

Expressing Identity in Colorado Bluegrass Music Sub-Culture:
Negotiating Modernity in the American West through Music, Humor and Shared Experience.

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Expressing Identity in Colorado Bluegrass Music Sub-Culture: *Negotiating Modernity in the American West through Music, Humor and Shared Experience.*

On a scenic twenty-two acre ranch in a bend of the St. Vrain river in Lyons Colorado, three thousand or so 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 at the 1997 Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival (Rockygrass) 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.

But something else is going on here as well. 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, 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. This invented tradition is native to members of both a regional music sub-culture and a non-geographic musical sub-culture. In addition, these rituals represent a dialogue with the past. This ongoing dialogue clearly expresses a respect for, and 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 a series of events; Traditions are usually thought of as being passed down through generations. This view does not allow for the complexities of our relationship with history. Traditions and rituals are not necessarily transferred in strictly generational or even regional trajectories in the modern era. Moreover, such “recently invented” 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 our history.

Framing the Discussion

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 terms, *super-culture* and *inter-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-, sub-, and inter- represent”¹. Slobin uses these terms to describe the relationship of individuals and communities to themselves and to each other. It is important to note that the term inter-culture represents not a third discreet culture, but the interplay between the various subcultures and the super-culture.

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. He relies extensively on language used by economist Arjun Appadurai defining our environment as composed of five dimensions within the “global cultural economy, “a ‘set of landscapes,’ which he terms *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *finanscapes*, and *ideoscapes*”². These five “landscapes” are not discreet sites, but are continually intersecting with and influencing 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.

Again, this is where things get tricky, as the discussion turns toward making some meaning of the tangled web of relationships that exists, for both communities and individuals, between the various hyphenated cultural associations and the landscapes within which each operates. When examined from this perspective, Pete Wernick’s Introduction of Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers as “The opposite of yuppies (young urban professionals). The idea that

¹ Slobin, Mark, *Subcultural sounds: Micromusics of the West* (Hanover, NH.: University Press of New England, 1993), 14

“They’re ‘old rural amateurs’” who play “ ‘old electric music’ as opposed to ‘new acoustic music’” 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. We will return to the question of these relationships at several points during the discussion, but some historical background is necessary to the discussion at this juncture.

Bluegrass is a uniquely American musical form, born out of a synthesis of Anglo American Ballads, Scots-Irish fiddling styles, Rural Church vocal styles and African-American blues chord structures and vocal styles. Since its early days in the post World War II period Bluegrass has seen many ups and downs, while never really breaking through to mainstream audiences. Even so, as popular music in America became increasingly homogenized and commodified in the 1970s, a growing nationwide spectrum of Bluegrass events enabled practitioners and devotees of the music to build and nurture a growing community based on a love and appreciation of the music and the shared experiences that are so important to the establishment of any cohesive community.

There are several characteristics that differentiate what sociologist Robert Owen Gardener has identified as “New West Bluegrass” culture from most modern music cultures³. I believe that the most important and defining of these is 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, Jazz, and even Mainstream Country Music, there is a well established and nearly inviolate line between audience and performer. The

² ibid 14

³ Gardner, Robert Owen. *"Welcome Home": Performing Place, Community, and Identity in the New West Bluegrass Music Revival*, Unpublished Sociology Dissertation, University of Colorado, 2004.

audience members are strictly consumers. They buy recordings and attend concerts without necessarily having any connection to the music or the artists beyond that of a passive 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 instrument⁴. 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.”⁵

Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

Any examination of Bluegrass music sub-culture in Colorado is best begun with some discussion of the history and evolution of Bluegrass Festivals in the area. 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 “Granddaddy of them all” the Telluride Bluegrass Festival which annually hosts a capacity crowd of ten thousand, plus artists, staff and concessionaires, for “four days of peace and music”. While not the first or, at this stage, the largest festival of its kind in the country, Telluride is, nonetheless, acknowledged by fans and performers alike as one of the most influential festivals in the world of Bluegrass and acoustic music, today. In that same spirit, this discussion will focus 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

