Authentically Authentic

I have a review up at Salvation South today about Jake Blount's latest album *The New Faith* (Smithsonian Folkways, 2022). As with most albums I review I listened to it repeatedly, along with other releases in Blount's catalog. I also scoured the intertubes for most of the original versions of the songs he reimagined for the album; I love hearing the source material and comparing it with the new versions. As usual, those tracks led me down other (semi) related rabbit holes, way more than I could fit into a reasonably cogent review. So here's my psychic overflow from the experience.

The Blount album opens and closes with songs originated by Bessie Jones and the Georgia Sea Island Singers. The word "originated" is working overtime here; the songs pre-date the Sea Island Singers, but they are the ones who first performed the pieces for field recordist Alan Lomax.

The first piece on Blount's album is "Take Me to the Water." (You can hear the Blount version here.)

The Blount album ends with "Once There Was No Sun." (Blount's take here.)

A cursory A-B listen to the originals/remakes reveals some obvious alterations. Some might call them discrepancies, or worse. With "Once There Was No Sun," the liberties taken are especially pronounced. The string and vocal harmonies are far more modern, the beat is decidedly funkier, and the implementation of elements like digital looping are the kinds

of things that could drive purists and authenticity gatekeepers to righteous indignation. How dare he &c.?

Take it a step farther. Blount's first recordings were faithful to the accepted roots music format, strictly acoustic affairs with minimal studio sleight of hand. Blount's approach on *The New Faith* – twining shout with gospel, rock, blues and hip hop – represents a significant innovation, one that purists and gatekeepers might deem heretical. (Recall the outrage when Dylan when electric.)

But the idea that Blount's version of "Once There Was No Sun" is unfaithful demands that we believe that Bessie Jones did not take any liberties of her own with her source material, either intentionally or via sketchy memory, or imperfect transmission from whoever she learned from, themselves a source we must likewise assume was faultless in memory and so on back to whoever actually "wrote" the song in the first place. ("Wrote" being a pretty problematic notion given the circumstances of slavery in the first place.)

At any rate, I am pretty comfortable vouching for Jake's bona fides, not that my take amounts to a hill of beans in this crazy world of ours.There, that allusion: Cheap pop reference or sincere homage?

In the late 1980s I saw a performance by The McIntosh County Shouters at Emory University's Cannon Chapel. During their performance they lamented that their generations-old music would likely die out soon since most of the young people in their community were not interested in the "old folks" music, preferring the fresher sounds of rap and hip-hop. Most of us were likely inclined to believe their dire prediction. Instead, they remain an active performing group, beneficiaries perhaps of the post-*O Brother* resurgent interest in American folk forms like bluegrass and country, not to mention the insistence of Black historians and performers – led by the Carolina Chocolate Drops among several – that the pan-racial

origins of American roots music be recognized and celebrated.

The Shouters' 2017 Smithsonian Folkways release is a fantastic document of the ring shout in its "authentic" form, and the production and recording quality is a good deal more polished than their 1984 Smithsonian release. (Hailing from a relatively isolated community in the low country of Georgia – a place made infamous in Melissa Fay Green's book *Praying for Sheetrock* – the Shouters were "discovered" in the early 80s still practicing 'authentic' ring shouts and slave songs.) Here are two versions of "Jubilee" 33 years apart.

1984 Slave Shout Songs from the Coast of Georgia by The McIntosh County Shouters

2017 Spirituals and Shout Songs from the Georgia Coast by The McIntosh County Shouters

Which one is more authentic? Is a casual performance more genuine than answering an audience expectations for polished presentation? Is the clarity of a professional studio less "real" than a field recording? Are the Shouters of 1984/2017 *really* being faithful to the forbearers, or have they corrupted the original purity along the way?

What – more pointedly, who – defines authenticity anyway? It has been an issue as far back as Peerless Ralph Peer recording all those 'hillbillies' in Bristol, mainly because that was around the time music became a commodity that non-creative types were desperate to control. That's oversimplifying things, sure. At that point, records were just accessories to induce people to buy furniture-sized record players; the actual music was secondary to the commerce of furniture sales.

But the marketers stuck their noses in early on, spurred by concerns that decent white folks would not wish to invite Negro musicians into their parlor, even if only via shellac

discs. Splitting music by race categories set in motion a drive to label every music as being one thing or another. Too many consumers responded like good sheep by accepting these imaginary categories as something very real and worth defending and became intimately identified with specific genres, much the way they do with specific sporting teams or religious belief. This is largely driven by the identity-formative experiences of age ~2 to 20 and lingering fears of ostracism from their fellow tribalists; it has a lot less to do with choices freely made than most people would care to admit.

A growing gaggle of music journalists happily leapt in, relieved to have something to write about that required neither musical literacy or actual ears to hear. The various gatekeepers – professional and hobbyist alike, and all more or less self-appointed – set themselves to keep their corner safe from incursion. Add to this audience's determination that artists and art remain what it is: Give us something new, the throng demands, as long as it is what we expect. This led to inevitable factionalism among fans of different genres, which gave way to bitter debate within factions as to whether this or that artist was pure to the form or a pathetic sellout.

Rock music – an amorphous term that has flipped itself inside out more often than a cheap folding chair – offers some of the more hilarious examples, though the inherent racism, sexism, and homophobia aimed at the funk and dance musics of the 70s, or pretty much any music performed by a person without a penis, is a decidedly unfunny demonstration of the prevailing sausage fest mentality of that sect.

