# I Am a Pilgrim: The Road to Telluride

***Bluegrass Festival Culture and the Quest for Identity in the New West***

## I. Historical Background and Theoretical Framework

### Introduction

As the title, borrowed from a song with a long history in the canon of bluegrass music, implies, this project has become an exploration of personal identity as well as an examination of the vital and exciting subculture which has grown up around bluegrass music in the American West over the last four decades. Twenty years ago my first exposure to what sociologist Robert O. Gardner now terms "New West Bluegrass Culture" came in the form of a "working vacation" to the Telluride Bluegrass Festival to vend clothing for my employer at the time. That week and the experiences I shared with so many new and old friends changed the direction of my life. Through the ensuing years I watched as other new initiates attended the festival and experienced similar epiphanies. After a few years absence I returned to the Telluride festival this summer as an aspiring scholar, armed with the tools of an ethnographer (notebook, discreet digital recording device), the ethno-musicological theories of Mark Slobin, Gardner's excellent dissertation, and a naïve belief that a few years of separation and some academic training would allow me to become an impartial and objective observer of a culture in which I have been immersed for two decades.[1] This project is an attempt to shed some light on a sub-culture which I believe has developed some unique and effective mechanisms for establishing and maintaining personal and group identity in an increasingly challenging modern/post-modern environment.

Historical Background: *Roots and Branches of Bluegrass Music*

Some historical perspective is elemental to a thorough examination of modern bluegrass culture, if only to dispel some commonly held misconceptions or misunderstandings. Bluegrass music, while closely related to earlier forms of Appalachian string music and other regional styles, only emerged as a discrete and identifiable idiom in the post World War II era. Bluegrass developed as a unique American music form at virtually the same time as the be-bop jazz of Charlie Parker and within a decade of the sweeping musical revolution of Elvis Presley and rock and roll.[2] In this sense, bluegrass is a thoroughly "modern" phenomenon and should be viewed as such. Bluegrass was born in the modern industrial world as music of displaced and disadvantaged working class people, and its symbolism and imagery are rife with images of a vanishing rural life to which the singer longs to return but, most often cannot. With its driving tempo and syncopated rhythms, it more accurately reflects the breakneck pace of modernity than the pastoral rhythms of a nearly vanished rural life. This perspective is critical in understanding bluegrass music and bluegrass festivals as the nexus of a modern/post modern folk culture.

In his *The Bluegrass Reader,* writer and editor Thomas Goldsmith identifies three distinct periods in the history of bluegrass. The formative or seminal period is referred to by Goldsmith as "The Big Bang, 1939-59." And indeed it was a bang. In 1939 Bill Monroe of Rosine Kentucky formed a new band in Atlanta and named them *The Bluegrass Boys.*[3] Over the next five years the band went through several changes in personnel and instrumentation as Monroe sought for that special sound, and by 1945, with the addition of banjoist Earl Scruggs and

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[1] Gardner, Robert Owen. *"Welcome Home": Performing Place, Community, and Identity in the New West Bluegrass Music Revival,* University of Colorado Department of Sociology, 2004.

[2] In fact, Elvis's first hit was a cover of "Blue Moon of Kentucky" penned by the "father of Bluegrass" Bill Monroe.

guitarist/vocalist Lester Flatt to Monroe's driving mandolin and "high lonesome" tenor vocals the sound we know as bluegrass today had become fully formed. But as Rosenberg clearly illustrates, it would still be sometime before the term would come into wide use as an identifier for this musical style. The term did not appear in print in direct reference to musical style until 1957 in liner notes for Musicologist and Folklorist Mike Seeger's *Mountain Music, Bluegrass Style* written by noted music historian Ralph Rinzler.[4]

In the years immediately following World War II, bluegrass boomed. Monroe and his band were mainstays on "The Grand Ole Opry," broadcast live every Saturday night over Nashville's powerful WSM and heard throughout the upper South and Midwest. Other musicians heard Monroe's sound and were compelled by the driving rhythms, haunting vocal harmonies and intricate instrumental solos to explore this new and exciting style. By the early fifties a number of touring bands were playing music in this style. Far from appreciating the flattery, Monroe remained jealous of "his style," even as whole musical genre was emerging, arguably, from the seeds he had planted only ten years earlier.[5] And then along came Elvis.

Goldsmith dates the end of this seminal period as 1959, but I would submit that the first period effectively ends with the emergence of Elvis and the immediate boom in rock and roll beginning as early as 1954. In any case, by the late 50s, with rock and roll dominating the popular music scene, things were somewhat grim for both bluegrass performers and the wider fraternity of country music artists of which they were still a nominal part. Work dried up and even the great Monroe often had difficulty keeping a regular band together, yet the music and the

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[3] Rosen berg, Neil., In *The Bluegrass Reader*, Goldsmith, Thomas, ed., ( Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2004), 95

[4] Ibid, 94

[5] The discussion concerning the origins of the bluegrass "sound" and the validity of Monroe's identification as "the father of Bluegrass" is a subject itself worthy of dissertation length examination, and remains the subject of some dispute within the community.

musicians persisted. And eventually like seeds that lay fallow for an indeterminate period and suddenly, unexpectedly burst forth into a new spring, they emerged. Slowly at first, but with growing strength and vitality, into what Goldsmith has termed "The Re-Seeding of Bluegrass, 1960-1979." It is in this period that the foundation was laid for the emergence of the twenty-first century post-modern "community of choice" that is the primary focus of this project, and during which many of its values and mores began to form.

In the late fifties and early sixties, bluegrass existed on the fringes of both the country and folk music scenes. Bluegrass acts such as The Osborne Brothers, and Jim and Jesse McReynolds appeared as afterthoughts on country music package shows throughout the country while North Carolina's Doc Watson, a blind guitar virtuoso, began appearing at folk festivals and a nascent network of folk clubs and coffee houses in urban centers. Flatt and Scruggs kept bluegrass in the public eye through their appearances on the popular *Beverly Hillbillies* television program and many appearances on college campuses, an entirely new kind of venue for most bluegrass acts in 1960.

And then, in the fall if 1965 an event took place which has had a significant and lasting influence on American music culture as a whole, as well as on the formation of a new and innovative form of community largely immune to the isolation, alienation, compartmentalization and general malaise associated with modern urban/exurban living. In September of that year, on a horse farm outside Roanoke, Virginia, some three hundred or so musicians, fans and curiosity seekers gathered for the first multi-day, multi-band event dedicated entirely to "bluegrass music." This celebration is widely acknowledged as the first "bluegrass festival." While small in scale, this event set many precedents which have become part of the festival experience. Forty years later there are at least a dozen annual events of varying scales in Colorado alone which

refer to themselves as “bluegrass” festivals and several others which overtly associate themselves with mostly acoustic oriented musicians. It would be the work of many months to compile a complete list of events worldwide. The International Bluegrass Music Association includes members from, and there are festivals held in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Japan and a host of other countries. But, in 1965, these eventualities had not even been conceived of. Country music promoter Carleton Haney was just trying to create a venue for music and musicians he himself deeply appreciated.[6] This first festival featured not only formal performances by established acts but more informal instructional workshops in which aspiring musicians could interact with the performers, as well as even less structured “pickin’ sessions” in the campgrounds and parking lots in which even more intimate interaction with professional performers was not only possible but likely. This first festival established traditions that remain an essential part of every bluegrass festival produced today. Most importantly, these interactions facilitated the passing on of songs and musical idioms from elders to new initiates.

Haney’s inclusion of a “Story of Bluegrass” on Festival Sunday which emphasized Bill Monroe’s prominence in the development of the music is evidence of the importance early enthusiasts placed on an understanding of where the music came from and what differentiated it from other styles. It is not unreasonable to argue that without Haney to champion Bill Monroe as the noble and heroic “Father of Bluegrass” the entire culture might have evolved along different lines. Every folk culture needs its mythic figures and Monroe was as willing to fulfill the role as Haney was eager to cast him in it. Monroe’s continuing presence as the central figure in the pantheon of first generation bluegrass practitioners is an important element in the entire discussion, again reinforcing the importance of history and continuity within the group and providing a model for the heroic figure of new stories and mythologies that would develop.

[6] Goldsmith, *The Bluegrass Reader,* 189-91

After Haney's first few festivals, other promoters and fans began to organize festivals around the country. Among them was a group of musicians in the tiny western Colorado town of Telluride who billed themselves as the *Fall Creek Band*. In 1972 they decided that the isolated picturesque box canyon would be an ideal venue for a bluegrass festival. This study is an examination of the portable post-modern folk culture which I will argue has evolved as a direct result of that decision.

Concurrent with the emergence of the festival movement, this period of "re-seeding" was marked by the emergence and maturation of a new generation of musicians with a more diverse and wide ranging set of musical and cultural backgrounds. In the formative years of bluegrass, the pool of musicians virtually all came from the American southeast, most had rural backgrounds and their musical vocabulary was heavily influenced by church singing, Appalachian fiddle tunes, and local African-American musical traditions. By the early sixties, bluegrass had transcended its regional, rural roots and a new generation of urban musicians began to add their voices to the growing chorus. Two of the most influential and prolific of these "northern" practitioners were mandolinist David Grisman, a native of New Jersey, widely recognized today for his unique and innovative acoustic instrumental style[7] and guitarist singer-songwriter Peter Rowan, originally of Massachusetts, who served a term in Monroe's *Bluegrass Boys* in the early 60s, before heading to California to pursue a variety of musical projects. In California, in 1973, these two teamed with the iconic *Grateful Dead* guitarist Jerry Garcia and Florida fiddler Vassar Clements (who had played with Monroe as a teenager in the late forties) to form the short-lived but still widely influential bluegrass band *Old and in the Way.* Although this band made a limited number of appearances during a period of less than a year in 1973, the recordings that resulted from those appearances, became legendary among longtime fans and the

presence of the counter-culture icon Garcia(on Banjo), brought new fans that might not otherwise have been exposed to the bluegrass scene. The introduction of *The Grateful Dead's* counter culture or "hippie" audience to bluegrass, along with the campus appearances of Earl Scruggs with his sons in a Bluegrass/Folk/Rock fusion band known as *The Earl Scruggs Review* would have a lasting influence in the evolution of festival culture in the ensuing decades.

Also extremely important in this period was the 1972 Nashville collaboration of several California country rockers with an array of bluegrass and country music legends in. These *Nitty Gritty Dirt Band* recording sessions, featuring Earl Scruggs, Jimmy Martin, Mother Maybelle Carter, Vassar Clements and Merle Travis, among other Nashville luminaries which resulted in an album titled *Will the Circle be Unbroken.* The importance and influence of this recording cannot be overstated as it bridged what had been a potentially widening "generation gap" between the early innovators and the emerging generation who would inevitably inherit the legacy. Tim a fifty five year old teacher from Fort Collins says: "That record was so important in the development of my musical tastes. Still is."[8]

Even as Rowan, Grisman and others were coming together in California to contribute both musicians and repertoire into the wider national scene, the Southeast was also beginning to nurture a new generation of musicians with a firm grounding in the foundations of bluegrass accompanied by an ever widening appetite for new material and new musical vocabulary. In 1972, in Kentucky, a group was formed that would turn most of these conventions on their collective heads and eventually becoming so influential that its even more frenetic, heavily rock influenced, improvisational style would come to be identified simply as "Newgrass." *New Grass Revival* toured from 1972 to 1989 with only three personnel changes and their sound remained

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[7] Known to enthusiasts as "Dawg" music after the artists initials DWG.
[8] Interview, September, 22, 2007

consistent. It was based on the incendiary mandolin and fiddle of Sam Bush, the powerfully emotive lead vocals of John Cowan and the innovative banjo and guitar stylings first of Courtney Johnson and Curtis Birch,[9] and later of Bela Fleck and Pat Flynn. Especially in the early 70s, the *Revival* looked like a rock band and they played seamless versions of bluegrass standards in traditional style, searing acoustic interpretations of rock classics and original material with extended instrumental solos.