⁴ Willis, Barry, *America’s Music, Bluegrass*,(Franktown, CO.: Pine Valley Music, 1992), 531

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. Even the promotional material produced by 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, which reflect both 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.”⁶ Ferguson’s observation is borne out by the story of “Telluride Tom,” known as “the Mayor of Town Park” (the most desirable festival camping area) by informed Festivarians. Tom has attended all thirty-three festivals in Telluride. It is important to stress that he never actually *lived* in Telluride, but he has managed to make it up there every June, for thirty-three years and counting.

One can only truly understand the impressive nature of this feat 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 is the venue itself. Location, Location, Location. Nestled snugly in a remote box canyon on Colorado’s

⁵ O’Brien, Tim, Personal interview 4/13/2006

⁶Ferguson, Craig, Personal Interview 4/13/2006

Western Slope, Telluride is an idyllic Victorian mining town reborn as a Mecca for alpine enthusiasts and a necessary stop on the “must visit” list for young jet-setters 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 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.”⁷

Writers, artists, fans, and promoters all regularly refer to festivals with such terms as “Homecomings” or “Reunions”, and feelings of “belonging” to an extended family are often cited. I would argue that the more appropriate characterization in the case of Festivarian culture is that of a pilgrimage. Like Telluride Tom, most Festivarians will never have a home in Telluride, or Lyons, Colorado (home of the other PB events) but it will always exist as both a mythological and an actual ideal. Most of us cannot spend everyday playing and listening to music, hanging out with friends, enjoying nature and just generally doing whatever we please. But, if we plan and prioritize well, we can do it for a week or so at least once every year (committed Festivarians will often arrive up to a week early for the Telluride event and attend at least two or three other festivals throughout the year). In the meantime it gives the average Festivarian something to strive for. In acknowledgement of Tom’s achievement, Planet Bluegrass recently rewarded Tom with a lifetime festival pass and an “official” public recognition of his “Mayoralty.”

A gesture such as this can have many functions in the construction of community identity in this context. It recognizes an elder in the audience as having value in the relationship with

⁷ Ibid 4/13/2006

both the artists and the promoter that is rarely if ever expressed in American Pop music performance environments. The Bluegrass Festival environment fosters an intimacy between audience, artists and festival staffers that can only come from often-repeated, shared experiences. Thus “Festivarians” have at least one easy tool for identifying each other in the swirl of what most of them consider a pop-culture musical morass. They keep coming back. Telluride Tom is an icon among Festivarians, and his string may never be equaled by the time he leaves us, but a ten or fifteen year stretch of consecutive trips is not unusual among those who readily identify with the designation “Festivarian.” Such annual commitment on the part of so many people begs the obvious question. What drives that loyalty, commitment and intimacy? What are the things that bind together the Festivarian community?

It’s the Music

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, these core 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.”⁸ 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,”⁹ who are regular performers at the festival. Again, this is a reciprocal relationship. At the same time that Festivarians repeat the pilgrimage to Telluride to enjoy and appreciate the artistry of these

⁸ <http://www.Bluegrass.com/media/press/whatpeopelaresaying.pdf> April, 30, 2006

⁹Ferguson, Craig Personal interview 4/13/2006

musicians, many artists cite the 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 event apart from most others in the genre.¹⁰ 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, 1997¹¹

So, what exactly is "Bluegrass" music? The American Heritage online dictionary definition reads, "*Bluegrass Music*: A type of folk music that originated in the southern United States, typically played on banjos and guitars and characterized by rapid tempos and jazzlike improvisation."¹² The Columbia online encyclopedia refers the reader to a listing on "Country and Western" music before offering this slightly less vague description: "Bluegrass, exemplified by Bill Monroe, is a style of country and western music distinguished by a driving, syncopated rhythm, high-pitched vocals, and an emphasis on the banjo, mandolin, and fiddle."¹³ Both of these definitions are technically correct, but they fall far short of communicating the depth and complexity of the music and its associated sub-culture.