Country music has long had its internecine dramas regarding what "real" country is and who it belongs to. Seemingly more open to women than rock – 'seemingly' the key word here – an accusation of inauthenticity has been a key weapon ever since country music became a money making proposition. Money changes everything, right? *That* can't be country, because that would

take a sliver of my piece of the pie. Can’t let those people in, or that instrument, and so on.

And despite the fact that most mainstream country music today sounds like pale imitations of 70s Southern boogie (sprinkled with the occasional “rap” for flava), the Country Music Association has crawled right up its own rectum in the face of such threats to their “tradition” as Black musicians, or even worse, Black women musicians; worse still, Black LGBTQ+ musicians. The CMA’s disgraceful hissy fit over Lil Nas X’s delightful “Old Country Road” – an affectionate and funny sendup of cowboy music tropes – is the most visible example of this, but the ongoing struggles of POC and queer musicians to break into country/Americana/etc. belie a much deeper cultural sepsis.

A while back, a bunch of musicians tired of being frozen out of the Nashville-dominated country music scene rallied under a new banner: Americana. Though I hate this genre label with the burning fury of a thousand suns, it has managed to provide platform and access for many worthy musicians otherwise shut out. And like most genre labels, it has become meaninglessly expansive in scope.

And, predictably, another generation of gatekeepers is getting more than a touch defensive over what has become lucrative turf.

(But hey, credit where due: the Americana Awards just this week bestowed Album of the Year honors on the superb debut from Allison Russell, *Outside Child*. So while I still hate the Americana label, their industry community is way ahead of their counterparts at the Grammys and CMAs.) Russell is Canadian, which apparently counts as American; wonder if musicians between the US/Mexican border and Tierra del Fuego would also qualify. We shall see.

Then there’s the inherently jingoistic echo in the word.

Americana emerged in the late 1990s, its spurt of growth coincident with the worst of Bush-Iraq era patriotic Amurikafukyeah excess, exemplified by the banishment of the Dixie Chicks for their vocal anti-war sentiment. The Nashville establishment were as accomodationist as 1950s Hollywood in this embarassing flag-humping orgy. (As I recall it, the Americana community largely viewed the DCs as big industry sellouts, so not much help there.)

Of note: Upon their return to performing and recording, the Chicks performed on the 50th CMA awards show with Beyonce. Good on the CMA, reckon. Seriously, the lines are confusing AF, but nothing shouts louder than the almighty buck. The Chicks also dropped the Dixie stain from their name and are considered by some to be Americana artists now.

So who was more authentic? The anti-imperialist Dixie Chicks or the faux macho men in hats like Toby Keith who fanned flames of bigotry and militarized Christianity? I'd love to ask Woody Guthrie or Johnny Cash their opinions.

How about jazz? During the 80s, Wynton Marsalis and Stanley Crouch set themselves up as the authenticity tribunal; they took fealty to specific forms and gestures to near-reactionary extremes. To be sure, Wynton created some fantastic music during this period and he has since toned down the purity pronouncements. (He even performed alongside the likes of Willie Nelson and Eric Clapton – mon dieu!) But the sense of repression and market limitation was damaging to a generation of musicians who did not fit the prescribed mold.

Along the way, as musicians misbehaved by absorbing and combining different influences, we had to come up with another level of labeling to keep up: Hence the hyphenate musics, or just slapping the tag *fusion* on these Dr. Moreau-like abominations as warning that the creations are impure.

So where ya going with all this, you ask? Likely the best I

can do here is reassert my belief that all these attempts at genre policing and all the high dudgeon the goes along with authenticity gatekeeping – I mean, seriously, is there any greater clucking scold of the moral failings of wayward artists than the free-spirited Lester Bangs, for example? – are just static and noise that undermines the very act of musicking itself.

Increasingy, genre labeling is to music as gated neighborhood development is to community: They undermine the very thing they purport to serve.

The music is the important thing. It literally changes the world we inhabit on a daily and global basis. Committed musicians work hard to make art that is most often lost in the sheer mass of music that comes out every single day; most music comes and goes with nary a ripple, no ears ever hearing its offering.

Who can possibly keep up? Nobody, really, which makes all of us *critics*, with our claims to vast wisdom and refined discrimination, every bit the con artists as Ralph Peer or Richard Branson. You could try to listen to everything (ha!) but then you would hear pretty much none of it. Best you can do is keep the antenna up for something new to you and open your ears to the possibility.

I won't argue that there are no standards. Picture yourself in a boat listening to William Shatner sing The Beatles; despite the production values, the inauthenticity is howlingly apparent. Also too: howlingly funny. I got nothing against camp/kitsch, which is inherently anti-authentic, but no one would mistake it for great -or even good – art. Or would they?

We can still make judgements, have robust opinions about music that gets under our skin and makes us *_feel_* and move and think and then bug our friends with you-gotta-hear-this insistence. It's half the fun, perhaps, but the lesser half.

The meat of the matter lies in our sincere engagement with the art itself. Hell, I spend most of my waking life trying to figure out what my own standards are and how they might change from day to day.

Is this or that musician/album/whatever authentic? Or even any good? Everybody gets to be the judge, and no one person has any better insight than anyone else. And with that, I may have written my way out of a job.

Go. Listen.