During this period in the early and mid 70s there were also the beginnings of a solid grassroots bluegrass movement here in Colorado which would gain national influence with the emergence of the Boulder based progressive bluegrass ensemble *Hot Rize*, who will figure prominently in the upcoming section on performance.

This new generation of bluegrass practitioners took differing approaches to interpreting the music which can be loosely classified into three categories. The first of these categories is best described as the "traditionalist" or strict constructionist school. Adherents to this line of thought tend to feel that any deviation from the instrumentation, presentation style or musical vocabulary established by Monroe et.al. is an at best misguided and at worst sacrilegious bastardization of the pure form. This debate is the continuation of a tradition that is itself part of the community identity. The definition of what is or is not bluegrass music is an ongoing and evolving negotiation, not only of musical style and content, but of values and priorities. Most "traditionalists" conveniently forget or overlook that Monroe's *Bluegrass Boys* were a constantly changing and evolving musical aggregation, both before and after the pivotal Flatt and Scruggs period. In fact, shortly before this pivotal period, the band included a female vocalist who also played the *accordion.* According to fiddler Curly Seckler, "Monroe had a accordion and a electric guitar when Lester went to work with him. And when Earl came in there they turned his

[9] Curtis was also an accomplished dobbroist

sound all the way around."[10] This reality makes it difficult for traditionalists to defend their position in the context of a thorough historical investigation of the origins of the music; however it does not lessen the "traditionalists" ardor for "pure bluegrass," or his/her inclination to dismiss or disdain more innovative or less rigid forms such as progressive bluegrass and newgrass.[11] These designations represent related but distinctly different approaches to the challenge of integrating modern sensibilities, technological advances, and updated subject matter into performances that continued to acknowledge and honor the musical legacy that inspired them.

On parallel trajectories we can track the evolution of both "progressive" and "newgrass" styles of bluegrass. The differences have mostly to do with electricity and its appropriate applications, but there are some social implications that accompany such differences as well. Progressive bluegrass is certainly the more restrained of these evolutions, and the most directly reflective of its roots. Progressive acts in the late 60s and early 70s might have an electric bass or use some newly available audio effects to enhance a specific song. But they remained true to the instrumentation of earlier incarnations. Early progressive bluegrass acts like *The Seldom Scene* and *Country Cookin'* still eschewed drums or inordinate levels of electrically enhanced volume. These groups are differentiated most by a new and much wider repertoire of material than previous generations had employed. This wider repertoire included an ever-growing number of new compositions by young artists which reflected the experiences and aspirations shaped by contemporary circumstances. It also borrowed liberally from the songbooks of rock and pop. This wider repertoire coupled with a more casual, informal performance style, both reflected and promoted the rising popularity of bluegrass in a segment of the urban "upscale" population and

[10] Willis, Barry, *America's Music, Bluegrass*,(Franktown, CO.: Pine Valley Music, 1992), 563
[11] Many "traditionalists" have been heard to remark the "Telluride ain't no Bluegrass Festival"

clubs featuring the music appeared in several urban areas.[12] One of the most influential of these progressive bluegrass acts was the Boulder, Colorado based band *Hot Rize*. As will be demonstrated later in this inquiry, *Hot Rize* and their musical alter egos *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers* represent an ideal example of how audience and artists interact to define, refine, and perform community identity.

In the case of newgrass there was a significant appeal to a much younger audience which had not previously embraced acoustic musical styles. Newgrass not only acknowledges its kinship with rock music, it celebrates that kinship and seeks to renew and expand the dialogue between these organic American musical genres. Newgrass is loud and boisterous. It employs an eclectic mix of electric and acoustic instruments, often includes some percussion and employs extensive improvisational solos by individual instrumentalists over an extended jam. Some observers including Planet Bluegrass's Ferguson, believe that *New Grass Revival* and its performances at festivals around the country is as direct a contributor to the current jam band scene as *The Grateful Dead* or *The Allman Brothers.*[13]

Newgrassers refused to either conform to the expectations of a previous generation or to allow that generation to define what they could or could not appropriate of the existing folkways and traditions to define themselves. In this sense they were indeed following in the footsteps of Monroe and the other foundational characters of the music and culture. Monroe himself experimented with styles and musicians until he found the sound that he wanted, and then he refused to compromise even as rock and roll nearly obliterated most American regional musical styles. He had defined his identity and he stuck to it.

[12] Fleischhauer, Carl and Rosenberg, Neil V., *Bluegrass Odyssey; A Documentary in pictures and words, 1966-86*, (Urbana, IL., University of Illinois Press, 2001) 47-67
[13] Interview, April, 13, 2006

It should be mentioned here that these distinctions are drawn primarily by critics and fans. Most contemporary performers prefer to avoid these categories so as not to be limited in their creative approach to their craft. Peter Rowan readily identifies himself as "a Bluegrass Boy," but his body of work covers a multitude of regional and international styles. Tim O'Brien of *Hot Rize* says: "It's really all just one ongoing song, and we all tap into it at different times and places. Style is just a question of what you feel in the moment. I like to play all kinds of stuff."[14]

I have emphasized the emergence of Peter Rowan, David Grisman, *New Grass Revival*, and *Hot Rize* but it should be noted that these are merely some of the most influential artists. There is a long and distinguished list of modern bluegrass practitioners who have also contributed to the growth of both the music and culture examined here; most of these have made numerous appearances at The Telluride Bluegrass Festival.

Ah yes, that little box canyon in Colorado. In 1972 the *Fall Creek Band* appeared at the Telluride Fourth of July celebration, and the following year they hosted the first annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival. That first event was a one day show with a couple of other Colorado acts joining the locals for a day of music. But the second annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival grew to a two day event featuring none other than *New Grass Revival*. This was a pivotal moment in the evolution of the community with which this study is concerned. *NGR* played every subsequent TBF until they disbanded in early 1989(fifteen years), with *NGR* stalwarts Sam Bush, John Cowan and Bela Fleck all continuing to appear regularly on the Telluride stage through 2007. Likewise, Peter Rowan has been a fixture on the Telluride stage since his first appearance at the sixth annual festival in 1979 and has been instrumental in creating some of the most prominent new mythologies and folktales of the culture, as well as his important contributions to the

[14] Interview, May, 27, 2006

modern repertoire. David Grisman made his first appearance at the fifth festival and while his return has not been as regular as Bush and Rowan, his esteem among fans and fellow musicians is no less. His influence on the evolution of the music itself has been profound. The importance continuity represented by the annual reappearance of these and a handful of other artists at TBF over the last three decades cannot be overemphasized as we begin an examination of the community which has evolved out of and around this music and the associated festivals. These artists, their music and performances have been an integral part of the formation of the culture which is the subject of this study.

Goldsmith extends his period of "re-seeding" (1969-1980) to the end of the decade, and I agree. *NGR* had carved out a niche with a sound that reflected the restlessness and rebelliousness of seventies youth culture while always maintaining a level of musical integrity that made even the staunchest "traditionalist" take notice. Peter Rowan, Sam Bush, David Grisman and their colleagues were pushing the envelope in terms of songwriting, musicianship, composition and repertoire. The Telluride Festival had survived five years by 1979. The seeds had been sown and the season was ripe for what Goldsmith calls "Another Roots Revival, 1980-2000."

The last two decades of the twentieth century are a challenging period in American cultural studies. For many, American popular music and culture in the late 1970s and early 80s had reached a nadir of packaging and plasticization. The acoustic sounds of bluegrass played on wooden instruments offered an attractive alternative to what some perceived as increasingly homogeneous and formulaic musical landscape. Words like "pure," "authentic," and "real" appear repeatedly in nearly all accounts of the music's appeal both in early scholarship from Rosenberg, Willis and others and in the more recent ethnographic work of Gardner. My own ethnographic work overwhelmingly confirms that these remain key identifiers within this site. A

great part of the challenge of this project is determining what these terms mean in this context, both musically and culturally.

Here then are the ingredients of an emerging folk culture: 1) A growing group of innovative and dedicated musicians with a firm grounding in an existing musical tradition, a strong drive to expand and explore its possibilities as well as their own creative boundaries. 2) A small but growing fan base of increasingly sophisticated listeners hungry for a musical experience more "authentic" and personally fulfilling than that provided by mainstream purveyors of musical entertainment, be they classified as "Pop," "Rock," or "Country." 3) Perhaps most important, a venue which is arguably the most beautiful setting in the world in which to perform and experience live music of any kind. The importance of the sheer physical beauty of Telluride's alpine valley, as well as its isolated location, cannot be overstated in the formation of the shared memory of place that is so important to any lasting folk culture.

In the following pages, I will argue that these three elements have combined over the last three decades to nurture a unique and vital post-modern sub-culture which transcends geographical, economic, political, social and even temporal limitations, offering its members the opportunity to "belong" to a community which fulfills a need, often perceived by individuals as unfulfilled in the communities in which they usually reside.

## The Problem of Post-Modern Identity

In this section I will offer a brief discussion of what Gardner calls "The Problem of Post-Modern Identity," and how my personal grappling with this issue led me to become immersed in modern Bluegrass culture.

In pre-industrial societies, and even into the early twentieth century in America, most people were easily able to define themselves by what we may call "traditional" means: geographic location, ethnicity, language, family and religious background. My Grandfather, born in 1906, lived his entire life in the same Illinois County, farming land that his Grandfather had settled two generations before. Today his oldest Grandson still farms that land, mostly untroubled and unconcerned about questions of "identity." He is an Illinois farmer, husband and father, farming the land his Great-Grandfather farmed before him. For most Americans this question is not as easily addressed.

Beginning as early as the massive migrations precipitated by the economic upheaval and natural disasters of the 1930s, Americans became disassociated not only from the land but often from family, religious and community traditions as well. Certainly, in the period during and immediately following World War II, America experienced unprecedented shifts in population, mostly from the rural South and Midwest to industrial centers in the North and to the rapidly growing Far West. Thus a significant percentage of America was rapidly disassociated from a way of life and a sense of both personal and community identity which had been in place for multiple generations. For many of these displaced persons bluegrass and other country music stylings offered a musical connection to a way of life which seemed lost to them. As Gardner states: "Throughout its…history, bluegrass music has appealed to listeners by articulating this tension between tradition and modernity through the mythical signification of…a place untouched by the contaminating forces of modern urban life."[15] I would argue that this appeal has continued to grow as individuals' connections to geographic "place" have continued to decrease. Without this deep and specific connection to place, it becomes exponentially more

[15] Gardner, *"Welcome Home,"* 83

challenging to develop and maintain the familial and community associations that are necessary elements in the emergence of both individual and group identities.

At the same time that Americans were experiencing the rapid erosion of traditional mechanisms for identity construction or "locating themselves in the larger world," American society as a whole was experiencing a significant shift in values and expectations as well. Through the 50s and early 60s conformity, homogeneity and a growing emphasis on materialism came to dominate American mass culture, fueled by the rapid rise of television and other forms of mass communication.[16] This is not the appropriate venue for a detailed examination of the social and political upheaval that accompanied the end of the nineteen sixties and the early nineteen seventies but it cannot be altogether ignored either. By the early 70s, America itself was in a deep existential crisis. The war in Southeast Asia had polarized the country; racial and gender disputes often erupted into scenes of unsettling confrontation and even violence; urban centers were in serious decay and the President himself was under a cloud which would soon drive him from office in disgrace. One history Professor at the University of Colorado has even referred to the 70s more than once as "The s**t decade. The music was bad. The TV was bad. The politics was bad, it was just bad."[17] In 1969, the perception of Rock music as a potential cultural unifier among young people had, in a few moments, gone from the promise and euphoria of the muddy but peaceful Woodstock festival to the horror and chaos of beatings and murder at Altamont. Now not only were many Americans bereft of the traditional identity markers of place, family etc., but the very identity of "American" seemed to offer less and less solace.