¹⁰Wernick, Pete, O'Brien, Tim Personal Interviews 4/7-9/2006

¹¹ <http://www.Bluegrass.com/media/press/whatpeopelaresaying.pdf> April, 30, 2006

¹² <http://education.yahoo.com/reference/dictionary/entry/Bluegrass> April, 30, 2006

¹³ http://education.yahoo.com/reference/encyclopedia/entry/countryN;_ylt=AmyJM5YTbTDZcdnrLjOrj0xTt8wF April,30, 2006

Strict Bluegrass traditionalists insist to today that only music played on certain proscribed instruments in a specific style with minimum electrical amplification is “real” Bluegrass. It is generally agreed that the form is acoustic string music, but the electric bass and internal amplification of instruments are now common at most major festivals, and many of the core musicians of the “Telluride Bluegrass Sound” have even been known to enthusiastically share the stage with a drummer (the ultimate taboo in traditional Bluegrass circles). There is some irony in the rigidity with which some “old line” Bluegrass aficionados view the form. 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.

Not surprisingly, as with the current Festivarian phenomenon, the original Bluegrass sub-culture coalesced around a core group of particularly talented musicians. Mandolinist and vocalist Bill Monroe had teamed with his guitarist/ vocalist brother Charlie to form one of several successful “brother acts” featuring guitar and mandolin behind the close harmonies often associated with Church singing of the period. As is well documented in the work of Niel Rosenberg and elsewhere, after splitting with Charlie in the mid 30s, Monroe began to develop the sound that we know as Bluegrass today. Many legendary figures in early country music moved through early manifestations of Monroe’s Bluegrass Boys, and Monroe became a member of the Grand Ole Opry in 1939, but most observers agree that the sound really came together when Monroe was joined by Guitarist Lester Flatt and North Carolina Banjoist Earl Scruggs in 1945.

Kentuckian Bill Monroe is often referred to as the father of Bluegrass Music, but he might never have assumed his paternity had not his driving mandolin and high tenor vocals been

abetted by the steady yet innovative guitar stylings of Flatt, the soaring and unpredictable, but musically impeccable fiddle improvisation of Vasser Clements, and most importantly, the frenetic yet precise three finger banjo picking of Scruggs. In any event, it is commonly agreed that this is the defining period for what has become known as Bluegrass music. It is worth noting that Monroe felt so strongly proprietary about his music that after Flatt and Scruggs left to form their own band in 1948, it was nearly twenty years before he shared the stage with either man again.

This feud was eventually forgotten and today, with Earl Scruggs the only surviving member of that particular, seminal incarnation of the Bluegrass Boys, all its members are revered in Bluegrass circles, along with a select group of other artists, as the unwitting progenitors of a vital and ever expanding American musical legacy.

Regardless of Monroe's perspective, the defection of Flatt and Scruggs was in fact a great boost to the growth of Bluegrass. It not only provided fans with that much more opportunity, it opened the way for a parade of aspiring musicians to serve their apprenticeships with Mr. Monroe. The number of artists who eventually left the Bluegrass Boys is a who's who of the genre. In any event it is generally accepted that this group of musicians combined to consummate the ongoing experimentation that Monroe had been engaged in since splitting with Charlie in the mid 30s.

As the music reached wider audiences, Bluegrass subculture began to have larger and more significant interactions with the various landscapes referred to earlier. The impact is perhaps most visible in the area of the finanscape. Small record labels, music stores and mail orders services, instrument repair shops and small clubs all benefited from a quietly growing Bluegrass "industry", thus allowing ever larger numbers of people to make the music not only

part of their life, but their livelihood as well. Interactions with the other scapes are less easy to quantify. Bluegrass had a reasonably significant place in the mediascape before the advent of Rock and Roll, but has remained mostly on the margins since then (The exceptions to this are a few brief flirtations following the release of big budget Hollywood films featuring Bluegrass artists, including *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Deliverance* and more recently *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*).

