

Spring 5-2017

Popular Music in the Films of Joel and Ethan Coen

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POPULAR MUSIC IN THE
FILMS OF JOEL AND ETHAN COEN

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2017

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This dissertation examines the use of popular music in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen, more popularly known as the “Coen brothers.” To date, the films of the Coens have been analyzed from a wide variety of scholarly approaches, including postmodernism, independent film, genre theory, and cultural studies. However, an extended, in-depth study of popular music in Coen films—a standout yet consistently overlooked feature of their auterism—has yet to be conducted, an important gap addressed by this dissertation. I argue that the use of popular music deserves to be, along with other aspects like dynamic camerawork, ornate dialogue, and genre play, considered a definitive feature of Coen brothers films. The particular way in which the Coens handle the music of their films goes well beyond the Hollywood norm, becoming something of a “bespoke” or “curatorial” kind of approach to film music. The depth and breadth of this approach situates the Coens as “auteur melomanes,” Claudia Gorbman’s term for music-loving American film directors that include Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, Woody Allen, and Spike Lee.

The brothers’ cinematic oeuvre showcases an astonishing array of musical genres that tracks through nearly every arena of American popular music, including country, rock, bluegrass, R&B, blues, gospel, hip-hop, modern and traditional folk, and jazz, among others. Rather than relegating music to a background, secondary role in their films, Coen films show how songs can be woven into the very fabric of the story, situating it as a powerful creative strategy for narrative feature-filmmaking. While it is often argued by critics that the Coens have nothing serious to say, that their films rarely rise above a kind of playful, self-indulgent

formalism, I argue in this dissertation that a close, systematic examination of the popular music of Coen films reveals a high degree of density and complexity of textual function and meaning. The music serves basic narrative purposes like character and setting, but also operates on more sophisticated levels by developing a tonal complexity that blurs the line between ironic and sincere forms of cinematic address.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who have contributed to this dissertation, and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to thank them here in writing.

To my wife, Felicity: you've been with me through everything. The logistical and emotional context you worked tirelessly to create made this dissertation. It has been a long, windy, rocky road, and I'm thankful we were able to walk it, as always, together. With love, this dissertation is dedicated to you.

To my daughter, Dakota Lilly: thank you for your sense of humor, loving nature, and boisterousness, all of which carried me through many long, tough periods of writing and research. I'm very proud to be your Dad.

To my daughter, Adley June: hopefully, this dissertation will be finished by the time you are born, but know that you were constantly in my thoughts as I wrote the final chapters. I wanted to finish before you arrived so we could spend time together, dissertation free. Thank you for pushing me to the finish line.

To my parents, Ann Gerlach and Jim Ulmer: thank you for fighting for me throughout my education. I owe you an immense debt of gratitude. Without your advocacy, optimism, and love, I wouldn't have made it this far. I hope this dissertation offers some vindication; you can now say, undoubtedly, and with hard evidence in hand, that you were right and they, most certainly, were wrong.

To my brother, Matt, and his family: thanks for always asking, "how's the work going?" and for always being positive and upbeat. I'm very proud of our entire family, and that pride can be a great driver, so thank you for being good examples.

To my mother and father in-law, Tony and Susan: your daughter and I have had many crazy ideas over the years, and I always marvel at how steadfast, selfless, supportive and

caring you have been through all of them, including this one. Thank you, warmly, for always being there when we needed you, and, of course, for the many memorable bottles of French red—past, present, and future.

To Dr. Slater: thank you for your guidance, support, and encouragement at every stage of this process. I've heard many horror stories from graduate students about their dissertation advisors. I'm proud and thankful to say you were nothing but helpful, professional, and humane.

To my dissertation committee members, Dr. Williamson and Dr. Dube: I always left our meetings with a renewed sense of purpose and enthusiasm for my work. Thank you for your thoughtful comments and challenging questions.

To Joel and Ethan Coen: I can't imagine you'll ever read this dissertation, but if you do, thank you for making films that are as pleasurable and interesting to listen to as they are to watch. I will always look forward to the next Coen brothers movie. I'm very proud you're from Minnesota, proving once again that great art can come from anywhere.

And finally, to Mr. Blazing, my sixth grade teacher: my love of books started in your class. You did something very simple yet very powerful—you gave me plenty of time and encouragement to read. That experience created an inner resource that I continually drew upon in the course of writing this dissertation. I hope this document is undeniable proof that you never know what kind of long-term impact you will have on students. So, thank you, Mr. Blazing, for simply letting me read.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“If the Coens are tightlipped and ironic with interviewers, perhaps it’s because they themselves can’t account for the warmth and integrity of their movie. ‘That’s your job,’ suggests Ethan, helpfully.” –David Edlestein

This dissertation examines the use of popular music in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen, who more popularly known as the “Coen brothers.” While many aspects of the Coens’ style have been subject to in-depth critical analysis, an extended study on the role of popular music in their films has yet to be conducted. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to fill a crucial gap in Coen scholarship. The brothers’ cinematic oeuvre showcases an astonishing array of musical genres that track through nearly every arena of American popular music, including, among others, country, rock, bluegrass, R&B, blues, gospel, hip-hop, modern and traditional folk, and jazz. Rather than relegating music to a background, secondary role, Coen films show how popular songs can be woven into the very fabric of the story, foregrounding popular music as a powerful creative strategy for narrative feature-filmmaking. My main argument is that the use of popular music deserves to be, along with other aspects like dynamic camerawork, ornate dialogue, and genre play, considered a definitive, signature feature of Coen brothers films.