This malaise continued through the 70s and by the beginning of the 1980s the American landscape was rife with classic examples of the alienation and isolation described by Riesman

[16] Diggins, John Patrick, *The Proud Decades* (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1988), 207-10
[17] Zeiler, Thomas, Lecture, September, 25, 2007

nearly three decades earlier in his highly acclaimed *The Lonely Crowd*. Cultural expectations dictated that one should be either a polyester clad denizen of the disco scene, ala John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever," a rocker in the big hair and black leather mold, or a drugstore cowboy with boots and hat but no horse, and certainly no cattle. For many (including this writer) these personas were simply empty. They were artificial, constructed by media machines to fit all sizes and subvert any real individual identity, like a children's Halloween costume. While my own views have been heavily influenced by the writings of Thoreau, Emerson, and Orwell, among others, the truth is that the single most important piece of literature informing my view of social and political interaction, then and now, is the children's folk tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Even as a child I knew deep in my bones that I did not want to be one of those poor souls either unwilling or unable to trust the evidence of their own senses as opposed to the "opinions" or "assurances" of those who "know better." I knew I could never have or be satisfied with the pastoral life of my Grandfather, but I knew just as clearly that a split-level suburban home, a corporate cubicle, and two weeks vacation every year would soon reduce me to just another cipher in Thoreau's "mass of men." No life of quiet desperation for this twentieth century man. In the fall of 1986, a seemingly random chain of events would begin which would eventually lead me to discover not only a viable and comfortable personal identity, but also a welcoming and nurturing environment in which to express and explore that identity. That environment is the subject of this study.

Framing the Discussion

As American mass culture has become increasingly fragmented sociologists have identified the emergence of a wide variety of sub-cultures. This study is an examination of just such a "community of choice" whose emergence and evolution is intrinsically linked to the

Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Even the promotional material produced by festival producers Planet Bluegrass reflects a strong sense of self-identification, as in the widespread use of the invented term "festivarian" i.e. one who regularly attends Planet Bluegrass events (and, in all likelihood, many others) and embraces a certain set of implied values, perspectives and priorities that reflect musical tastes and social values.The adoption of this identifier by the Planet Bluegrass fan base is an outstanding illustration of the finanscape intersecting with the ideoscape to define or refine a sub-cultural identity. The speed with which the term "festivarian" entered the everyday lexicon of regular festival attendees gives weight to Planet Bluegrass CEO Craig Ferguson's assertion that "The term was just reflective of what was already going on. Festivarian culture existed long before we started calling it that."[18]

Technology, mobility and the rapid dissemination of information have created an interconnecting web of what ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin calls sub-cultures, by which he means "the small units within big ... cultures." This, along with Slobin's accompanying term, *super-culture* will form the framework within which we attempt to make some sense of the "overlaps, intersections, and nestings of the sort that the prefixes super-, and sub-, represent"[19]. Slobin uses these terms to describe the relationship of individuals and communities to themselves and to each other. In the twenty-first century no sub-culture can exist wholly independent of or uninfluenced by the pressures and expectations of the dominant culture. Such relationships require constant adaptation, negotiation and adjustment. It is the position of this project that Festivarian culture has developed unique and effective mechanisms for constructing and maintaining identity within a cohesive, durable and portable folk culture which is particularly effective at adapting to the demands of the super-culture.

[18] Interview, March, 13, 2006

Slobin holds that the super-culture, the various sub-cultures and the extensive inter-culture relationships that necessarily accompany them, operate within the context of a series of landscapes. In adopting this approach he relies extensively on language used by economist Arjun Appadurai who defines our environment as composed of five dimensions, "a 'set of landscapes, which he terms *ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes,* and *ideoscapes"*[20]. These –scapes are essentially what they sound like. The financscape is the world of commerce and finance: Banking, investments, credit etc. The ethnoscape is that shifting and problematic world of ethnic background and modern identity. The technoscape is the rapidly changing world of technology which influences the other –scapes with each new innovation. The media-scape is that never ending world of mass communication and information technology which bombards us virtually non-stop with images and information. The ideoscape is that world of ideas in which we grapple with the many moral, ethical and philosophical questions raised by our navigation of these –scapes. Cultural values are defined by the ways in which communities and individuals negotiate the complex and often shifting nature of the relationships between the various -scapes.

These five "landscapes" are not discrete sites but are continually intersect and influence each other. The mediascape can change drastically with every new communications innovation produced by the technoscape, and the finanscape is inexorably linked to any such evolutions. Likewise the mediascape and the ideoscape are linked, with the mediascape often exerting significant influence on the ideoscape. In essence, our relationships with and within these various landscapes have replaced our relationship with the actual landscape as the context in which we define both individual and community identity. These -scapes and the way in which we interact with them are often the most coherent context available to us for identity construction in the

[19] Slobin, Mark, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH.: University Press of New England, 1993), 14

modern era. In terms of the present inquiry, I will argue that the emergent bluegrass sub-culture has developed and continues to develop innovative and effective ways to negotiate the often treacherous web of relationships engendered by these various landscapes and the sub-cultures embedded within the super or dominant culture.

Also relevant to this discussion is the importance of memory and its relationship to place as discussed in both Gardner and the work of cultural Historian George Lipsitz. Shared experience and place memory are necessary elements in the maintenance of a cohesive folk culture. Without the evolution of the festival movement, the building of such communal memories could not have progressed so rapidly in this community, even with the aid of ever more sophisticated communications and recording technologies. Like Slobin, Lipsitz cites Appadurai's series of interconnecting landscapes as appropriate in any examination of "place" in a post-modern, transnational environment. As Lipsitz boils it down: "…The dynamic movement of ethnic groups, images, technology, capital, and ideologies allows us all to inhabit many different 'places' at once."[21]

Against these theoretical frameworks, using Gardner's extensive research plus my own ethnological investigation conducted over this past summer, augmented by my decades long immersion in this culture, I will attempt to identify and elucidate the unique characteristics, both material and ideological that differentiate bluegrass sub-culture from the dominant culture, allowing bluegrass culture to thrive and grow in spite of continued marginalization by the superculture.

Within this site there are some underlying values which are critical to a coherent discussion of the sub-culture. Among these is a clear understanding of the importance of journey

[20] ibid 14

motifs in this community. Bluegrass culture as examined in this study could not have evolved without the modern transportation technology and the widespread mobility that accompanies it. That "the road," its joys and hardships, are deeply ingrained in the repertoire of bluegrass is a reflection of the lived experience of both musicians and fans. I will argue that a close examination of repertoire, evolving mythologies and ethnographic research indicate that while Gardner is correct in identifying "home" as an essential element in the construction of community identity, in this culture, it exists (in real or mythological terms) not only as a point of destination or return but equally important as a point of origin from which to begin a journey forward to the best future we can imagine. In the 1940s Bill Monroe sang of "goin back to old Kentucky, never more to say farewell." In the 1990s Peter Rowan sang "I Dream of a Home." The differences here can seem subtle at first, but upon close examination we can see a shift from nostalgia to hope and from the pain of past loss to potential future happiness. This forward oriented approach in modern bluegrass culture reflects the core community values of creativity, innovation, and commitment or perseverance.

Finally and perhaps, most important, I will emphasize the collective and cooperative nature of this culture as reflected in both musical performance and ritual and tradition. Bluegrass music is at its core a *group* activity. It depends upon close communication and cooperation between musicians; these values transfer seamlessly to the associated culture. Without cooperation, flexibility and good communication the festival experience would not be possible, just as the music itself suffers when individual musicians fail to fully integrate into the group sound.

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[21] Lipsitz, George., *Dangerous Crossroads Polular Music, Potmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London Verso, 1995),5

These values are represented not only by musical repertoire, ritualized behavior and material culture, but by the creation and repetition of stories and anecdotes which represent the mythological folklore of the community. All of these elements are important in the formation of a vital folk culture. In the following pages I will provide illuminating examples of these several elements of the culture and show how they reflect an identifiable set of values associated with if, not entirely unique to this community.

Why Telluride? *The Importance of Place in Collective Memory*

It may seem obvious to say "It's the music," but there can be no question that it is the music, and even more specifically a core group of musicians, that are a common bonding and mediating agent for all aspects of this community. Like the fans that make up the core of festivarian culture, this core of musicians return repeatedly to the Telluride Festival and, like the festivarians many consider it the highlight of their year. In the words of Banjo virtuoso Bela Fleck, "I was psyched from the beginning—before I even got here, because they kept saying, 'Wait till Telluride.' ... I feel like I grew up with the festival. It's like a big family that welcomed me in."[22] Mr. Fleck soon became one of what Planet Bluegrass's Ferguson called "...a group of eight or nine artists that are arguably...the best players in the world on their instruments," who are regular performers at the festival.[23] The importance of these artists is not simply in their talent. The virtuosity employed by these artists can only be achieved through long term commitment and perseverance. Again, this is a reciprocal relationship. Artists and audience know that they can depend on each other. At the same time that Festivarians repeat the pilgrimage to Telluride to enjoy and appreciate the artistry of these musicians, many artists cite

[22] http://www.bluegrass.com/media/press/whatpeopelaresaying.pdf April, 30, 2006
[23] Interview April, 13, 2006

the festivarian audience as a primary factor in their choice to return year after year. Both Pete Wernick and Tim O'Brien, long time Colorado residents and veterans of the festival circuit, cited the quality of the audience as something that sets the Telluride festival apart from most others in the genre.[24] In particular, artists and promoter Ferguson cited the wide-ranging musical vocabulary of the Festivarians, and their openness to experimentation and the stretching of musical boundaries:

> "I feel like it's a home festival where creativity is stressed. There's not a big pressure to be limited by a certain kind of music, and actually this festival, in its attitude, has influenced most of the other bigger bluegrass/folk-type festivals. But I still think Telluride is the broadest, all the way from Bill Monroe to James Taylor. It's all encompassing. I come back every year as one of the regulars, which is really nice, to be included. I just love the audience here and the setting. It's magical. The energy is always just sublime here, even when it snows in June."
> Peter Rowan, 1997[25]

There is some irony in the rigidity with which some "old line" bluegrass aficionados view the Telluride festival. The reality is that the roots of bluegrass are a classic American story of hybridization, innovation, and experimentation, and the current generation of artists, far from debasing the tradition is continuing and enriching it.

Any examination of bluegrass festival sub-culture must include some discussion of the history and evolution of bluegrass festivals in the West. Currently, the Colorado Bluegrass Music Association web site lists at least half a dozen events on the summer calendar that use the specific designation "bluegrass festival" in Colorado. These events range in size and scope from tiny local gatherings with attendance measured in the low hundreds to the "Grandaddy of them all" the Telluride Bluegrass Festival (TBF), which annually hosts a capacity crowd of 10,000, plus artists, staff and concessionaires for "four days of peace and music". While not the first or,

[24] Interviews April, 7,9, 2006

at this stage, the largest festival of its kind in the country, TBF is nonetheless acknowledged by fans and performers alike as one of the most influential festivals in the world of bluegrass and acoustic music, today. This discussion focuses primarily on the traditions, rituals and folklore that have grown up around the Telluride festival and its Planet Bluegrass-produced siblings, Rockygrass and the Rocky Mountain Folks Festival. This focus is in no way intended to de-value or marginalize the other fine events produced in Colorado and other western states, but to acknowledge the reality that Planet Bluegrass and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival have been key factors in the evolution of a community identity in this sub-culture and that these events either directly or indirectly inform the experience at most "bluegrass" events in Colorado.

I attended my first TBF in 1987 and in the ensuing years I have managed to attend that festival 15 times along with several other events. Even after a close examination of Gardner's extensive sociological profile and my own field research, I find it challenging to accurately or fully define the experience for those who have not attended the festival. Says Tim, the teacher from Fort Collins: "It's almost impossible to describe the festival experience if you haven't been here…every year it's a life changing experience." When asked to expand on this assertion the usual festivarian response is a beatific smile and a shake of the head. Words like "uplifting and "enlightening" are often employed but even these fail to capture the fullness of the experience. There is a totality to the experience for many that transcends the tedium and stress of everyday life to the degree that more than one festivarian has referred to the time between annual festivals as the "fifty one week supply run."