Perhaps it is its relationship to the ideoscape and the ethnoscape that this question is most complicated. Bluegrass was birthed in the crucible of the Great Depression, World War II, and America's often difficult transition from a primarily rural country to that of an urban industrial nation. Within this complex socio-economic environment, Bill Monroe engaged in the conscious manufacturing of an identity as surely as any Rock Musician two generations later. It has always been the trademark of Mr. Monroe's bands that they dressed in Western cut suits and wore Western style hats. This is at least a little incongruous, given that Monroe's roots are in central Kentucky and the music itself could in no way be described as either "Western" or "Cowboy." It was a new and unexpected blend of English and Scots-Irish ballads and fiddle tunes, combined with African-American acoustic blues rhythms and blues influenced chord structures. Vocal styles based in both African-American blues and the harmony singing of the white Baptist Church combined to form a new and uniquely American music that has sustained itself from within in spite of little support from the "mainstream" music industry.

In fact, by the middle 1960s, the country music industry of which Bluegrass had been a vital part in the late 1940s and early 50s contributed nearly as much to the marginalization of Bluegrass as did Rock and Roll. Through the 60s, Bluegrass Music survived on the fringes of both Nashville and the Folk revival circuit, but the circle of fans and musicians continued to

grow quietly. In 1965 a music fan and promoter named Carleton Haney held what would later be recognized as the first multi-day music festival devoted entirely to Bluegrass Music.¹⁴ In other words, the first Bluegrass Festival. It seems unlikely that Haney or anyone else who attended that first event had any inkling that they were witnessing the birth of what has become a global music phenomenon. Today, Bluegrass Festivals are held in more than 15 countries around the world. A decade years after Haney's seminal event, in 1974, some Bluegrass fans and musicians in a tiny little ski town in remote Southwestern Colorado decided it would be a good idea to hold a festival of their own, and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival was born.

The Next Generation

By the early 1970s, a new generation of Bluegrass artists began to assert themselves, and they brought to the scene both a broader musical vocabulary and, in many cases, a broader social perspective. Just as Bill Monroe, Flatt and Scruggs and The Stanley Brothers were influenced by the depression, World War II and the transition from rural to urban society, this new generation was affected by the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the uncertainty engendered by an increasingly volatile and unpredictable global environment. Likewise, just as the pioneers of the genre had been influenced by a broad spectrum of musical predecessors and contemporaries, this new generation of artists reflected the influences not only of their Bluegrass progenitors, but also of their contemporaries in other musical genres.

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

¹⁴Willis, Barry, America's Music, Bluegrass,(Franktown, CO.: Pine Valley Music, 1992), 473

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. As previously discussed, 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 sound all the way around.”¹⁵ 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 what is known in some circles as Newgrass. 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. 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,

¹⁵ Willis, Barry, *America’s Music, Bluegrass*,(Franktown, CO.: Pine Valley Music, 1992), 563

often includes some percussion, and employs extensive improvisational solos by individual instrumentalists over an extended jam. Some observers (This writer included) even 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.¹⁶ Certainly NGR’s performances at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival had a direct and lasting influence on nationally prominent Colorado based bands “Leftover Salmon” and “The String Cheese Incident.” Both these bands use electric instruments, heavy amplification and percussion and drums, but they continue to rely heavily on mandolin and guitar, as well as leavening their original compositions with songs from the traditional and newgrass repertoires. This pushing of the musical envelope is a clear manifestation of the ideoscape intersecting with and influencing the evolution of a sub-culture. 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.

But Bluegrass had moved beyond regionalism by the mid 70s, and even as the growing Newgrass movement was bringing Bluegrass to a new, rock-oriented audience, the progressive movement was reaching out to an upscale urban audience that had come to Bluegrass through the Folk revival of the 1960’s.