My study draws upon at least three established fields of film research: Coen scholarship, auteurism, and film music. To date, the issue of postmodernism has dominated the scholarly and critical conversation surrounding the Coens, and within this discourse, the issue of pastiche has been the most frequently discussed topic. While clearly relevant, an unfortunate bi-product of this approach is that it has tended to sideline some of the more innovative, pioneering contours of the Coens’ distinctive style—the use of popular music. What I propose to demonstrate is that a close, extended examination of popular songs can

help illuminate what makes Coen films inventive and original, can help show how their films are more than just elaborate pastiches of film genres past. Moreover, considering the Coens' relationship to the music of their films also raises important questions about cinematic authorship—are they the “authors” of the film music design? My study attempts to map how music in Coen films is significantly shaped by their collaborations with T-Bone Burnett. In the context of film music, I will endeavor to suggest, by focusing on production background, ways in which the Coens and Burnett handle music in film goes well beyond the industry norm in Hollywood, showing a careful, thoughtful, and above all “curatorial” approach to film music.

Chapter one articulates my thesis, purpose, and critical frameworks, furnishes a brief bio of the Coens, and briefly analyzes the music of *Blood Simple* (1984). Chapter two considers the first Coen-Burnett collaboration, *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a film that also denotes the first Coen soundtrack to rely almost entirely on popular, pre-existing songs. In chapter three, I focus on *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), which represents the most successful soundtrack of any Coen film to date and suggests a blueprint for the use and production of popular music that is further developed in subsequent Coen films. Chapter four explores *The Ladykillers* (2004), which relies heavily on southern gospel and blues. While the film is routinely considered to mark a creative dip in the Coens' career, I argue that a close analysis of the music of the film—how it was produced, how it is used in the narrative—offers a critical reappraisal. Chapter five addresses *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), a film that represents for the Coens and Burnett one of the most significant engagements with popular American music to date. Set in the Greenwich Village folk scene of the early 1960's, the story centers on a struggling folk musician. The film features a number of musical performances that were recorded live on-set, a risky, innovative approach intended to create a potent sense of authenticity. Moreover, music is also used to maintain a healthy balance

between ironic and sincere representations of the eponymous protagonist, whose songs and performances provide humanity, warmth, and sympathy to an otherwise unsympathetic character. Chapter six, the conclusion of my dissertation, considers the significance of what the Coens have achieved in their engagement with American popular music by discussing the “afterlife” of their films’ soundtracks in the context of the music of the 2014 TV series *Fargo*, which is based on the Coens’ 1996 film and musically references a number of songs from a variety of Coen films. These musical references provide a compelling testament to what the Coens have managed to achieve with their use of popular music and cements the idea that a creative use of popular song is a signature aspect of Coen brothers films.

The Coen brothers were born in the mid to late 1950’s in St. Louis Park, Minnesota. Joel arrived on November 29, 1954, and Ethan was born three years later on September 21, 1957. Social commentator Jonathon Pontell has recently labeled the group of Americans born from 1954 to 1965 as “Generation Jones.” Not quite baby boomer, not quite Gen X, Generation Jones supposedly combines the sunny idealism of the former with the skeptical disillusionment of the latter (Williams). While broad generalizations of this type are always suspect, it nevertheless aptly characterizes the unruly, contradictory perspective of many Coen films. Their parents were both academics, which is ironic given the satiric skewering of intellectual characters in films like *Barton Fink* (1991) and *A Serious Man* (2009) Although born in the United States, their father, Edward “Ed” Coen, was raised in England. He graduated from the prestigious London School of Economics before assuming the position of Professor of Economics at the University of Minnesota, the state’s flagship university. The Coens’ mother, Rena, served as a Professor of Art History at St. Cloud State University, which is located approximately 70 miles northwest of Minneapolis. Though both parents were middle-class Jewish intellectuals, according to Joel and Ethan, they did not hold orthodox religious views, nor did they impose them upon their two children. According to

Joel, Rena carefully “toed the line in terms of ‘party’ dogma,” while his father, Ed, “just went along for the ride” (King 41).

St. Louis Park, a suburb of Minneapolis, is distinguished by a heavy concentration of Jews. Dubbed “St. Jewish Park” by locals, the city has five synagogues in a population of only 45,000. This is an unusual demographic in that Jewish communities are stereotypically imagined to exist mostly on the East or West coasts, not the northern Midwest. In some ways, one could not imagine a more unusual cultural juxtaposition: synagogues and yarmulkes and Hebrew script exist alongside deer hunting, ice fishing, and Vikings football. This situational irony is comically exploited in the Coens’ *A Serious Man*, which is set in a small Jewish enclave in the Midwest and follows the Job-like travails of Physics Professor Larry Gopnick (Michael Stuhlbarg). Interestingly, the Coen brothers are not the only people of note to emerge from this small Jewish community. *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author Thomas Friedman, as well as former *Saturday Night Live* comedian turned U.S. Senator Al Franken, also grew up in St. Louis Park.