As noted earlier, the most accurate description of the experience and one often employed by participants is that of a pilgrimage, an undertaking often described by anthropologists as "a rite of passage that involves the temporary removal of a person from their host society to a

[25] http://www.Bluegrass.com/media/press/whatpeopelaresaying.pdf April, 30, 2006

sacred space at a special site."[26] In this modern, portable folk culture the pilgrimage site serves not only as the physical site of ritual performance and annual reunion but as a collective repository for shared experiences and the memories generated by them. It is both pilgrimage site and symbolic home. The isolated and visually spectacular Telluride valley is an ideal venue for such a pilgrimage and many festivarians as well as residents of the valley would not hesitate to characterize it as just such a sacred site. Underlining this point, the park was sanctified by Tibetan Buddhist monks during their visit to the festival as performers in 1993.[27]

## **II. Goin' to the Fair:** Undertaking the pilgrimage

In this section I will provide a narrative which attempts to capture some of the feel of a typical pilgrimage to the Telluride Festival in hopes of providing an understanding of the mythic and spiritual nature of the experience.

One can only truly understand the mythic nature of this journey if one has made the trek to Telluride from *anywhere* else. There are many elements which make the Telluride Bluegrass Festival a uniquely affecting experience but by far the most important of these after the music itself, is the venue. Nestled snugly in a remote box canyon on Colorado's Western Slope, Telluride is an idyllic Victorian mining town reborn as a Mecca for alpine sports and a necessary stop on the "must visit" list for outdoor enthusiasts and music lovers of all economic classes. But Telluride is not for everyone. Surrounded on three sides by jagged and majestic thirteen thousand foot peaks, it remains difficult to get to, even in the era of easy air transportation. The airport operates only in daylight and a significant percentage of scheduled flights are diverted to

[26] Gardner, *"Welcome Home,"* 136

[27] The diversity of "sacred" performances on Festival Sunday will be examined in some detail in the upcoming section on religion and spirituality

Montrose, Colorado, forty miles and a significant mountain pass away. In the words of Planet Bluegrass's Ferguson "It's the hardest festival in the country to get to. It's a long way from anywhere. That takes commitment."[28] Indeed, commitment is one of the core values of this culture.

The Journey Begins

*Tuesday, June12, 2007 6:15 am*

It is five days before festival camping begins in Telluride Town Park, and nine days before the 34th Annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival actually begins on Thursday the twenty-first of June. The day dawns uncharacteristically grey and damp in Boulder and as you stand at the front door alternately staring at the enormous pile of gear which has accumulated on the living room floor over the past several days and the steady drizzle. You could easily convince yourself that it's not really that important to get on the road today. You can wait till the rain lets up and load out at your leisure. But the festivarian conscience has other ideas. "You're already late," it whispers. "You know there are other ABGAT (advanced bluegrass assault team) troops arriving already. As far as the rain goes you're gonna be livin' outside for the next two weeks, so if you're worried about a little drizzle you might wanna make other plans." By 7:15 the 93 Isuzu is tightly and strategically packed with tents, tarps, cooking gear, cold weather and rain gear, coolers full of food and beverages, boxes of dry goods, lanterns, tables, folding chairs, yellow pads, recording device, guitar, mandolin and a variety of objects, artifacts and icons which will help to identify you and your place in the culture during the upcoming rendezvous. As each successive piece of gear is carried out and packed, the transformational process begins. For long term participants in this ritual, most items are well used and they can often evoke vivid and

[28] Interview March, 13, 2006

specific memories from festivals past, transporting the subject in both time and space, thus reinforcing old memories and anticipation of new memory, inexplicably linked to place.

Into the truck, crank up some bluegrass and get out on the road. Getting out of Boulder doesn't take long. You head south on Colorado 93 and the miles roll away behind you. You move first through the majestic mountain landscape of the continental divide, into the narrow corridors of Glenwood Canyon and out onto the high desert east of Grand Junction. The workday world melts away and you can feel the excitement as you draw closer. South on Colorado 50, through the small western slope towns of Delta and Montrose, on south to Ridgeway, southwest over Dallas divide, a turn back to the southeast at Placerville and you enter the valley of the San Miguel River for the final 17 mile trip up to Telluride. For many, this final leg of the journey, and that first spectacular view of Telluride's surrounding 13,000 foot peaks is as important a moment as any other element of the event. Dennis a "fifty something" retiree from "eastern Kansas" says: "The first time I came here in 89, we came up over Keystone Hill and saw the valley for the first time and I knew right then that I would always come back." Here we see again the importance of place in establishing relationship to this community. The physical beauty of the environment is often enough to ensure that an individual will return and that the memory will remain vivid and vital long after the individual has moved on.

Finally, the epic journey nearly complete, the pilgrim descends into the valley. Even with modern vehicles creeping along the streets and a shiny new high school building at the entrance to town this is clearly a different world. Small Town America. The natural landscape is dramatically dominant. The town and its accompanying human activity are reduced in scale by the surrounding mountains. And then, suddenly you arrive. The ultimate destination Town Park. Right into the parking lot, hook left past the Parks and Rec office, and into the campground.

Veteran festivarians often have difficulty describing the feelings they experience upon returning to the festival. Steve, a construction worker from Tucson says: It's like coming 'home' only better because this is the family I *choose*. I know I'll see people I haven't seen in a year or more and it's like no time has passed. It's hard to describe"[29] His wife Michelle just smiles and says "It's Euphoria, just like the Salmon song."[30] Melissa, a realtor from San Francisco says: "It's like you come over the hill and by the time you hit the valley floor everything has just melted away behind you and the only thing that's important is what's happening right now." Here we see an interesting and complex juxtaposition of memory, place and experience. Upon arrival at the pilgrimage site the subject moves from anticipation stirred by memory to immersion in the emergent experience or in vernacular terms, moves completely into "festival mode." This is a state in which all priorities are determined by a particular individuals taste in "festivation." But before true festivation can commence, on must deal with the basic necessities of shelter and food in an often volatile mountain climate.

Making Camp: *Constructing Place and Identity from the Ground Up*

It must be acknowledged that as the first generation of festivarians moves inexorably into middle age, many have abandoned the campground experience for the relative quiet and comfort of condominiums and hotels. But it remains true that the campground experience is still at the core of festivarian culture. It is in the annual construction and operation of the temporary village that is a festival campground that we can observe a rich and diverse modern folk culture in full bloom.

[29] Some version of this answer was markedly common in asking people any sort of direct question regarding specific feelings or qualities that drew them to the festival, often accompanied by the observation that if you have not had the experience no description can convey any real sense of it.
[30] Boulder based jamgrass band Leftover Salmon.

Even on a Tuesday afternoon ten days before the festival's mainstage performances are scheduled to begin, the festival stage area and adjoining Town Park campground bustle with activity. Production assistants and contractors unload and sort just a portion of the immense and varied paraphernalia required to produce an event of this scale in a temporary venue usually configured as a municipal park for a community of 2000 or so. The same thing is happening throughout the campground. Through the week ever larger and more elaborate camps spring up in casual but escalating defiance of municipal regulations which will be suspended on Saturday when management of the campground transfers to the festivals producers for the next nine days. That Saturday morning marks the official beginning of "festival week," a ten day period in which a myriad of rituals and traditions will be enacted by the community.

The first of these annual rituals is commonly known as a "land rush," and is in fact just what it sounds like.[31] Many of the most dedicated festival attendees will camp in the developed area of Town Park for up to a week merely to assure that they will be on hand for the opening of the "reserve" area which is only available for camping during major events. One fan, a healthcare administrator from Lakewood, Colorado, attending the Rockygrass festival this summer went so far as to camp for five days in an empty field used for festival parking in order to assure that he would be first in line for the opening of the onsite camping. This man camped for five days in an empty lot to secure a festival campsite he and his comrades will use for four nights. In his words: "It's really not bad out here; I've got my mandolin, get lots of reading in. It's just what I do with my vacation." [32] This sort of commitment demonstrates how deeply important place, memory of place, and consistency of place are to members of this community. These people are not lining up just to get a campsite. For many, they have returned over

[31] This event is common to nearly all multi day bluegrass festivals with some variation for individual events.
[32] Interview July, 26, 2007

hundreds of miles, often through financial or other significant sacrifice and stood in line to claim *their* campsite. In the case of individuals this might simply be a favored spot near the river, but for the representatives of the many larger collective camps this is a critical element in maintaining the continuity of both individual and collective identity within the festival community.

At this point in their evolution many of these large collective camps have developed specific traditions that have, in several cases, become institutions of the larger campground experience and thus become rituals of the festival week. Monday evening is the annual clam and oyster bake at Camp Run-a-Muk, Tuesday afternoon is rumballs at the MASH tent, followed by "Tropical Tuesday" at the "Crossroads of Steamboat." The final pre-festival events take place on Wednesday of festival week. On Wednesday evening there is a camp wide potluck, followed by the "Free Box Fashion Show." The potluck is truly a sight to behold. Picnic tables laid end to end spanning fifty or sixty feet, laden with every imaginable foodstuff, wild mushroom risotto with grilled chicken, shrimp ceviche, a plateful of peanut butter sandwiches on wonder bread and everything in between. All this is accompanied by several varieties of home-brewed beer and high quality wines poured by the vineyard owner herself. These events are described not only to evoke the festive and bountiful atmosphere of the festival camp but to illustrate some of the most important values of the group and the way in which they combine with ritual and shared experience to create the lasting collective memories that are critical to any cohesive folk culture.

First and foremost among these values is inclusiveness. Everyone is welcome at these events: campers, condo campers (prices often dictate packing as many festivarians as possible into indoor lodging), townies, production staff, *everyone*. This is not to say that there are not expected standards of etiquette and behavior but the underlying message in the words of one

festivarian is that "pretty much anybody will be happy to help you figure out how things go…" if you want to be a part of the community. Social and economic standing, gender, race all carry very little weight in the festival campground environment.

Concurrent with this openness is a profound inclination to share. Many festivarians, especially those associated with the larger camps bring far more food and beverages than they could ever consume themselves with the express intent of sharing not only with campmates, friends and family but with complete strangers as well. This sharing instinct often seems quite odd to the uninitiated. The following conversation took place between two women from the Lyons community who had come to volunteer at Rockygrass for the first time: "These people all seem very nice." "Yes they're all very friendly and polite." "They're always offering me a sip of their drinks, what's that about?"[33] The simple answer is that it is hot volunteering out in the sun, and festivarians appreciate it and see nothing unusual or out of the ordinary in offering a stranger some form of appreciation and hospitality.

Also expressed in these campground rituals are the core community values of creativity and innovation. It takes loads of both to feed two hundred people in a campground environment. It also takes teamwork. Just as one person cannot produce bluegrass music alone, so no one festivarian or even one collective camp could produce these rituals alone. As new arrivals continue to filter into the various neighborhoods of the campground ("go past Wander-In and bear left, we'll be along the fence just north of Crossroads") greetings and introductions are exchanged, accompanied by constant rejoinders to "let us know if you need any help," and inquiries as to whether the newcomers "need anything?" Occasionally minor disputes will erupt over territory, but more often than not such disputes end in an easy accommodation followed by

[33] I overheard this conversation verbatim at the Rockygrass backstage gate.

one party inviting the other to share in some food, beverage or other festival accompaniment.[34] Such an incident illustrates not only the inclusive and collective nature of the community but also another of the most important values present in this community. It is predominantly a self-policing environment. Tim, the teacher from Fort Collins, who is also the official Planet Bluegrass Town Park Camp Host, says he believes that this is one of the primary reasons the festival has been able to continue in the delicate physical and political environments that exist in the Telluride valley: "It's a self- policing environment. There's almost always somebody around who's been to the festivals and is willing to step in and educate if someone is not behaving appropriatley." This sentiment is echoed by members of the Telluride Marshals Department and many members of the Telluride community.[35] One Festivarian, a Deputy with the Routt County (Steamboat Springs, Colorado) Sheriffs department who asked not to be identified by name said "you could never have an event like this in Routt County…law enforcement would never let it happen."[36]

In this section I have described the ways in which the establishment of the festival campground and its constitution and operation allow community members an opportunity to perform both community and individual identity. I have identified several of the core values of the community expressed by these performances. In the following section I will describe the most prominent elements of the material culture of the community examined and the explore ways in which they both shape and reinforce community values and identity.