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

¹⁶ Ferguson, Craig, Personal Interview 4/13/2006

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 clubs featuring the music appeared in several urban areas.¹⁷ One of the latest (1978) and most influential of these Progressive Bluegrass acts was the Boulder, Colorado based band “Hot Rize.”

“Hot Rize” and their musical alter egos “Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers” represent an ideal example of how audience and artists interact with the various –scapes to define, refine, and perform community identity.

Who Are These Guys? A Brief Introduction to Hot Rize and Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers

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

¹⁷ 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

values in uniquely coded forms that help identify insiders within that sub-culture and aids them in understanding and negotiating their relationships within the super-culture.

Hot Rize is a progressive Bluegrass band formed in Boulder Colorado in 1978. They made their first appearance at the Telluride Bluegrass Festival in that year and have been an important presence on the Colorado and National acoustic music scene ever since. They are a four piece unit originally consisting of Tim O'Brien on Mandolin, Fiddle and Vocals, Bassist Nick Forster (also a vocalist), Guitarist Charles Sawtelle (Charles died tragically of leukemia in 1999), and Pete Wernick on Banjo. The varied backgrounds of these virtuoso musicians is far too extensive to detail in this discussion so we will join them in 1978 at the beginning of their collective journey as Hot Rize.

All members of the Band cite the importance of the Denver Folklore Center in bringing them together. Charles and Nick were both employed there and as Tim O'Brien says "That was really important, that there was already an established community here."¹⁸ According to the Pete Wernick the band came together to support albums that Tim and Pete respectively had just released¹⁹. And things just sort of clicked into place after the original guitar player was replaced by Nick on bass with Charles assuming the guitar duties. From the earliest stages the members of Hot Rize developed distinct stage personalities of their own. Nick Forster emerged as a smooth and engaging MC, Tim assumed his natural role as a good natured jokester, Pete just kept pickin' along, and Charles seemed to enjoy his role as "the Bluegrass mystery" or "the man lost in a world he didn't make." The band adopted suits and ties (The quality of which increased as their units sold rose). And their 1985 release *Traditional Ties* both respectfully acknowledged and poked good-natured fun at the "formality" of an earlier generation of Bluegrass performers. This

¹⁸ O'Brien, Tim personal interview 4/9/2006

¹⁹Wernick, Pete, Personal interview 4/7/2006

is one of the things that make Hot Rize/Red Knuckles so unique. As a band and as individuals they 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.

In adopting the suits and ties, and in always introducing the band by identifying their town and state of origin (or in Nick’s case country, he was born in Beirut), Hot Rize is enacting a ritual which predates the inception of “Bluegrass” as a distinct genre of American music. Perhaps this tradition in American country music can provide some explanation for the rapid growth of the Red Knuckles mythology and its instant and lasting popularity. Americans love to know something about everything. If Hot Rize played “Bluegrass” music characterized by rapid-fire acoustic instrumentals, high pitched vocals and soaring harmonies, who were these guys that played classic old country honky-tonk music on vintage electric instruments?

According to Tim and Pete, the “Western” music was part of the act from nearly the beginning, with Pete learning to play the steel guitar expressly to play that style. According to Tim “...one night, I introduced us as ‘Red knuckles and the Trailblazers’, and the crowd just went nuts...they loved it.²⁰” Sometime shortly thereafter, Charles suggested some kind of small costume pieces and again, the crowd ate it up, and Red and the Boys began, quite literally to take on a life of their own.

Red Knuckles and the Trailblazer appeared at virtually every Hot Rize show, and an elaborate history began to emerge for every member of the band. Red (Tim O’Brien) is the flamboyant, slightly egotistical, but clearly true-hearted leader; Waldo Otto (Pete Wernick) on

Steel Guitar (the electric table) is the affable if somewhat obtuse proprietor of Waldo's Discount Donuts (you bite it you bought it); Wendell Mercantile (Nick Forster) on Guitar is part pitchman and part pretty boy, and, on bass, the nearly silent, always mysterious Slade (Charles Sawtelle), of whom no photograph has ever been successfully developed. 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. 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.