The Coens have described their childhood as boring and uneventful, the stultifying ennui of a suburban, middle-class life exacerbated by Minnesota’s infamously long, dark, and cold winters. “Our lives were incredibly mundane,” Joel recalls. “We grew up in a typical middle-class family in the United States’ equivalent of Siberia. . . . I kid with my father that he’s living in the closed city of Gorky’s. Bob Dylan got out of there at an early age and you can see why” (Mottram 14). There was, as it turns out, a big upside to living in such a cold climate. As Ethan puts it, “[A]ll that cold weather drives you inside to watch movies” (14). The eclectic cultural consumption of the Coens’ early years reflects the postmodern collapse of high and low culture that typifies their style. An important early source of this cultural eclecticism was a local TV show called Mel Jass’ *Matinee Movie*, which ran from 1958 to 1979. Jass presented an incongruous assortment of films, interviewed guests, recounted

anecdotes from a brief stint in Hollywood, and did commercials (“Mel Jass”). Joel described Jass as a “a very eclectic programmer. . . . One day he’d show, like, 8 ½, and the next day he’d show *Son of Hercules*.” In the middle of a film, Jass would occasionally break the fourth wall and address the audience directly. “He’d just kind of interrupt the middle of 8 ½ and go, ‘Wow! This movie is really wild, isn’t it?’” recalls Ethan (Simon). One cannot help but make a connection between Jass and Coen films—an unruly grab-bag of high and low sources presented in highly self-conscious ways.

As a way to relieve what close Coen friend William Preston Robertson described as “the chest-squeezing tedium of their meaningless teenage lives,” the Coens, along with a neighborhood friend, Ron Neter, bought a camera to make a few amateur movies (23). Joel mowed neighborhood lawns to earn the requisite funds, and many lawns later, like so many contemporary auteurs (Spielberg, Lucas, Abrams, Fincher, Nolan, Burton, Raimi, Jackson), they bought a Vivitar Super 8. They set up the camera in front of the TV screen, browsed a copy of *TV Guide*, and filmed one long steady shot of *Tarzan and the She-Devil* (Kurt Neumann 1953). The film featured Tarzan (Lex Barker) fighting a group of avaricious, slave-driving, white ivory poachers led by Lyra, the She-Devil (Monique Van Vooren). The first Coen brothers film was, literally, a film of a film. Eventually, they moved outdoors and shot simple things like “their sneakered feet down the length of their own legs as they descended a slide;” or laying on their backs and filming neighborhood kids jumping from trees and landing around them (Robertson 24). At some point, they decided to do re-makes. “We’d see something on TV,” recalled Joel, “and round up our friends the next day to film it” (Levine ch. 1).

This string of re-makes included Otto Preminger’s *Advise and Consent* (1962) and Cornell Wilde’s *The Naked Prey* (1965) which, like *Tarzan and the She-Devil*, involved a group of white Western males having a bad time of it in Africa. Re-named *Zeimers in*

Zambia, the film's title was inspired by the nickname of a neighborhood friend, Mark Zimmering, the star of the film. According to Coen biographer Ronald Bergan, the film features "Zeimers, fully clothed and wearing a fuzzy winter cap with earflaps . . . pursued by Ethan, in Buddy Holly glasses, and reddish mop of hair, as a savage native waving a spear" (57). They also made the oddly titled *The Banana Film*, which was intended to be viewed while listening to Frank Zappa's 1969 *Hot Rats* album. While one should not take this too seriously, this example nevertheless suggests that the brothers have been considering the relationship between film and popular music for a long time. When asked about the role or presence of music in their lives while growing up, Ethan remarked that "Our parents had two records. One was *The Mikado* and the other was the soundtrack of *Fiddler on the Roof*." Joel noted that the Coens' parents "listened to so little music that when I went to college I took the entire stereo system and they didn't notice" (Hammond). Of these early, tyro efforts, Levine observes that they "are probably more important than they might first seem, [and that] while the equipment was simple and the stories adolescent, the process was not really so very different from professional filmmaking if one considers that all artistic creation is a kind of play" (ch. 1). Indeed, all of these details would be merely cute and trivial if they did not also point to the bizarre incongruities and random antics that so often define Coen cinema.

Along with much of the young local Jewish population, the Coens attended St. Louis Park High School. Joel and Ethan were "bored," generally describing them as "bright but unexceptional" students (Bergan 40). Ethan, however, began developing his literary talents in elementary school by writing an Arthurian play marked by a rather Coenesque moment, where a nurse reminds the King to put on a sweater before leaving the castle (Levine ch. 1). Together, Joel and Ethan published two issues of a two-cent newspaper, the *Flag Street Sentinel*. Probably due to a lackluster high school experience as well as a desire to flee what would have been, at least in the 1970's, a rather insular and homogeneous cultural

environment, Joel announced he wanted to change schools: “I wanted to get as far away as possible as fast as possible” (Mottram 14). He was enrolled in Bard College at Simon’s Rock, a small private liberal arts college in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, which was established to provide a college-level education to high school students in the final one to two years of their primary education. Joel enrolled in 1971 and spent two years there while Ethan arrived three years later in 1974 and attended for only one year.

At Simon’s Rock the Coens were first exposed to art cinema, attending showings of films like Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959), which were exhibited by a faculty-led cinema club. After graduating in 1974, Joel enrolled in NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts to pursue a B.F.A. in filmmaking. His decision was motivated less by the school’s prestigious reputation than his own youthful penchant for procrastination. “[I]t had a late application deadline,” recalls Joel. “I missed all the others” (Bergan 60). Joel Coen’s tenure at NYU was decidedly unremarkable: “I was a cipher there. I sat at the back of the room with an insane grin on my face” (60). The short film he produced for a senior thesis has all the trappings of the Coens’ absurdist black comedy. Titled *Soundings*, the 30-minute film features a woman who, while having sex with her deaf boyfriend, verbally fantasizes about wanting to have sex with his best friend, who happens to be listening in the next room. As with the earlier example of *The Banana Film* and Frank Zappa, *Soundings* hints that the Coens have long been interested in the relationship between sound and film, how what we see as well as what we hear can be used to create offbeat narrative film. After NYU, Joel pursued an M.F.A. in filmmaking at the University of Texas at Austin but quit after one semester. Most biographical sources suggest that the move to Texas was driven by romantic rather than professional reasons. Regardless, after dropping the program, Joel returned to New York.