[34] The use of certain controlled substances in festival culture will be discussed in the section on religion and spirituality.
[35] The importance of the cooperation of the Telluride Marshals Department and its professionalism in dealing with such a challenging event cannot be overstated. In most years there are few if any arrests and the few incidents that do occur are usually mediated on the spot.
[36] Interview, June, 22, 2007

Material Culture and Iconography

The material culture of any folk group is highly revealing of the values and priorities of the culture and festivarian culture encompasses a rich and diverse array of artifacts. There are several sub-categories within this area which are worthy of examination beginning with the instruments themselves. There are five instruments which are considered the basic tools of bluegrass: mandolin, guitar, banjo, fiddle and bass. In the case of the mandolin, guitar and banjo, not just any style or make of instrument will do. In the tradition of the music's pioneers aspiring practitioners are encouraged to use whatever instrument they have access to but certain makes, models and vintages are acknowledged as the standard by which all bluegrass instruments are measured.

Regarding the mandolin (arguably the foundational instrument) the standard is set not merely by make or model but by specific builder. Sometime in the 1930s, Bill Monroe came into possession of an F model mandolin, hand built for the Gibson Company by a craftsman named Lloyd Loar in the early 1920s. As Monroe's music evolved and expanded, other musicians seeking to emulate this new and exciting sound began to search out these "Lloyd Loar" instruments until they became as highly prized as many classical violins. Today these instruments (on the rare occasion that one comes on the market) can easily fetch six figures. The rarity of these pre-war mandolins has spawned a healthy industry in instrument building. In Colorado alone there are several craftsman producing instruments to the exacting standards established by Mr. Loar nearly a century ago. Depending upon the woods and hardware employed, these new instruments often sell for well over ten thousand dollars, yet many builders have waiting lists two and three years long for their products. One woman with a successful career in the wine business, when it was noted that she was spending a lot of time practicing

during the festival said "I just signed up for one of Bobby's mandolins, and I want to be worthy when it's ready."[37] She was that excited about an instrument she will not have in hand for at least a year. Mr. Monroe's mandolin holds nearly as revered a place in bluegrass history as does the man himself. In essence they are a single entity, inextricably entwined and ingrained in the history and mythology of the culture.

There is an equally exacting standard in bluegrass guitars. In this case the acknowledged standard is the pre-World War II Dreadnought guitar produced by the C.F. Martin Company. This model, developed in the early twentieth century, has a larger body than previous designs and evolved to produce a louder, fuller sound as the guitar became more common in band settings. Martin has been building instruments since 1833 and the Dreadnoughts produced in the period between 1934 and 1940 or so are considered the gold standard in bluegrass guitars for their booming bass tones and crisp clear treble notes. Like Monroe's mandolin, certain of these guitars have achieved iconic status. Florida guitarist Tony Rice is known to have gone to great lengths to locate and obtain the pre-war Martin once owned by Clarence White, an influential guitarist whose life was cut short by a tragic accident in the early 70s. This story has become so ingrained in bluegrass culture that Martin recently issued a limited edition reproduction of this iconic instrument. In this thriving instrument building economy we can see clearly an intersection between history, folk culture and the financscape.

While the mandolin and guitar are elemental to bluegrass both musically and iconically, neither instrument is as rich in subtext and symbolism as the five string banjo. The mandolin, guitar, fiddle and bass all have their origins in the European musical tradition. Conversely the banjo is of African origin and represents the often unwitting (in the early years) integration of a multi-cultural perspective into the music at its inception. Cantwell asserts in his excellent

[37] Bobby Winteringham of San Juan Mandolins in Dolores, Colorado

*Bluegrass Breakdown*, that due to its African origin the banjo is "the essential folk instrument, the instrument which to play is to always make do, which we cannot advance into the precincts of polite music without somehow refining out of existence its uncultivated twang."[38] The presence of the banjo and its central role in defining the bluegrass sound integrated, the rhythms of Africa with the lyric and tonal constructions of western musical tradition to create, in essence, a "new roots music" which belongs to *all* Americans.

Like Monroe's mandolin, the banjo which has become most directly associated with Bluegrass was manufactured by the Gibson Company in the pre-World War II era. Nearly as rare as the Lloyd Loar built mandolins of the 20s, the pre-war Gibson Mastertone is the instrument played by Earl Scruggs when he joined Monroe's *Bluegrass Boy's* in the mid-40s and is arguably the most important instrument in defining the bluegrass sound. Cantwell astutely observes that these three defining bluegrass instruments are all designs that emerged in the first third of the 20th century when large musical groups became more prominent and louder more robust instruments became necessary. This reinforces the emergence of bluegrass culture as a phenomenon that has deep historical roots but could only have developed in the modern era.[39]

The centrality of theses instruments to bluegrass culture is perhaps the closest we can come to an expression of the elusive "authenticity" that members of this group identify as elemental to the culture's appeal. These instruments are, ideally, handmade by individuals who practice a craft whose very name, "Luthier", is indicative of the ancient nature of the art. This term can be dated to at least the ninth century and perhaps earlier. Thus to play or hear these instruments is to be at once part of a modern music culture and part of an ancient musical evolution that stretches beyond overt memory, individual or communal. They are actual physical

[38] Cantwell, Robert, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press), 218

artifacts of the accumulated knowledge of centuries adapted to the needs of the twenty-first century. Their manufacture makes use of the most current modern technology, but their operation requires nothing more than human energy and perseverance. Unlike the instrumentation found in modern popular music forms, bluegrass instruments require no electricity. To be sure, large festivals would not be possible without electric amplification, but neither would the extensive campground and parking lot jam sessions be possible if the instruments themselves required electric power. They can be played anytime, anywhere, thus allowing community members to recreate something of the festival atmosphere even in a dark and dingy urban apartment.

At the opposite end of the material culture spectrum from the handcrafted, highly specialized instruments but no less important to festivarian culture is the ubiquitous plastic tarp. Most commonly seen in the standard electric blue, the poly tarp is one of the most important utilitarian artifacts in any festival survival kit. The Festivarian Forum internet message board includes one discussion thread dedicated entirely to discussion of the "Treatise on Tarpology." This pseudo-academic, semi-tongue-in cheek essay is an extensive dissertation on proper techniques and strategies for "tarp deployment" during land rushes (accordion fold versus rolled up, weighted versus un-weighted etc.), strategies and techniques for shelter construction and securement and a discussion of etiquette for the above mentioned activity. Most larger camps have at least one veteran member or elder that is acknowledged as the camp "Tarpologist," and it is not uncommon to hear someone request "a little tarpology consultation" during the camp construction phase. While the "treatise" is certainly evidence of a fairly sophisticated sense of humor, it is also a manifestation of the collective nature of the community and the importance placed on the dissemination of information which can preserve or enhance the experience of

[39] Ibid, 218

those less experienced. Camping in Telluride is a challenging undertaking. The weather can shift dramatically in a short time and snow is not unheard of during festival week. A strategically placed and well-secured tarp can make the difference between cooking dinner in a nice dry, calm kitchen tent and trying to light your stove in a driving rain and twenty mile an hour winds. As an integral part of camp construction and the primary tool for claiming space in the festival grounds, the plastic tarp is as closely associated with place memory as any artifact in the material culture of this folk group. To this day I cannot see a stack of tarps in a hardware store without recalling some fleeting tarp-related image from a festival and anticipating the next land rush I will be involved in. This nondescript, mass-produced, utilitarian consumer product has acquired the power to transport me momentarily from wherever I encounter it to the sacred site of pilgrimage through memory. In this way members of the community have adapted an artifact of modernity to their own purposes and infused it with meaning which has no currency outside the sub-culture.

Another important element in the material culture is the seemingly endless array of equipment that makes up the camp itself, including the often extensive decorative elements which are used to identify camps. The list of gear supplied in the earlier pilgrimage narrative is only one example of the diversity of items festivarians find necessary in constructing “home” in the festival campground. A deconstruction of the potential symbolism of these items would be the work of years, so I will emphasize a single item: The festival chair. Like the art of tarpology, the festival chair has its own discussion thread on the Festivarian Forum. When one will be sitting in a chair for up to twelve hours a day for four days, it becomes very important. There are as many opinions about chairs as there are chair options and I would argue that the ongoing dialogue concerning the ideal chair configuration is further evidence of this community’s

continuing emphasis on the future. As wonderful and important as the memories of past festivals are, their primary function seems to be as incentive to attend the *next* festival. My festival chair has been safely stored until spring and neatly folded inside of it (accordion style, no throw weight attached) is my land rush tarp, ready for deployment.

There are two categories of material culture that are found not only in the festival environment but often in the day-to-day lives of group members. These are the memorabilia and apparel available at the festivals (and year round through the internet) and recorded music. The artifacts in these categories are the most direct link to festival life during non-festival times. In the case of recorded live music, there is a long tradition of collecting and trading live recordings. The advent of digital technology has resulted in an explosion of interest and availability. Most artists allow and even encourage the recording of live shows. Computer savvy festivarians are quite diligent about posting these recordings on websites such as tapers.org.[40] The wide availability of these recordings allows community members on-demand access to the pilgrimage site through sense memory, in effect allowing her to take the "festival vibe" along wherever she goes.

Apparel and memorabilia can serve the same purpose. The Planet Bluegrass logo is an interesting juxtaposition of symbols. It is based on the Taoist yin-yang symbol signifying harmony and balance. It incorporates a stringed instrument theme, depicting two different colored instruments nested together in the yin-yang pattern.[41] This image has become wildly popular among festivarians. It appears on an extensive array of t-shirts, hats, jackets, posters, stickers and other knick-knacks and I have encountered a half dozen festivarians who have gone so far as to have the "yinjo" tattooed permanently onto their persons. There is little one can do to

[40] This site and others go to great length to encourage visitors to purchase commercially available recordings and concert tickets in an overt acknowledgement that even artista must operate within the realities of the financescape.

show a deeper attachment to a culture than to have one of its principle icons inked into his living flesh. That this icon is also the trademark of a commercial organization raises more questions than it answers about the intersection between capitalism and folk culture in the post-modern period. The one man I was able to ask about this responded that he had never thought about it in those terms: "To me it's just a symbol how much I love the music and the festivals, I don't think of it as somebody's logo…it's more like a flag or a cross or something."[42] Perhaps this is an early example of "how the interconnectedness of capitalist culture might help create solutions…" to the many social and economic challenges facing us in the modern/post-modern world.[43]

In addition to serving as portable and effective memory triggers, many items of apparel and other artifacts are effective identifiers of status within the community. At each festival, supervisors receive one distinct hat or shirt, volunteers another, and patrons have the opportunity to purchase a third. Over the years elders in the community have the opportunity to collect each year's shirt, and a ten or fifteen year old festival shirt will be greeted with exclamations of approval and respect for the wearer's longevity.[44]

Most of the apparel and memorabilia that constitutes this category is available for sale to the general public, but there are a few items that can only be obtained through some connection to the institutional hierarchy of the festival world and which might be said to confer some form of status within the group. One example of such an item would be the ball caps issued to the law enforcement officers from around the state who are hired to augment the Telluride Marshal's Department during the festival. These are produced in very limited numbers and issued only to deputized officers. Very few have ever been given to civilians and most of these are Planet

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[41] See appendix A
[42] Interview, July, 22, 2007
[43] Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads,* 17

Bluegrass staffers in particularly prominent crowd management positions. When considered in the context of a small police force augmented by a dozen or so officers from other jurisdictions attempting to monitor and manage a week long celebration attended by 10,000 people who came to *party*, the gift of such an icon should be seen as a gesture of solidarity, trust and responsibility. My own experience bears this out.