The inclusion of "Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers" in Hot Rize's performances can also be read as a commentary on Bluegrass's often rocky relationship with mainstream country music. As mentioned earlier, the Country Music establishment in Nashville has always had ambivalent feelings about Bluegrass, and it is widely known that such Country hit-makers as Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton were actually prohibited from making Bluegrass recordings by their major label contracts. Both artists have since recorded successful Bluegrass albums. Ms. Parton's album was recorded with a band including Telluride Bluegrass regulars Sam Bush and Jerry Douglas, and Mr. Skaggs, who toured with the legendary Ralph Stanley while still in High School, now performs regularly with his high powered traditional Bluegrass ensemble

²⁰ O'Brien, Tim, Personal interview 4/9/2006

“Kentucky Thunder.” In any event, the idea of a “Country” act appearing as a special guest on a Bluegrass show is an ironic reversal of the circumstances of most professional Bluegrass Musicians in the 50s and 60s. During this period Bluegrass musicians appeared almost exclusively in small venues or on “Package Shows” with Big name country acts. This ironic twist is only one small element in the constructed reality that is the world of Bluegrass music.

Created Mythology and Ritualized Performance of Traditions

Hot Rize and Red Knuckles and the Trailblazers toured steadily for *twelve years*, and by 1998 they had been friends and musical partners for twenty. They had built a large and loyal fan base in their home state of Colorado and all around the world, had received individual and collective awards from various bodies and institutions, and created a whole new mythology for a generation of music fans within a certain milieu. What began as simple humor and musical expression had morphed into a statement of shared consciousness.

The depth, breadth and subtlety of ritualized behavior contained within a Red Knuckles appearance is impossible to fully describe in these pages, but I will attempt to illustrate and examine a few examples, while encouraging the reader to listen to the attached audio appendix, seek out the volumes of recorded material by these artists and draw their own conclusions.

The most simple and obvious example is the transition from Hot Rize to Red Knuckles. It is always enacted as described in the opening of this writing. Tim, Nick and Charles duck quickly off stage and don their western regalia, while Pete repeats the saga of how and why Red Knuckles came to tour with Hot Rize. This narrative contains several nuggets of insight into the values of “Knuckleheads,” but we will just look at a couple of key elements.

First we should really take a moment to 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 ourselves 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. 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 only people who don’t like Red’s easy self confidence are the members of Hot Rize. Pete always lets it be known in the introduction that the bands don’t really care for each other, and that Hot Rize only keeps Red and the Boys around because they “get really tired from playing all that really fast, high Bluegrass and they need a break during the set.” This implied tension is another key element in the identifying values within the “New West” bluegrass culture.

The argument can be made that this construction is merely a reliable set up for a variety of jokes concerning the relationship between the bands, but they have been riding the bus together for the over a decade. That’s a lot of not getting along. Many values and behaviors are

demonstrated by such a relationship. Perseverance in the face of adversity, loyalty, communication, compromise and commitment are all required to maintain healthy business and personal relationships, and Hot Rize and Red Knuckles succeed in doing that. When presented in the form of repeated narratives and shared experience between audience and artist, this represents the enactment of shared community values.

Performing Community Identity

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 which 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 its potential 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.

The primary setting of the relationship between Hot Rize and Red Knuckles is indicative of what may be the single most 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.

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.

The Mythic Narratives of Peter Rowan

In the world of Bluegrass music, one of the most prolific and accomplished story-tellers is the guitarist and vocalist, Peter Rowan. Mr. Rowan is, by both choice and acclimation, 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 "New West" festivals (Telluride Bluegrass, The Oregon Country Fair, California's Strawberry Festival and countless other smaller events) and other performance spaces around the country. Three narratives in particular have become so internalized by group members that they can be referred to by insiders simply by the names of the songs to which they attach as in "Did Peter tell the *Walls of Time* story last night?" I will attempt to recreate the 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 all three tales by the artist.