After graduating from Simon’s Rock in 1975, Ethan enrolled in Princeton and entered the philosophy program. While this sounds rather serious and sober compared to Joel’s

wacky experience at NYU, Ethan had his fair share of perverse fun. At one point, he decided to take a semester off but failed to inform the registrar that he intended to return. After discovering his mistake, Ethan reported to the administration that his arm had been accidentally shot off in his brother-in-law's living room during deer hunting season. He presented a fake doctor's note issued from "Our Lady of the Eye, Ear, Nose, and Throat" (King 43). Though they allowed him to return, university officials recommended psychiatric care (Levine ch. 1). Ethan wrote a senior thesis titled "Two Views of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." To many, this kind of high minded work would seem to indicate a desire to pursue an academic career like his parents, but Ethan claims that he "didn't study philosophy with the idea of making a career out of it. It's just an indication that I had no idea what career I wanted to pursue" (Bergan 61). His supervisor, Dr. Raymond Guess, a scholar of modern continental European philosophy and currently Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, remembered Ethan as "a slightly built undergraduate who was very quiet, seemed self-possessed, and smoked a lot. . . . I can't honestly say that Coen made any strong or distinct impression on me" (61). Ethan's philosophical education helps to explain why many Coen films are studded with references to modern European philosophy, especially of the existential and absurdist kind. After graduating from Princeton in 1979, Ethan moved to New York and reunited with Joel.

By the time Ethan arrived in New York, Joel had already begun working in the film industry as a Production Assistant (PA) on sponsored/industrial films like *How to Buy a Used Car* as well as, significantly, music videos (Levine ch. 1). At the time, Barry Sonnenfeld, one of Joel's peers at NYU, was also making inroads into the film industry through corporate projects and hired Joel to assist him. "He was the world's worst PA," recalled Sonnenfeld. "He got three parking tickets, came late, set fire to the smoking machine. He was better in the cutting room" (Bergan 68). In the spring of 1980, Joel was hired as an assistant editor the

B horror film *The Evil Dead* (1981), directed by a young and unknown kid from Detroit named Sam Raimi. The meeting between the Coens and Raimi would prove to be one of the most important professional collaborations of their early careers. “When I pulled up to the building where the cutting room was,” remembers Raimi, “this guy came up to my car with long scraggly hair down to his chest, looking undernourished. I thought he was trying to rip us off. That was my first meeting with Joel” (Bergan 65). After *The Evil Dead*, Joel worked on a number of other low-budget horror projects including Frank Laloggia’s *Fear No Evil* (1981), where he served as an assistant editor under Edna Ruth Paul, and *Nightmare* (1981). Apparently, Joel was fired from *Nightmare* for “declaring that the footage was too incoherent to be edited into a film” (Levine ch. 1).

In New York, Ethan worked a number of temp jobs, including a stint as a statistical typist at Macy’s, a skill that would serve him well when the brothers began co-writing scripts. Along with rigorous storyboarding, composing well-wrought scripts has been a mainstay of the Coens’ heavily front-loaded, pre-production filmmaking process. After completing a number of scripts that failed to gain any real traction, by 1981 the brothers had managed to produce one that they felt was worthy of a feature-film. Since they had no established reputation that would attract the financial support of producers, they were forced to raise the funds themselves. This unenviable position made a remarkably positive impact on their career in the long run, for it forced them to practice a high degree of pre-production discipline and revealed understanding the value of creative freedom. The story of the making and financing of the Coens’ first film has since become the stuff of legend in the annals of American independent filmmaking.

After completing the film and securing distribution, *Blood Simple* debuted in France at the Deauville Film Festival before joining the North American circuit with showings at major festivals like Toronto, New York, and Sundance, where it won Best Dramatic Feature.

Financially, the film was a success, generating a 150 percent return on its first run (King 20). While many critics praised the film as a promising, well-executed debut, many also felt that the Coens sacrificed compelling storytelling for dazzling visuals and formal play, a criticism of their films that persists to this day. Nevertheless, as time has passed, many critics have come to praise the film. A recent re-screening of the film at the 2013 Atlanta Film Festival prompted Christopher Sailor to remark that *Blood Simple* represents “nothing less than one of the most remarkable debut films of all time” (20). *Blood Simple* launched the Coens’ career and ultimately resulted in a steady production of critically award-winning films that show no signs of slowing down.

Coen films merit academic study by reason of both visibility and salience. Since their debut at the New York Film Festival with the neo-noir thriller *Blood Simple*, the Coen brothers have become two of the most highly regarded American filmmakers of the post-1980 period. While industry film awards are no guarantee of critical regard or scholarly relevance, nevertheless the Coens have amassed a long list of sterling domestic and international awards that register a marked presence in both Hollywood and independent expressions of American cinema. Individually, they have each received four Academy Awards, and in total their films have earned over thirty nominations. They have also won a number of Independent Spirit Awards including Best Feature (*Inside Llewyn Davis*), Best Director (*A Serious Man*), and Best Screenplay (*Fargo*). Abroad, their films have garnered a number of BAFTA awards and nominations, and in 1991, *Barton Fink* won all three major awards at the Cannes Film Festival: the Palme d’Or, Best Director (Joel Coen), and Best Actor (John Turturro). This event prompted the organizing committee to rule that no one film could ever win more than two awards. This extensive record suggests the Coens occupy a highly visible position in the landscape of contemporary American filmmaking, one that invites critical and scholarly mapping, a call undertaken by this dissertation.