As a former production assistant for Planet Bluegrass and a nine year resident of Telluride, I returned in the summer of 2007 as a "civilian" researcher with no official ties to the festival other than as a volunteer laborer for the KOTO-FM beer booth fundraiser. Among many old friends in the community is a long time member of the Marshal's Department. Upon our first meeting after my arrival in town, after a bit of small talk, he looked at me directly and said without preamble, "Do you have a Bluegrass Marshal's hat?" I replied that I had had one but it was included in a trade with another Planet Bluegrass staffer for a banjo some years before. He, in turn, simply said "I'll bring one to your camp when we come for dinner tomorrow." When I asked "Is it permissible to wear it during the festival?" he said "Oh yea, you should." Small thing, the gift of a ball cap but the there is much symbolism in an artifact that juxtaposes the images of law enforcement with those of a folk culture whose rituals and celebrations regularly involve the public use of intoxicants, legal and otherwise. Personal connections aside, the clear subtext of this exchange is that this veteran officer is recognizing an individual who has what can only be referred to as "elder" status within the festival community. The hat will serve as a totem that can be recognized by both newcomers and longtime members as a symbol not of authority, but of connectedness. The wearer may have no official capacity within the festival production hierarchy or law enforcement establishment but it would likely constitute bad judgment not to

[44] Longevity of attendance is the only factor which may trump merit or diligence as grounds for respect or access to privilege in this culture.

heed any unsolicited advice offered by such a person. In the words of Laura, the co-camp host of Town Park Campground and an educator at Colorado State University: "Refusal to accept inside information freely offered is refusal of an invitation to join the tribe."[45]

The last and perhaps most interesting piece of material culture in festival society is the one that truly identifies tribe members and their place within the structure of the group. This item is the access wristband. By now most Americans have attended some large event at which they were required to wear a wristband to show they have paid the admission fee or meet the age requirement for alcohol consumption. In the context of this study the festival wristband and its gradations reveal a way in which a mostly egalitarian sub-culture also reflects the super-culture of which it is a part. There is social stratification in bluegrass culture and it is defined by access. Wristbands are issued in a rainbow of colors and each color indicates the level of access the wearer enjoys. At the top of this hierarchy are the artists whose band color indicates their status and grants them complete access to any area of the festival. Next are staffers and "guests of the festival" who receive a different color band which also indicates "all access." Finally there are the festival attendees, but even among this group there are different levels of access. Each designated camping area has its own wristband color. The most highly sought after is the Town Park pass as this camping area is adjacent to the festival and by far the most convenient. There is an important difference between this one form of social stratification in bluegrass culture and the extensive social divisions found in the super-culture. There is little or no economic element present in the establishment of this hierarchy. Higher levels of access are bestowed upon those who contribute significantly to the event or have some connection to those who do, regardless of social or economic standing in the day to day world. Nonetheless, possession of an "all access" credential, like the above mentioned Marshal's cap, signifies some degree of membership in an

[45] Interview, June, 19, 2007

"inner circle" of festival society to which most festivarians aspire. These wristbands also serve as direct memory triggers for many festivarians. It is not uncommon for a group member to save her wristbands and even arrange them for display in the home.

In this section I have described some of the prominent elements of the material culture and iconography of this folk group in order to shed some light on the way certain items can serve as memory triggers and status identifiers, as well as reinforcing community values. In the following section I will attempt to illuminate the festival experience itself as a further expression of the degree to which participants in this culture successfully negotiate the complexities of identity in the context of Appadurai's ever shifting series of interconnected –scapes.

Performance**:** *Enacting Community Identity on the Festival Stage*

It's mid-afternoon on Saturday of the twenty-fifth annual Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Approximately 10,000 music lovers watch and listen with (mostly) rapt attention, as on the large stage, four men in contemporary suits and ties work their way through a particularly fast and complicated bluegrass instrumental, the fiddle, banjo and guitar singing out high and fast while the bass thumps steadily along. It's halfway through the *Hot Rize* set and things are really starting to cook. Several audience members are wearing neckties over their t-shirts or other gear announcing their support of this nationally known homegrown band. Along with the other artists mentioned in the section on historical background, the members of *Hot Rize* have been elemental in forming the musical foundation of festivarian culture. Their performances illustrate the tension inherent in membership in a living musical folk culture with its roots in our rural, pastoral history for urban and ex-urban denizens of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

After finishing his last break, the fiddle player slips quietly off the stage, likewise the guitarist and bassist step quickly into the wings as the song ends and we are alone with Dr. Banjo, Pete Wernick. Pete steps to the microphone and asks with a sly grin "How many of you have seen Red Knuckles at a *Hot Rize* show before?" In an oft repeated ritual, the majority of the crowd roars their allegiance and Pete proceeds to introduce the evenings "Special Guests," "Western Style Musicians *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers*." As the crowd again whoops and hollers in appreciation Pete ducks off-stage just as Red and the Boys arrive in colorful western garb complete with oversized hats and *sunglasses.* In the audience, several fans remove their neckties, and don glasses and hats similar to those of Red and the boys as the band breaks into a classic 1950s country tune by Ernest Tubb, Hank Williams or the like.

For those longest in the know, this has been a familiar, expected ritual repeated for years at small clubs and large festivals around the nation and the world, a humorous musical respite from the breakneck pace of most bluegrass songs and a part of *Hot Rize* appearances dating back to the late 1970s. But there is always a newcomer somewhere out there in a festival crowd who leans to her more experienced neighbor in the audience and asks some variation of "Who are those guys?" or "Is this for real?" The answers to these questions are much more complicated than one might expect. The simple answer is that these are the same musicians assuming different characters for entertainment purposes, but why go to the trouble of inventing a whole cast of characters with a known history, costumes and a fan base of their own? The answer is, at least in part, that *Hot Rize*, and *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers*, are performing rituals of a created tradition. These rituals represent a dialogue with the past. This ongoing dialogue clearly expresses a respect for and an understanding of, the earlier traditions in which the contemporary performance is undeniably rooted.

This is where it gets tricky. History and tradition are terms which we tend to interpret in a linear fashion: history is most often seen as a series of events; traditions are usually thought of as being passed down intact through generations. This view does not allow for the complexities of our modern/post-modern relationship with history. Traditions and rituals are not necessarily transferred in strictly generational or even regional or geographic trajectories in the modern/post-modern era. Moreover, such created rituals and traditions are some of our most effective tools for negotiating the complexities of our modern world while still remaining engaged in a dialogue with history. When examined from this perspective, Pete Wernick's introduction of *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers* as "The opposite of yuppies" (young urban professionals) expresses the idea that they are "old rural amateurs" who play "old electric music" as opposed to "new acoustic music." This is not only a clever bit of word play but can be read as a telling exposition of the values and priorities of both artist and audience in relation to several of the –scapes, most notably the technoscape and the ideoscapes.

In the *Hot Rize/Red Knuckles* phenomenon we can observe the innovative intermingling and hybridization of musical styles that represent a discreet musical sub-culture and at the same time we can witness a performance that provides an opportunity for the communicating of shared values in uniquely coded forms that help identify insiders within that sub-culture. This aids them in understanding and negotiating their relationships within the super-culture.

As a band and as individuals *Hot Rize* are so sincerely and enthusiastically engaged in the previously mentioned "dialogue with the past" that even in a performance of parody they are able to convey not only respect, but reverence for those who came before. This is a reflection of the ethos of the sub-culture. At least peripheral awareness of the history of the music is intrinsic

to the group identity and it is coupled with good humored needling of those not yet aware of this imperative.

According to legend, *Hot Rize* encountered Red and the Boys at the Eat Cafe in tiny Wyoming, Montana just across the border from Montana, Wyoming, where "the juke box has lots of songs by guys named Hank and Merle, but none by anybody named Garth or anything like that." Such references to country music legends Hank Williams and Merle Travis, accompanied by disdainful dismissal of "new Nashville" mega-star Garth Brooks are more obvious evidence of the importance of maintaining an ongoing dialogue with history within this sub-culture. The mythical town of Wyoming, Montana evokes of the memory, real or imagined of the simple more "authentic" life in a small western town. In fact, Red Knuckles might be considered a more "traditional" or "conservative" musical aggregation than *Hot Rize*, in the sense that they played exclusively "old" music, most of their material having been composed by artists long dead, while *Hot Rize* created much new material and experimented with such Bluegrass taboos as electronic effects and alternative instrumentation. This juxtaposition is representative of the continuing tension between looking backward and moving forward that is an intrinsic element of festivarian sub-culture.

In addition to clearly illustrating the importance of a dynamic relationship with history, a Hot Rize/Red Knuckles performance also illuminates one of the most significant differences between bluegrass culture and the super-culture, the nature of the relationship between the artists and the audience. There is a level of intimacy and reciprocity between these groups that is virtually non-existent in most other forms. In rock, pop and mainstream country music, there is a well established and nearly inviolate line between audience and performer. The audience

members are strictly consumers. They buy recordings and attend performances without necessarily having any connection to the music or the artists beyond that of consumer.

Bluegrass fans are a different breed. They certainly buy records, and concert tickets, but they tend to be more involved in the music than other fans. Among other characteristics, people who identify themselves as "bluegrass fans" are nearly twice as likely play an instrument. Tim O'Brien cites this as one of the main reasons fans and artists share such a close relationship: "Most people at the shows play a little or a lot and that really helps them appreciate what we're trying to do up there."[46] This in turn reflects a cultural understanding of the difficulty of the endeavor and a respect for the commitment and perseverance necessary to the performance.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the many layers of expression present in thi performance let us examine the tension between the terms "young urban professionals" and "old rural amateurs." This line was a huge hit with bluegrass audiences in the height of the "yuppie" period. This exposes a great irony. These days, the vast majority of bluegrass fans could easily fit the classification "yuppie." They tend to have high income, high education and high degrees of social mobility. One might argue that "anti yuppie" jokes in 1987 were an easy sell but when a joke lasts ten or fifteen years, it becomes part of an oral tradition, especially when performed repeatedly before audiences mostly familiar with the narrative. Twenty years later, it becomes institutionalized as part of that audience's dialogue with both the past and the future. It is self-deprecating humor as acknowledgement of a continuing struggle to define our identities in an increasingly fragmented world. *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers* are unencumbered by such concerns. They know who they are and where they are. Hot Rize may think of them as amateurs, but Red and the boys know they are the hottest thing on the bill and the people come to see them.

[46] Interview, April, 29, 2007

This level of certainty is something we all crave, and it is a perfect trait for a hero upon whom to base a new mythology.

The song selection and performance style of *Hot Rize* and *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers* are rich texts for examining the construction of communal identity but the narratives that introduce or accompany the songs are often even more directly reflective of the community identity. This is particularly true in the case of stories and jokes that become embedded in the performance tradition over extended periods of time. A *Red Knuckles* performance contains many such embedded traditions, but perhaps the most informative is a segment known as "Red remembers the Sixties." This humorous interlude takes the form of a commercial for a compilation album of sixties hits performed in "the Western style by Red and all the Trailblazers, such as ourselves." This segment usually contains references to the Woodstock festival, psychedelic drugs, and vague references to other cultural icons that could be associated with certain "counter-culture" attitudes. The coding in this performance is subtle in many ways. References to such "counter-culture" icons by a fictional character are easier to discount by those group members uncomfortable with such associations but impossible to miss for those who embrace such perspectives.

