland, where she died, to the Union Miners’ Cemetery in Mount Olive, Illinois. Her autobiography, published in 1925, is prefaced by an eloquent appreciation by Clarence Darrow of her lifelong struggle on behalf of labor. Though she died at the very onset of the Depression, Mother Jones was one of a handful of legendary figures whose memory was invoked during the thirties as inspiration for a new generation of labor organizers.

Gene Autry, born in Tioga, Texas, in 1907, recorded “The Death of Mother Jones” at the beginning of his career, in 1931. He worked as a railroad telegrapher in Oklahoma, whiling away lonely hours by singing the songs of his idol, Jimmie Rodgers. With the onset of the Depression, Autry went to New York to seek a singing career, encouraged by complimentary remarks made by a passenger on a train stopping briefly at his station; the passenger was Will Rogers. Success came quickly. By late 1929 Autry was recording commercially for several companies, and in 1930 he went to Chicago as a featured performer on the newly popular WLS *National Barn Dance*. His first hit record, “That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine,” came out in 1931, and in a few more years he was a top Hollywood star, with his new image of “singing cowboy” contributing to his success.

The origin of “The Death of Mother Jones” is obscure; Autry said that he learned it from his agent, William R. Calaway. Its stanzaic, repetitious, pentatonic nature suggests that it may be an Anglo-American folk song fitted with topical words. It speaks of the career of Mother Jones in quite general terms (“In ev’ry mining town,/ Mother Jones was ready to help them,/She never turned them down”), rather than referring to specific strikes. There is clear implication that what she had done could serve as a model for labor activists of the Depression years (“May the miners all work together/To carry out her plan,/And bring back better conditions/For every laboring man”).

All I Want

(Millard Lampell, et al.)

The Almanac Singers and Pete Seeger. *Recorded 1941. Originally issued on Keynote 304.*

Pete Seeger (born 1919), who had dropped out of Harvard in order to roam around America, play his banjo, and expand his repertory of folk songs, teamed up with Lee Hayes (a former Commonwealth College organizer, born in rural Arkansas) for an evening of their brand of folk songs in Greenwich Village in late 1940. With Millard Lampell, a writer who had graduated from the University of West Virginia, they became the Almanac Singers and gave an impromptu performance for the National Youth Congress in Washington that same year. Hayes explained the choice of the group’s name: “. . . if you want to know what’s good for the itch, or unemployment, or Fascism, you have to look in your Almanac. That’s what Almanac stands for” (*People’s Songs Bulletin* 3, November, 1948). The three had similar political views and shared a conviction that working-class Americans could best be told of the evils of capitalism through music of a sort already known to them.

The Almanacs became a quartet in the early summer of 1941 when Woody Guthrie joined them, and they traveled across America later that summer, singing at union meetings from New York to California. Other musicians would join them from time to time, and at one point the makeup of the Almanacs was so flexible that several groups with the name would perform at different places at the same time.

Their album *Talking Union* consisted of six of their most political songs. Lampell wrote most of the lyrics, though both words and music represent collaboration by several of the

Almanacs. The songs, including “All I Want” on the present album, are apparently addressed at union workers; but as Serge Denisoff puts it in his book *Great Day Coming*, the album remained largely unknown except in “bohemian and leftist circles.”

Another album released in 1941, *Songs for John Doe*, contained antiwar songs, reflecting the Communist Party’s desire for a neutral America. But Hitler’s invasion of Russia changed all that, and the Almanacs’ *Dear Mr. President* album of 1942 urged national unity in the war against fascism. “Round and Round Hitler’s Grave” (based on the folk tune “Old Joe Clark”) from this album was widely played on the radio during the early days of America’s involvement in the war.

The Almanacs drifted apart after 1942, just as the New York press was launching an attack on them for their political views and activities. Their politically motivated protest songs had reached few Americans, partly because of timing: almost all Americans were united in a struggle against a common enemy. The time was not ripe for revolution. But the Almanacs laid some groundwork for protest songs of a later period.

The White Cliffs of Dover

(Nat Burton and Walter Kent)

Glenn Miller and His Orchestra. *Recorded November 24, 1941, in New York. Originally issued on Bluebird 11397.*

The Depression ended with America’s entry into World War II, and for the first time in over a decade Americans looked beyond their country and its problems to events in other parts of the world. “The White Cliffs of Dover” takes a sentimentally optimistic view of England’s difficult and courageous stand, almost alone, against Nazi Germany. (The song was most certainly inspired by Alice Duer Miller’s long poem *The White Cliffs of Dover* [1940], which became a best seller and the basis for a successful motion picture starring Irene Dunne.)