As auteurs, the Coens practice a distinct cinematic style. Unusual camera work, vivid cinematography, precision editing, ornate dialogue, elaborate mise-en-scene, genre play, exaggerated characters, graphic violence, black comedy—these features constitute the basic DNA of the Coens’ authorial signature. The purpose of this dissertation is to argue that the use of popular music should be added to this list of stylistic features. There are numerous ways to graph the presence of music in Coen films.

One is to observe the range of genres found either within or across films. *Blood Simple*, their first film, includes Motown, country, reggae, and opera. *Raising Arizona* (1987) features the choral section of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony hummed to a quick-tempoed banjo medley overlaid with yodeling and whistling. *The Big Lebowski* uses Creedence Clearwater Revival, Kenny Rogers, and German techno-pop. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* revives numerous forms of American roots music—blues, country, gospel, bluegrass, and traditional folk—while *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001) relies largely on classical music, particularly the piano sonatas of Beethoven. *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003) opens with Simon and Garfunkel and Elvis Presley, and *The Ladykillers* features not only Southern gospel but also contemporary hip-hop and Renaissance baroque. *True Grit* (2010) relies on a number of late nineteenth-century Protestant hymns, and *Inside Llewyn Davis* incorporates the music associated with the 1960’s Greenwich Village folk scene. The variety of musical genres in many ways supports the Coens’ generally eclectic cultural tastes, which include hardboiled detective fiction, film noir, westerns, screwball comedy, Road Runner cartoons, and, aptly, musicals, especially the work of Busby Berkeley.

Another way to mark the presence of music in the films of the Coens is to observe that music and musical performances are frequently positioned as a central textual feature. Two relevant examples are *O Brother* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, both of which enlist actors in the film to deliver musical performances. In *O Brother*, Tim Blake Nelson, who plays Delmar

O'Donnel, sings "In the Jailhouse Now." Chris Thomas King, who plays Tommy Johnson, is the voice of "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues." The Fairfield Four, who play gravediggers, sing "The Lonesome Valley." The same strategy applies to *Inside Llewyn Davis*, which showcases the musical talents of Oscar Isaac, who plays Llewyn Davis, as well as Justin Timberlake, who plays Jim Berkey. Moreover, music defines both films in terms of setting, plot, character, theme, irony, humor, and mood.

Music is deployed to aurally pattern many of the Coens' visual montages. Notable examples include the banjo medley that plays over the opening sequence of *Raising Arizona*, the rhythm and pace of which supports the editing, characterizes H. I., and establishes the setting and general cultural milieu of the American southwest. In *Miller's Crossing* (1990), the traditional Irish folk ballad "Danny Boy" choreographs the unfolding violence of the assassination attempt of Leo as well as pointing up the ethnic-historical context of the Irish mob. *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) features a montage of the conception, production, and popularization of the hula-hoop, which is ironically dramatized by music from the ballet *Sparticus* by Khachaturian. *A Serious Man* uses the percussive rhythms of Jimi Hendrix's "Machine Gun" to aurally structure the shaggy-dog story of the goy's teeth, and ironically underline the cultural liberalization of the period played against the conservative setting. One of the strongest examples of musical montage is furnished by *The Ladykillers* in the sequence where the action crosscuts between the casino, church, tunnel, and back again while the music simultaneously shifts from rap to gospel to baroque.

My interest in the Coens' use of popular music was initiated by *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* The first thing to intrigue me about *O Brother* was that, at the very outset of the film, the sound and music precede the visual narrative. The viewer hears the chain-gang talking, breaking rocks, and singing before seeing them. Denying the visual semiotics of the narrative and only supplying aural signs triggers orientation questions: What is happening? Where are

we? What am I hearing? The opening sequence depicts an African-American chain-gang breaking rocks while singing a traditional folk song called “Po’ Lazarus,” which is an original live field recording of James Carter and the Prisoners that was collected in 1959 by the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax. After presenting Homer’s invocation to the muse in *The Odyssey*, the visual narrative is set in motion by a wide shot of a sprawling field presented through a washed-out cinematography that is void of color. As the camera pans left and up, the color palette shifts into a sepia-stained veneer, a strategy that recalls Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), signaling an ontological shift from reality to fantasy. The aural and visual codes both function on the level of allusion, creating a multi-valent, multi-sensory, intertextual engagement. Understanding how this complex musical-visual cinematic-textual strategy tends to work in Coen films, what it means and why it is significant, are some of the fundamental research questions motivating this project.

This dissertation marks the first book-length study specifically devoted to analyzing the popular music of Coen films. The reason for this lacuna is likely due to the fact that the study of film music is a relatively new area of research in cinema studies as a whole. While this is generally true, there nevertheless exists a reasonable amount of commentary on the matter scattered in various places throughout Coen criticism, which includes popular and scholarly sources. The following review is not intended to be comprehensive; rather, it is guided by my thesis and focuses mostly on book-length studies given that my analysis of individual films in the chapters to follow will feature in-depth summaries of critical reviews and scholarly articles. Despite its limitations, a survey of this literature reveals two patterns: the music of Coen films is often commented upon but rarely situated as a main focus, and when the topic is addressed, it is suggested that one of its primary functions is to express ironic and/or sincere attitudes, which constitutes a key line of inquiry in my project.