Presenting these references in the form of a commercial heightens the self-referential irony of the performance. The "commercial" can be seen as a negative critique of consumerism and lack of musical integrity but *Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers* will gladly sell you a T-shirt, a bumper sticker, or a fly-swatter emblazoned with their logo, proving that even mythological characters must interact with the finanscape if they want to survive in the modern world. This necessary interchange is also reflected in the narrative attached to steel guitar player Waldo Otto (Pete Wernick). When not on the road with Red, Waldo is the proprietor of "Waldo's Discount

Donuts (you bite it, you bought it)" in Wyoming, Montana. Waldo is very concerned about the consumer's donut experience and always seeks to provide the best possible value to his customers. This can be interpreted as a direct commentary on the mistrust and dissatisfaction group member's associate with large corporations and an inclination to support small entrepreneurs and locally owned businesses, regardless of any perceived disadvantage. This is another clear intersection of the financscape with the ideoscape.

The primary setting of the relationship between *Hot Rize* and *Red Knuckles* is indicative of another important aspect of community identity in bluegrass Culture, the Journey Motif. *Hot Rize* and *Red Knuckles* are perpetually together "on the bus". Headed, not to any where in particular but "on down the road" to the next gig. As has been previously discussed, the advent of the bluegrass festival movement reinforced for a new generation of fans and artists the idea of a bluegrass journey transcending both time and space. This idea has been recently reinforced in the media and ideoscapes by the production of a mainstream feature film (*O Brother Where Art Thou?*) based on Homer's *Odyssey,* and using bluegrass and traditional acoustic music to advance and enhance the story. While Gardner emphasizes the importance of "homecoming" in his analysis, I would argue that a more consistent characterization would be that of an ongoing journey of which the pilgrimage to Telluride is an essential but not culminating element.

These are just a few of the ways in which a *Hot Rize* performance both shapes and reflects community identity, and it is important to note that *Hot Rize* are not the only artists in the bluegrass community who have employed the invention of new mythologies that reflect the communal identity.

As emphasized in the section on historical background, one of the most prolific and influential song writers and story-tellers in this sub-culture is the guitarist and vocalist, Peter

Rowan. Mr. Rowan is, by both choice and acclimation of the audience, a tradition bearer in the world of bluegrass and acoustic music. He served his apprenticeship under Bill Monroe in the early 1960s and went on to build a diverse and eclectic body of work, while never forgetting his roots in bluegrass. This relationship with Monroe is significant in many ways. It gives legitimacy to Rowan's assumed identity as a direct inheritor of the mantle of leadership within the group and it has clearly influenced his stories as well as his song writing. Monroe himself appears as the central heroic figure in one of the tales collected. By the mid 1990s many of Peter Rowan's songs and stories had become part of a ritualized performance at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival and other performance spaces around the country. I will attempt to recreate two of these stories as briefly and accurately as possible here but I refer the reader to the attached compact disc recording for a complete re-telling of both tales by the artist.

We begin with the tale of the origin of a song titled *Walls of Time.* This is a song composed jointly by Mrrs. Rowan and Monroe sometime in the early 1960s. The story begins with the journey motif which is intrinsic to the very idea of bluegrass music itself, that of a band on the road. Many of Monroe's early compositions, such as *Rocky Road Blues, Ain't This Road Been Rough and Rocky?* and *The Road is Rocky but it Won't be Rocky Long,* reflect this theme and Mr. Rowan incorporates it seamlessly into his narrative.

The tale begins with the band leaving Bean Blossom, Indiana (home of the Brown County Jamboree) on a Saturday night bound for Nashville, Tennessee and their weekly appearance on WSM's Grand Ole Opry. On this particular night, the bus, christened the "Bluegrass Breakdown" lived up to its name "and we found ourselves watching the sunrise over the mountains of Western Kentucky" Here Rowan introduces the heroic figure, in this case, Bill Monroe himself. The narrative continues: "Sometimes when you stand next to Bill Monroe, you

hear what he calls ‘The Ancient Tones.’ Well, as we watched that sunrise, he leaned over and said ‘Listen to this Pete, and don’t you ever forget it.’ So I wrote this song.” The song itself is a haunting yet hopeful exposition of the sadness of lovers separated by death, but ever hopeful of a reunion in some future time and place and it has become an important part of the song canon of bluegrass music.

The second narrative is known as “The Free Mexican Air Force Story” or “The Camp Howdy Story.” This story is much more layered and also much more overt in some of the values it expresses. The legend begins quite sedately with the storyteller and his companions congregated around a campfire in their South Texas retreat known as “Camp Howdy,” pursuing the “search for spiritual sport.” Into this congregation strolls “a dude of an hombre” with “endangered species all over his body” who proceeds to ask “What are you boys, Hippies?” This heavily coded reference is followed by the seemingly ambiguous answer “We’re Vegetarians,” which can also be seen to have some complex coding attached to it. Without further preamble, the dude whose name, we are told, is Beauregard Hooligan, invites the campers to accompany him on a quest for “true spiritual sport.” The campers “...jump into our L.L.Bean tent, pull on our cotton drawstring yogi pants with the extra flap and slip into our wooden sandals with the little points that tickle your feet, keep your chi movin’ like Elvis all day” and head out to accompany Beauregard. In the interests of space I will again refer the reader to the attached compact disc for a complete re-telling of the narrative and conclude this report with a summary of remaining story elements. These include: marijuana, tequila and airplanes. The narrative ends with our intrepid seeker of “spiritual sport” in the co-pilots seat next to an extremely intoxicated Beauregard. As the Airplane glides silently off a desert cliff, Mr. Hooligan looks at his seatmate and says “You drive,” the engines sputter to life and artists and audience alike share the exhilaration of “Flying

with the Free Mexican Air Force." This song and story emerged in the late 70s or early 80s as a commentary on U.S. drug policies regarding Mexico. Over the ensuing years these meanings have evolved,encompassing the current international debate regarding immigration policy. The inclusion of this performance in Mr. Rowan's appearances over a thirty year period indicates its continuing relevance to the audience, thus confirming it as an accurate reflection of community identity.

The narratives collected share two clear thematic elements; each involves a larger than life or "Heroic" figure and each uses a journey of some kind as the vehicle for advancing the narrative. In the case of the *Walls of Time* story we can observe a direct connection with the evolution of bluegrass music. Monroe is the pivotal figure in bluegrass music and is indeed revered in heroic terms by many devotees. In both the story and the song lyrics we can hear evidence of an open dialogue with the past and the future. The title itself expresses this tension. And Monroe's admonition to Rowan at the end of the story "and don't you ever forget it" in reference to the "ancient tones," is a clear acknowledgement of the importance of remembering and respecting the past and its role in shaping the future.

There is also an important element of counter-culture consciousness in Mr. Rowan's performances. This "counter-culture" element of the constructed identity is most evident in the *Free Mexican Air Force* narrative and song performance. While retaining the elements of mythic or heroic figure (Beauregard Hooligan) and journey motif (both the "quest for spiritual sport" and the opportunity to "Fly with the Free Mexican Air Force"), Rowan introduces a host of identifiers which can be read in a variety of ways. There are commentaries on consumerism ("L.L.Bean tent and cotton drawstring yogi pants"), drug policy (just above the radar and just below the paraquat") and several other "modern" social issues. The critiques of consumerism and

the “search for spiritual sport” reveal a sense of irony and appreciation of self-deprecating humor that, in turn, reflect community values of intelligence and humility, especially among tradition bearers. Peter Rowan and his contemporaries have maintained a wide web of interconnecting collaborations that have stretched over several decades. They have successfully maintained and nurtured the music, that in turn nurtures an increasingly diverse and extended new American folk group which, in pleasingly circular fashion, was born out of the evolution of the music itself.

That this circular journey is an overt theme in bluegrass culture is well evidenced by the continuing popularity of the previously mentioned recording known collectively as *Will the Circle be Unbroken: the Trilogy*. This collection consists of recordings released 1972, 1989, and 2002, all titled *Will the Circle be Unbroken* after the traditional song of the same name. This song of loss and renewal has been recorded by countless artists within the realm of American folk and popular music and the recording sessions begun in Nashville by members of the *Nitty Gritty Dirt Band* are a fine representation of how important maintaining a dialogue between past, present and future was and remains in this sub-culture. This collaboration laid a solid foundation on which to build a tradition of sharing and honoring the music’s roots while continuing to promote its innovation, growth and expansion.

In this section I have given an account of some performances which are representative of the festival experience and the way in which they both shape and express community identity in Bluegrass culture. In the following section I will provide a brief discussion of the complex roles that religion, spirituality and drugs play within this sub-culture.

Religion, Spirituality and Drugs**:** *The Fine Line Between Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*

As is made obvious by the emphasis on pilgrimage in this report, there is a religious or spiritual element which underlies the festival experience for many members of this group. This is perhaps the most complex and challenging element of festivarian identity to explore. There has always been a close relationship between bluegrass and the church music of the American Southeast. Gospel or "sacred" songs have been a part of the canon since the music's inception. As the music was adopted by an increasingly urban and cosmopolitan audience this relationship became increasingly multi-faceted.

Gospel songs remain an important part of the bluegrass songbook, but Christianity itself occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in this site. This is one of the primary factors which differentiates Gardner's "New West" bluegrass culture from the more conservative "traditional" element which supports a circuit of small "family" festivals mostly east of the Mississippi River which are often overtly Christian oriented. This is not to say that festivarian culture is in any way anti-Christian or anti-religious, but it is clearly anti-dogma and anti-proselytizing. Says one Festivarian who asked to remain anonymous: "I'm a Pagan through and through, I love the sacred songs, but I didn't come to the festival to have somebody use the stage to talk about their religious beliefs. I just hate it when people assume that we all share the same belief system."[48] This comment was made in reference to a performance by Nashville star Ricky Skaggs several years ago during which he spent a significant amount of his performance time talking about Jesus. In fact this performance was cited by several Festivarians as in inappropriate injection of religion into a festival performance. But this underlying resistance to overt proselytizing does not constitute an aversion to overtly sacred or religious musical performances. On the contrary, Festival Sunday always features some form of religious or spiritual performance, ranging over the years from "traditional" Bluegrass gospel sets or the rocking African-American rhythm and

blues gospel of *The Mighty Clouds of Joy*, to the mesmerizing resonence of Buddhist chants as preformed by the Drepung Monks from Llhasa, Tibet or a Jewish based klezmer performance. Such diversity is clearly expressive of the openness identified as elemental to this culture. The commonality in all of these performances is the sincerity and commitment of the performers which translates into the elusive quality that we have dubbed "authenticity" and which is so central to the character of the community.

The title of this section is "Religion, Spirituality and Drugs," and it would be irresponsible, as well as obtuse, for any serious observer not to note that the use of psychotropic substances is endemic within, if not elemental to this culture. The offer of marijuana as a gesture of hospitality is as common as that of food and drink and its sharing can be seen in the context of Folk culture as a ritualized bonding experience repeated throughout the rendezvous. This is also an instance of a significant interaction between the sub-culture and the financscape. The quantity, variety and quality of cannabis available within the festival site is indicative of a thriving agricultural economy (legal or not) within or associated with this group.