For lack of a better technique we will list these stories in the chronological order that the songs were created. Thus 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 a 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 motif 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, widely acknowledged as the "Father of Bluegrass Music." 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 has become an important part of the song cannon of Bluegrass Music. The collaboration between Monroe and Rowan represents an unbreakable link between the founders and the next generation of Bluegrass practitioners. The acknowledgement and honoring of this connection serves to reinforce one of the most important values of the community, knowledge of and respect for history. This dialogic relationship to history and tradition is intrinsic to the group's relationship to the ideoscape.

The next narrative is known as "The Free Mexican Air Force Story" or "The Camp Howdy Story." This story is much more complex and also much more overt in some of the values it expresses. The legend begins quite sedately with the story-teller 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 list 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 Beauregard in an extreme state of intoxication. 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 certain evolving U.S. drug policies regarding Mexico, but the meanings could easily evolve given 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 third narrative collected is attached to a song called *Rainmaker* which emerged in the late 80s or early 90s (Like many artists, Mr. Rowan often experiments with lyrics and song structure in front of sympathetic audiences before producing a “final” version of his songs). This

narrative, like the Free Mexican Air Force Story features the narrators interaction with a mythic figure, in this case the Hero is Elvis. The story begins with our intrepid story-teller "...in Nashville writing some songs with Ricky Skaggs, George Straight, ...But I realized that I was lacking inspiration...because there was a dearth of mirth upon the earth." In this tale the journey motif is expressed overtly in the form of a vision quest from "...my shack by the railroad track, across the four lane highway... to sacred ground... the glistening asphalt of the Kroger Store" and there atop the Kroger Store was "The Deity, Elvis." The story then moves to a call and response interplay between artist and audience using two phrases a certain element of music fans instinctively associate with Elvis Presley, "We-ell" and "Uhhn Hunhh." The crux of the story is that Elvis has a message for Mr. Rowan, "I want you to write a rainmakin' song. I don't want you to write no New Age ditty. I don't want you to write no Neo-shamanistic jingle. I want you to write a sure fire rockabilly rainmakin' song, We-eell, Uhhn Hunhh!" The Narrative concludes with Mr. Rowan's assertion that "When Elvis talks, I listen." Like the previously recounted stories, the song accompanying this narrative is also heavily coded and can reveal much about the culture in it is performed and all songs are included on the attached recording.

What's This All About, Pete?

A thorough inventory and deconstruction of the coding in these narratives individually or collectively could stretch into several chapters. So I will try to elucidate some of the larger themes and their reflection of Bluegrass Music Cultural Identity.

The three 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 both 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.

Mr. Rowan's continued re-telling of this story serves to reinforce this value in the wider community, and the fact that he indeed collaborated with the legend himself lends credibility to the entire experience. It also bolsters the image of Monroe as the Founding Father. Perhaps more importantly it reinforces Rowan's self-defined role as the direct (if somewhat rebellious) inheritor of Monroe's legacy. To be fair, the audience generally embraces Mr. Rowan's adoption of this identity, including what might be best described as the "counter-culture" sensibility that accompanies it.

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 paraquat²²), 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

²¹ A herbicide sprayed on Mexican marijuana fields as part of joint U.S.-Mexico drug interdiction efforts in the 1980s

bearers. The argument can be made that this is an internal critique of the legendary Monroe's well known temper and imperious nature. Monroe was humble and friendly on stage, but he took himself and his music quite seriously, and many musicians left his employ under less than ideal circumstances.

In contrast Peter Rowan and his contemporaries have maintained a wide web of interconnecting collaborations that have stretched over several decades successfully maintaining and nurturing the music, which 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 perhaps best evidenced by the continuing popularity of a series of recordings known collectively as *Will the Circle be Unbroken: the Trilogy*. This collection consists of Albums 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 perhaps the best representation available of how important maintaining a dialogue between past, present and future was and remains in this sub-culture. The Circle recording sessions, particularly those of 1972, were a pivotal catalyst in the resurgence of Bluegrass and Country music in the period. The sessions brought together a funky, hairy California based country rock band with many of the living legends of Country and Bluegrass. The resulting collaboration reinforced for both camps the importance of sharing and honoring the music while remaining open to its growth and expansion which, in turn, reflects the shifting social and cultural realities of the modern era.