There are a number of mass-market, biographical/critical books available on the Coens, which include, among others, Ronald Bergan's *The Coen Brothers*, Josh Levine's *The Coen Brothers: The Story of Two American Filmmakers*, James Mottram's *The Coen Brothers: The Life of the Mind*, Carolyn R. Russell's *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, and Eddie Robson's *Coen Brothers*. Overall, the discussion of music in these books denotes a minor topic and is only included as part of a more general, survey-style account. Despite being cursory, many of these comments suggest a few worthwhile points in the context of my argument.

Levine considers the function of music in Coen films to serve basic narrative roles like setting, character, theme, and so forth. Levine describes the music of *Raising Arizona* as “a comic soundtrack of banjos and yodeling that underscored the unsophisticated nature of the characters and the folkloric, backwoods quality of the story” (ch. 4). Using the music to comically and ironically undercut characters is a common musical trope in Coen films; however, it can also suggest more sincere, sympathetic portrayals, as in the case of *Miller's Crossing*, where Levine argues that the music “heightened the emotional, human story and the period feel rather than playing to the film's ironic side” (ch. 5). Levine hints at how music helps Coen films manage a careful tonal balance between distanced, comic irony and sympathetic, teasing sincerity. Interestingly, in a parenthetical aside planted amidst his discussion of *The Big Lebowski*, Levine remarks, “Music—not just the original score but the use of popular songs from the sixties on—is perhaps more important and integral to the Coens' conception of scenes than I have so far explored. No doubt at this very moment someone is writing a PhD thesis on *Pop Music as Ironic Counterpoint to the Themes of the Coen Brothers*” (ch. 9). While more than a decade has passed, with this dissertation, the topic is finally being formally developed. In any case, Mottram also echoes and develops many of the points offered by Levine. The music of *Miller's Crossing* is seen to “destabilize

generic parameters,” thereby distancing Coen films from prior genres, as well as correlating the music with the image “in a deliberately inappropriate manner” (Mottram 58). Attention to music in Coen films becomes more visible in Robson, which features a brief section on the music of every Coen film from *Blood Simple* to *Intolerable Cruelty*. Robson repeatedly emphasizes how the music of Coen films is impacted by industrial and economic factors. Another recurring point is how deeply engaged the Coens are in the musical design of their films, especially *O Brother*. In contrast to Levine, Mottram, and Robson, Bergan and Russell are significant for their noticeable lack of attention to music, an absence indicating that this topic has often been overlooked in the past.

The more academically-oriented books that address music in Coen films follow a trajectory similar to that of the mass-market books—they start slow but gain momentum in concert with the expansion of the study of popular music in film. Works in this vein include R. Barton Palmer’s *Joel and Ethan Coen*, Erica Rowell’s *The Brothers Grim: The Films of Ethan and Joel Coen*, Allen Redmon’s *Constructing the Coens: From Blood Simple to Llewyn Davis*, and Jeffery Adams’s *The Cinema of the Coen Brothers*.

A landmark academic study on the Coens in many ways, Palmer offers relatively little music analysis. In discussing *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, Palmer sees the music as a generic distancing device: “the simplicity of the Beethoven piano sonatas and American hymns that dominate its soundtrack . . . offers a pointed contrast to the *weltschmerz* symphonic scores of the European émigré composers like Max Steiner and Dimitri Tiomkin whose work suffuses classical film noir with a desperate sense of romanticism” (65-66). Rowell offers more commentary on music in Coen films than Palmer, especially on the level of theme. Of *The Ladykillers*, Rowell remarks that the two main music genres of the film posits a binary opposition between “Hip-hop, which is used to spotlight material excesses, and gospel, whose focus is on less worldly pleasures” (337). Redmon conceives of music in Coen films

as part and parcel of their constructivist use of genre, with special attention paid to the musical, which offers itself as one among many different generic strands threaded through the text that await activation by viewers. For Adams, like Palmer and Redmon, music does not constitute a primary or even secondary focus; however, Adams suggests that music represents “one of the few things the Coens do not subvert or trivialize in their films” (Intro). Adams’s remark reinforces the idea that music in Coen films offers an antidote to their potent mixture of dark comedy and bleak existentialism.

While there are no book-length studies of the Coens that focus exclusively on music, there is an extensive body of scholarly articles available, which I will review in the chapters dedicated to individual films. Broadly, though, most of the attention has been devoted to *O Brother* and, to a lesser degree, *The Big Lebowski*. The most relevant preexisting scholarly text on the use of popular music in Coen films is an essay by Jeff Smith titled, “O Brother, Where Chart Thou?: Pop Music and the Coen Brothers.” Smith challenges the “notion of postmodern cynicism expressed by many critics of the Coens through their use of popular music, which both supports and problematizes the broader characterization of them as cinematic postmodernists” (130). Rather than viewing musical allusions as part and parcel of a depthless and textually fragmented postmodern pastiche, Smith contends, “these allusions enhance, rather than negate, the music’s more traditional narrative and narrated functions” (131). After considering the role of popular music in *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *The Big Lebowski*, and *Miller’s Crossing*, Smith concludes that music signifies the Coens’ “deep investment in notions of musical expressiveness and cultural authenticity” (154). My dissertation owes a significant debt to the work of Smith. A key idea that he repeatedly suggests but does not develop fully in the limited space of his essay, however, is the way popular music contributes to the tonal oscillation of ironic

distance and sincere modes of cinematic address in Coen films, which is a key aspect of my analysis.