In melody, harmony, and structure, the song is squarely in the Tin Pan Alley tradition of the twenties and thirties. But the performance is quite different. Sections of trumpets, trombones, and saxes, five or six of each, supported by rhythm instruments, give it the big-band sound that had suddenly become so popular in the late thirties. This sound was first heard a decade earlier in the bands of such black composers and arrangers as Fletcher Henderson and Benny Carter. Even the rhythmic vitality and subtlety of black jazz groups was taken over by the big white bands. The combination of a dynamic, exciting new instrumental sound with this rhythmic punch gave white popular music an energy and excitement appropriate to the mood of the country as it prepared for war. It was a new sound for a new era.

Glenn Miller (born in Clarinda, Iowa, in 1904) spent a long apprenticeship as a trombonist and arranger with the bands of Glen Gray, Ozzie Nelson, Vincent Lopez, the Dorsey Brothers, and Ray Noble. The first group to play under his name was formed in 1937. It took several years to win recognition as a top band, but the early forties saw hits

like “Moonlight Serenade” (composed and arranged by Miller himself), “Little Brown Jug,” “Tuxedo Junction,” “A String of Pearls,” “Serenade in Blue,” and many others that remain permanently identified with this period. After enlisting in the Army Air Force, Miller was killed in a plane crash in the English Channel in late 1944.

Walter Kent, born in New York in 1911 and educated at City College and the Juilliard School, wrote successful music for film (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*, 1943) and stage (*Seventeen*, 1951). His most popular song was “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” “The White Cliffs of Dover” was written in 1941 and recorded by a number of bands and vocalists in the early forties. —*Charles Hamm*.

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**BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A DIME?
AMERICAN SONG DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION
80270-2**

1 BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A DIME? 3:13
(E. Y. Harburg and Jay Gorney)
(publ. Warner Bros. Music, A Division of Warner Bros., Inc.)
Bing Crosby; with Lennie Hayton and His Orchestra

2 THE BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS 3:10
(Al Dubin and Harry Warren)
(publ. Warner Bros. Music, A Division of Warner Bros., Inc.)
Deane Janis; with Hal Kemp's Orchestra

3 LIFE IS JUST A BOWL OF CHERRIES 3:13
(Lew Brown and Ray Henderson)
(publ. Chappell & Co., Inc.)
Rudy Vallee and His Connecticut Yankees

4 IN THE STILL OF THE NIGHT 3:14
(Cole Porter)
(publ. Chappell & Co., Inc.)
Glen Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra

5 LOVE WALKED IN 2:41

(George and Ira Gershwin)
(publ. Gershwin Publishing Corp./Chappell & Co., Inc.)
Kenny Baker; with orchestra conducted by Harry Sosnik

6 ON THE GOOD SHIP LOLLYPOP 2:25
(Sidney Clare and Richard A. Whiting)
(publ. Movietone Music Corp.)
Shirley Temple; with studio orchestra

7 UNEMPLOYMENT STOMP 2:36
(Anon.)
(publ. unknown)
Big Bill Broonzy

8 THE GOLD DIGGERS' SONG (WE'RE IN THE MONEY) 3:13
(Al Dubin and Harry Warren)
(publ. Warner Bros. Music, A Division of Warner Bros., Inc.)
Dick Powell; with studio orchestra

9 ALL IN DOWN AND OUT BLUES 2:31
(David Harrison Macon)
(publ. unknown)
Uncle Dave Macon

10 FIFTEEN MILES FROM BIRMINGHAM 2:46
(Alton Delmore)
(publ. Vidor Publications, Inc.)
The Delmore Brothers

11 THE COAL LOADING MACHINE 2:42
(George Korson)
(publ. unknown)
The Evening Breezes Sextet

12 NRA BLUES 2:52
(Bill Cox)
(publ. unknown)
Bill Cox

13 I AIN'T GOT NO HOME IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE 2:45
(Woody Guthrie)
(publ. unknown)
Woody Guthrie

14 THE DEATH OF MOTHER JONES 2:40
(Anon.)

(publ. unknown)
Gene Autry

15 **ALL I WANT** 2:58
(Millard Lampell, et al.)
(publ. unknown)
The Almanac Singers and Pete Seeger

16 **THE WHITE CLIFFS OF DOVER** 2:52
(Nat Burton and Walter Kent)
(publ. Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., Inc.)
Glenn Miller and His Orchestra

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