Negotiating the modern era is a tricky subject in Bluegrass culture. So much of the songwriting takes on a sort of pastoral longing that it can be taken to reflect a perspective that finds modernity somehow lacking, as in Mr. Rowan's "dearth of mirth upon the Earth." In contrast to this, the image of "The Deity, Elvis" appearing atop an urban supermarket with a message of inspiration for the narrator effectively communicates that inspiration, wonder, and in fact purpose are all around us. This construction can offer some comfort to anyone who has ever felt bogged down by the often cramped and tedious routine of American urban life. This is a direct reflection of Festivarians desire to make the rest of their everyday lives more like their "festival lives."

This tale also contains overtly negative political references to Republican leaders of the era and a rather scathing critique of certain New Age spiritual movements: "I don't want you to write no New Age ditty..." This is a clear indictment, and close examinations of the song lyrics that follow reinforce this view: "The good Lord promised me a miracle on one condition, He said 'Take your money, get outta town. Don't try to start another Religion.'" This coding can obviously be interpreted in many ways, but in general it speaks to a respect for existing traditions and an imperative not to exploit ones knowledge too heavily for personal gain.

The choice of Elvis is interesting for this piece, and I hope to interview Mr. Rowan at some point, but I am willing to assert that this again represents the importance of an ongoing conversation with history. In the eyes of many Bluegrass "old timers," Elvis and Rock and Roll in general, nearly killed Bluegrass. The reality is much more complicated. One of Elvis Presley's first big hits was a recording of Bill Monroe's composition *Blue Moon of Kentucky*. Exactly why this song was chosen has never been exposed, but one can reasonably speculate that among his wide range of musical tastes, Elvis was a fan of Monroe and liked the song; also it is

reasonable to assume that Sam Phillips of Sun Records expected the name recognition of Monroe's previous Country hit to help boost sales. In any event this is just one episode in a long and complicated relationship between Rock and Roll and Bluegrass and Country music that would take considerable time to unravel, but Mr. Rowan's invocation of Elvis is clear evidence that the conversation continues and that the relationship has evolved over time. It is hardly a stretch to read this as an acknowledgement of the complex and nuanced relationship Bluegrass has with other forms of American music both in the present and historically. This relationship is often worn as a badge of honor by members of the Bluegrass community, again reaffirming Mr. Rowan's narrative as reflective of an evolving community identity.

Taken alone or together these narratives can be seen as a new mythology representing a range of folk groups beginning with Mr. Rowan and the Musicians with whom he most often appears (In the case of the attached recordings, his two brothers and Bass player Victor Krauss, brother of Crossover Bluegrass artist Alison Krauss. Family is big in this culture also, but that is really another paper), or Hot Rize and their immediate familiars, progressing through the most ardent fans and regular festival attendees, eventually perhaps making, its way into the other familial and friend groups that intersect within a particular members life.

The Hot Rize/Red Knuckles performance has been recorded for commercial release while Mr. Rowans have not. But legally recorded live versions of these performances are widely available and widely disseminated within the community. These recordings are made with the knowledge and acquiescence of the artists and a lively exchange of recordings continues with regularity. This allows group members to compare and contrast versions of the various legends and track their evolution, thus allowing the legends and the community identity to evolve interactively. Again, this ongoing interaction between the fans and the audience, coupled with a

conscious, and conscientious maintenance of an open dialogue with the past on the part of both sub-groups combine to make Bluegrass Music Culture a musical sub-culture which, though under appreciated and under-studied, can offer some valuable tools for successfully negotiating relationships in an increasingly impersonal and isolating superculture.

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