After alcohol and marijuana the most commonly encountered substance in the festival environment is the psilocybin mushroom. [49] This psychoactive fungus is widely used by festivarians, most often during the featured evening performances on the main stage and is considered by many to enhance the experience in profoundly significant ways. Mike, a 42 year old advertising salesman from Denver describes the moment when he became a "bluegrass convert," "It was in '84, I guess, I had been seeing a lot of *Dead* shows and I thought that was the place to be. Somebody convinced me to come to Telluride that summer. It was Saturday night and I was just coming on to the 'shrooms, *New Grass* went into *Sapporo* (an extended

[48] Interview, June, 24, 2007

instrumental), and by the time it was over I was a whole new person, both in my musical tastes and in my view of myself."[50] Such stories of lasting transformation are heard repeatedly from all corners of the festivarian world and as often as not they include the ingestion of this substance. For most festivarians, this too is a ritualized behavior reserved for the festival or other "safe environments." Chris a consultant from Denver in his mid-fifties, put it this way, "the festival is a place where it is safe to step outside yourself and stretch a little. Some people feel like smoking a little or doing some mushrooms helps them do that." Negative stereotypes aside, the members with whom I was able to discuss this all characterized the use of psychedelics in the festival environment as a positive transformational experience. Phrases such as "I saw the world and my place in it in a whole new way," or "It just helped me see things differently" were universal. Such transformations, occurring as they do in the spectacular Telluride valley, constitute the building of both temporal and geographic place memory and the establishment of transcendental sense memories of what I call "spiritual emplacement." After such a powerful transformation experience, one's identity is forever linked with the place in which it happened and the comrades with whom it was shared. From this perspective, the importance of Telluride as a "sacred site," and the corresponding importance of the pilgrimage experience as a journey of continued discovery and renewal cannot be overemphasized. As important as that first transformational experience remains, it reinforces a *forward* looking relationship with history. The most important festival will always be the *next* one. It is not unreasonable to assert that this forward looking perspective is primary reason that this community continues to thrive and grow even as

[49] For a description of the qualities and effects of this fungus see the work of Terrence McKenna, Andrew Weil … find reference.
[50] Interview, March, 25, 2006

sociologist continue to observe "the loss of community, a lack of connectedness, the feeling of being cut adrift in a fragmented world that moves too fast."[51]

Get on Board: *Recent Developments and Future Outlook*

One of the best examples of this emphasis on the future is found in the approach of Planet Bluegrass President Craig Ferguson. Mr. Ferguson is acutely aware of ever higher expectations of artists and audience at the events that he produces. Planet Bluegrass festivals have been the scene of many groundbreaking performances but in July of 2007, an event occurred at the Rockygrass Festival in Lyons, Colorado that speaks volumes about the differences between Gardner's "New West" bluegrass culture and the more traditional culture represented by the "family" bluegrass festival circuit in the Southeast. While I have emphasized the open and inclusive nature of this community, it would be disingenuous to avoid the reality that race, gender and sexual orientation are still areas in which it could improve. There have been many African-American performers at the Telluride festival and I truly believe that the majority of the audience cares little about sexual orientation but Rockygrass is a different story. This is not to say that there is any overt effort to exclude people of color or women from performing at the festival. The reality is that even though African-American musicians were critical in the development of the sound, bluegrass in its first incarnation, evolved as the music of working class white people in the American Southeast. As such it was clearly not the most attractive idiom for African-Americans. Similarly, women were uncommon if not unheard of in the early years and inclusion has remained an uphill battle for many female performers.[52] Rockygrass

[51] Peterson, Elizabeth, *The Changing Faces of Tradition: A Report on the Folk and Traditional Arts in the United States*(Washington D.C., National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Public Information, 1996),14

[52] The crossover success of Alison Krause has eased this difficulty somewhat for women over the last several years

2007 saw what is quite probably the first time in history that an openly gay, African-American woman appeared as a featured act at the head of a bluegrass band at a festival with a reputation for featuring bands that are more strictly bluegrass than many Telluride acts.

Seattle-based singer songwriter Laura Love was touring in support of her latest recording, whose title alone could be the subject of a thesis length inquiry. The album is called *NeGrass*, and is described on Love's website as "an acoustic collection of traditional and original field hollers, Negro spirituals and folk songs… recorded in Nashville with some of the finest bluegrass musicians in North America."[53] In this performance the roots of bluegrass come full circle and it is to be hoped that this will be the first of many such reunions of the long sundered stylistic cousins.

The situation also seems to be improving rapidly in regards to the role of all women in bluegrass. Both Telluride and Rockygrass featured performances by women under 20 at the head of talented groups of young musicians. The future looks bright.

## **III. Conclusion:** Ya'all Come! A Viable and Accessible Folk Culture for the 21st Century

It is no great revelation to point out the continuing commodification of American popular culture and the potentially debasing nature of that trend. Critics from all segments of society continually decry the decline of community institutions and values and the soporific pandering that often passes for entertainment. But rarely do they offer any real discussion of potential alternatives to the malaise they so roundly condemn. In the previous pages I have attempted to provide some insight into a community which has organically developed a durable, portable post-modern folk culture. It is the assertion of this report that this sub-culture offers its members a context in which to construct and perform their identities and to gather the shared experience

upon which to build the collective memory necessary to the development of any discreet sub-culture. In *Dangerous Crossroads,* Lipsitz observes that, "…shared cultural space no longer depends upon shared geographic place… New discursive spaces allow for recognition of new networks and affiliations; they become crucibles for complex identities in formation that respond to the imperatives of place at the same time that they transcend them."[54] Telluride serves precisely this purpose in the festivarian sub-culture. It provides a common reference that binds together a community whose geographic, socio-economic, educational and political diversity are an accurate representation of the super-culture from which its members are naturally drawn.

In *The Changing Faces of Tradition,* Elizabeth Peterson quotes a passage from a sociological study titled *Habits of the Heart* in which the authors assert that; "Communities… have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a 'community of memory' …. People growing up in communities of memory not only hear the stories that tell how the community came to be, what its hopes and fears are, and how its ideals are exemplified in outstanding men and women; they also participate in the practices—ritual, aesthetic, ethical—that define the community as a way of life. We call these 'practices of commitment' for they define the patterns of loyalty and obligation that keep the community alive."[55] It is the position of this report that the culture which it examines is just such a community.

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[53] http://www.lauralove.net/frames.html October, 28, 2007
[54] Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 6
[55] Bellah, Robert, Madsen, Richard, Sullivan William MAnn Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart (*,Berkeley,University of California, 1985), pp.153-54 In Peterson, Elizabeth, *The Changing Faces of Tradition: A Report on the Folk and Traditional Arts in the United States*(Washington D.C., National Endowment for the Arts, Office of Public Information, 1996),14

Festivarians are deeply committed to their community. They have developed a complex system of pilgrimage, ritual, sacraments, ceremonial clothing,[56] vernacular language, and social culture which reflect the imperatives of commitment, openness and inclusiveness, collective action, creativity and innovation, gratitude and appreciation, generosity which constitute the core values of the sub-culture. The only requirements for entry into this group are desire and a willingness to commit. Whether you are an aspiring musician or a novice festival pilgrim bluegrass requires a level of commitment that is often difficult to sustain amid the pressures of a modern life. In the introduction to his instructional book *Bluegrass Banjo*, Pete Wernick, a longtime resident of Niwot, Colorado puts it this way: "If you don't feel you'll have too much time to practice don't even start. It really needs some commitment, no matter how fast a learner you are…So if you don't you'll have time…try another style."[57] That an author and performer who earns a part of his living from instruction would be so blunt about the level of challenge involved speaks to the depth of commitment necessary to successfully integrate into this community. Of course, the sub-text of this admonishment is that the effort will be worth it. Perseverance will be rewarded. If you commit to the community, it will commit to you, thus creating a reciprocal relationship of "loyalty and obligation," and ensuring a dynamic and nurturing relationship between individual and community. I would argue that this community largely is immune to the vagaries of economic upheaval, geographic displacement and social stratification that characterize most brick and mortar "communities" on the post-modern landscape, because it is not dependent on the stability of local history or institutions. Members of this post-modern bluegrass folk culture carry their collective memory of place with them wherever they go in the form of the pilgrimage experience and its associated memories and the

[56] Tie Dye and Batik
[57] Wernick, Peter, Bluegrass Banjo (New York, Oak Publications, 1974)

physical artifacts associated with the experience. Local jam sessions and performances take place virtually every day somewhere in most major cities and musicians and fans can bond instantly over the common repertoire and history regardless of ethnic or geographic origin or economic or social standing. This in turn re-emphasizes another key element which makes this culture particularly adaptable to the post-modern environment; its collective or communal nature. A reporter for the Boulder, Colorado *Daily Camera* collected the most telling piece of ethnography on the subject I have encountered. In discussing the campground scene at Rockygrass he wrote: "What may seem odd to some is that van Winkle came to camp outside Planet Bluegrass all by himself. His family and friends see it as going stag. Van Winkle sees it completely opposite.' They ask me whom I'm going with,' he says, smiling. 'Well, I'm going with everybody.'"[58] Indeed it may seem odd to those who have not had the opportunity for membership in such a group, but to festivarians this is the way in which they see the world. Just as you cannot play bluegrass alone, so you can never be alone at a bluegrass festival (not the place to seek solitude in any case). One is part of a welcoming and genuine community with established customs and traditions and a hopeful and dynamic relationship with the future. Membership in this culture provides individuals a secure sense of belonging. This sense of belonging provides a consistent frame of reference within which to confront and negotiate the compartmentalization and alienation so common in industrial post-modern society. No matter how isolated or disconnected one may feel in the workplace or the local community, access to the festivarian experience is always available through recorded music, artifacts, local jams and performances, and the internet. This accessibility, combined with the inclusive and nurturing nature of the community

[58] http://www.dailycamera.com/news/2007/jul/27/picking-and-grinning-bluegrass-fans-camp-out-in/,October, 28, 2007

make modern bluegrass culture a robust and durable option for 21st century humans seeking connection to culture and traditions in the increasingly hectic urban/exurban environment.

While I have attempted provide a narrative and analysis that offers some insight into the festival experience and the associated culture, it remains true that festivarians overwhelmingly agree that one cannot truly understand the transformational nature of the festival experience without direct exposure. Bob, a longtime festivarian from Boulder County said simply, "If ya wanna know, ya gotta go."[59] I concur with this straight forward assessment. Like so much that is worthwhile and rewarding in human existence The Telluride Bluegrass Festival and its associated folk culture must be experienced to be truly understood.

There are dozens and dozens of songs old and new that express the basic outlook of this community but I have chosen one in particular to close this report. This song was composed by Colorado resident, Jim Ratts, and began to enter the group consciousness in the middle 90s when it was added to the repertoire of festival mainstay Sam Bush. Over the ensuing decade, *Howlin at the Moon* has become an anthem at Planet Bluegrass events. This year, Rockygrass coincided with the full moon, and on Saturday evening, some 3000 fans howled and hooted uncontrollably between songs until their "request" was fulfilled. Rather than engage in a detailed deconstruction of the song's significance, I will simply transcribe the lyrics and close with the assertion that this single song and its rise to the top of the festivarian charts is as revelatory as any lengthy scholarly examination of this vibrant and growing American folk culture:

Chorus:
"Take a little time for sunshine
Take a whole lotta time for love
Take time to praise and thank heaven up above
Take your life as it may come
Cus' boy it'll be gone soon

[59] Interview, July, 23, 2007

Take a little time for howlin at the moon

Somebody said keep your eyes open
Keep your feet on solid ground
Ya gotta take time to take a real good look at everything you've found
Take your life as it may come cus' boy it'll be gone soon
Take a little time for howlin at the moon

Take a little time for sunshine
Take a whole lotta time for love
Take time to praise and thank heaven up above
Gotta make music (Gotta make music)
Raise your voice in joy every day
Got a lot to live for
Got a life time to stay

So I try to keep my eyes open
Try to live my life from day to day
But it seems that life's unhappiness kept leadin' me astray
Till I saw a friend go down hard
It made me sing a different tune
Take a little time for howlin' at the moon

Repeat Chorus

Take a little time for sunshine
Take a whole lotta time for love
Take time to praise and thank heaven up above
Gotta make music (Gotta make music)
Raise your voice it'll be gone soon
Take a little time for howlin at the moon

Repeat chorus

Appendix A:

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**Internet Resources**

http://www.bluegrass.com/

http://www.bluegrassnow.com/issues/102007/

http://www.bluegrassmusic.com/

http://www.festivarian.com/

http://www.ibma.org/

http://www.timobrien.net/Lyrics2.cfm?ID=122

http://www.lauralove.net