My analysis is situated within the historical context of the popular music of the compilation soundtrack. A brief survey of this area offers a broad explanation for how and why the Coens came to use so much popular music in their films.

Traditionally, film music history has focused on studying original orchestral scores. Notable works in this vein include Roy Pendergast's 1977 *Film Music: A Neglected Art*, Christopher Palmer's 1990 *The Composer in Hollywood* or more recently, Larry Timm's 2003 *The Soul of Cinema: An Appreciation of Film Music* and Roger Hickman's 2006 *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music*. These film music histories examine the work of composers like Bernard Herrmann, Max Steiner, and John Williams, whose scores exemplify the classical Hollywood tradition. While this area is undoubtedly significant and should not be ignored or marginalized, there is another type of film scoring practice that is equally salient to the history of cinema, the use of preexisting popular music.

While the use of pop music in film is commonly seen as a post-1950's phenomenon, coeval with the rise of rock and roll and other vernacular styles, recent scholarship suggests that popular song in film has a much deeper history, one that reaches all the way back to the "silent" era. In "Cinema and Popular Song: the Lost Tradition," Rick Altman shows that early nickelodeons regularly featured illustrated song slides as part of their programs, "a live entertainment featuring a popular song illustrated by colorful lantern slides" (19). Typically, a singer with a piano accompaniment would sing two verses and two choruses before inviting the audience to sing along with lyrics projected on a slide. Initially arising in the 1890's, illustrated song slides fell out of use around 1913, when the addition of a second projector in the booth enabled a more uninterrupted flow of film (20). More broadly, early films often featured musical accompaniment supplied by pianolas and phonographs, or through live

performances that utilized pianos, orchestras, or organs. One of the most notable early compilation scores was for D. W. Griffith's prestige feature film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which was intended to be viewed to the sound of familiar folk tunes like "Dixie" and "Home Sweet Home"—songs that strongly suggested a political subtext—as well as well-known classical compositions like Wagner's "The Ride of the Valkyries" (Wojcik and Knight 3). As this evidence suggests, the compilation scoring practices of the Coens are part of a rich and deep historical tradition.

The use of popular songs as non-diegetic music in film declined significantly with the advent of sound in the 1920s. With the ability to record sound on the filmstrip, music became more central to the filmmaking process. Filmmakers began seeking original compositions to make their films more unique. As Julia Hubbert observes in "The Compilation Soundtrack from the 1960s to the Present," these economic and aesthetic conditions introduced the figure of the film music composer, who was enlisted as a means to realize the desire to elevate film as a serious art form by associating it with classical music (291-92). While this general situation characterizes prestige films, the use of popular songs on a diegetic level maintained a strong presence in genre filmmaking. The classical period witnessed the rise of the musical, for instance, which incorporated the song and dance of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley. Screwball comedies and film noirs also featured many memorable, on-screen performances of popular song. As Wojcik and Knight remark in the introduction to *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*, "imagine *Casablanca* (1942) without Dooley Wilson's repeated performances of 'As Time Goes By.' Or consider what a Marlene Dietrich or Mae West film would be if they didn't include song. . . . Recall Jimmy Stewart's drunken crooning in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) or Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant singing "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" to a leopard in *Bringing up Baby* (1938)" (3). Westerns also frequently featured popular songs, a prominent

example of which is John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), which borrows its title from the familiar folk song that plays over the opening and ending credits. The film features a square dancing sequence set to folk music, which serves to unify the community as well as underline the interconnected ideas of ritual and courtship. While the compilation soundtrack might have fallen out of common use in the studio era, popular songs were still employed for a variety of narrative purposes.

The popular music of the compilation soundtrack experienced a full revival in the post-classical era. For most scholars, the 1960s initiate the most visible turn away from the original orchestral compositions of the studio era and towards the repurposing of commercial popular music. There are several factors that account for this development. The broadest is the steep economic decline that the film industry experienced in this period, an outcome of the long-term effects of the Paramount Decree, which disrupted the monopoly of Hollywood studios by divesting them of their exhibition holdings, and the rise of television, among other developments. This recession prompted film industry leaders to seek out new ways to boost ticket sales and generally increase revenues, which many felt could be achieved by exploiting the burgeoning youth market. Rock and roll and other popular musical styles in this period offered an attractive way to ameliorate the overall decline in attendance and profits. Film executives began hiring younger directors, many of whom were just beginning to emerge from the recently established university film schools. These so-called "movie brats" were granted, relative to studio-era filmmaking, generous amounts of creative freedom, an artistic latitude that enabled an "auteur" style of filmmaking. These "New Hollywood" directors influenced nearly every aspect of the filmmaking process, including the music (Hubbert 295-96).

As a result, the use of popular music in film bloomed in the late 1960s. *The Graduate* (1967) is often viewed as a landmark film in this regard, a key moment in the shift from

classical to post-classical scoring practices. Director Mike Nichols musically textualized his film with several songs from Simon and Garfunkel's 1966 album, *Sounds of Silence*, which play over the opening credits and a number of montage sequences. As Peter Larsen in *Film Music* explains, while Nichols had originally contacted Simon to compose songs specifically for the film, Simon struggled with the project, and Nichols was dissatisfied with the end result. Meanwhile, Nichols was using selections from *Sounds of Silence* as temp tracks, which are commonly used by directors to convey musical ideas to film music composers. Eventually, Nichols concluded that these temp tracks best captured the mood, characters, and themes of the film. *The Graduate* represents one of the first commercially successful films of the post-classical era to use a compilation soundtrack populated with recorded popular music (151-2).

The use of preexisting popular music in film increased as the period developed. *Easy Rider* (1969) represents a significant compilation soundtrack of the period. Built almost exclusively on preexisting popular songs, the music evokes a distinct socio-cultural milieu, drawing on Steppenwolf, The Band, Jimi Hendrix, and The Byrds, among others.

Like *Easy Rider*, George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973) is notable for relying almost exclusively on recorded commercial songs. The film's soundtrack includes a remarkable forty-one songs, mostly rock and roll oldies from the 1950s recorded by the likes of Bill Haley and The Beach Boys. The music gave the film a potent sense of nostalgia as well as serving a variety of other narrative, aesthetic, and intertextual functions (Smith 172-85).

Unlike the classical era, where the authorship of film music was located primarily in the composer, the films of Nichols, Lucas, and Hopper indicate a shift towards the director as the agent most responsible for a film's musical design (Hubbert 295). For Claudia Gorbman, this period marks the emergence of the *auteur melomane*—a director whose love of music rivals their passion for cinema. By the end of the 1970s, films like *2001: A Space Odyssey*

(1968), *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Mean Streets* (1973), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Raging Bull* (1980), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), *Shaft* (1971), and others demonstrated how preexisting music could be put to a wide variety of uses, including serving basic narrative functions like setting, mood, and characterization, as well as offering additional layers of intertextual meaning and enabling opportunities for authorial commentary.

The practice of compiling popular songs for Hollywood films changed around the mid-1980s with the rise of the Hollywood “blockbuster,” an economic strategy that displaced the youth-market strategy of the late 1960s and into the 1970s. In addition to the composer and director, the introduction in this period of the “musical supervisor” signals another shift in film music authorship. As Jeff Smith remarks in *The Sounds of Commerce*, “As the back catalogs of publishers and record companies became increasingly valuable financial resources for Hollywood studios, the problem of managing various licensing agreements created a number of new responsibilities, and thus a new position to fulfill those duties” (209). Not only did the musical supervisor manage the business side of scoring, according to Smith, they also participated in “spotting sessions, the selection of preexisting musical materials, the organization of prerecords, the screening of dailies, and the preparation of ‘temp tracks’” (209-10). The musical supervisor capitalized on the increasing synergy between the film and music industries, and thus compilation soundtracks of this period became more standardized, the oversaturation of popular music crowding out other styles and shrinking lengths to a dozen or so songs. “The vast and varied collections heard earlier in films like *American Graffiti* and *Raging Bull*,” observes film music historian Julie Hubbert, “unwieldy compilations that had been difficult to package, had been replaced by compilations that were easily transferrable to a commercial soundtrack format” (302). Moreover, a new relationship developed between music, visual style, and narrative with the rise of the music

video and the launch of MTV. Films like *Flashdance* (1983), *Footloose* (1984), *Ghostbusters* (1984), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) registered a marked increase in montage sequences, introduced a faster editing pace, and featured a “modular” approach to cinematic scenography (Hubbert 302-7). The popular music of these films exploited the ancillary profits to be gained from the cross-promotional incorporations generated through the merging of the film and music industries.

This corporate-style, profit-driven model prompted the rise of an off-Hollywood independent film sector. Although relying on lower budgets and working mostly outside of the major Hollywood studios, these “independent” films would also turn to the use of preexisting popular music for both economic and aesthetic reasons. It is at this point that the Coen brothers enter the industry with their self-financed *Blood Simple*, which featured a compilation soundtrack of popular genres such as Motown, country, and reggae, as well as original, jazz-inflected compositions by Carter Burwell. Other young, independent American filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino and Spike Lee would also make use of recorded popular songs in their films. Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* (1989) used hip-hop, jazz, and other popular styles to reinforce the socio-cultural identity of the director, the setting, and many of the main characters. Radio Raheem’s boombox both jump starts the narrative and triggers the film’s violent turning point. Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1984) draws on an eclectic, often obscure range of pop songs and styles, including Dick Dale, Kool And The Gang, Dusty Springfield, the Statler Brothers, and Urge Overkill. As Conrich and Tincknell suggest in the introduction to *Film’s Musical Moments*, the use of music in *Pulp Fiction* exemplifies John Mundy’s “music video aesthetic” in which “musical moments not only break narrative continuity, they are also frequently self-consciously non-realist in style, using montage editing and an aesthetic that defies continuity to produce textual disruption” (10). Much the same could be said of many of the musical moments of Coen films.

The MTV-inspired aesthetic of American “indie” film began changing towards the end of the 1990s as both the film and music industries entered the digital age. Stylistic and generic diversity are common characteristics of the digital age compilation soundtrack, which regularly features a blend of popular and classical styles. Furthermore, on an aesthetic-narrative level, Hubbert observes that “filmic space is not so rigidly enforced by the soundtrack. The musical selections instead often move fluidly between diegetic, non-diegetic, and extra diegetic space, generating a host of narrative effects” (308). The Coens’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), with its many on-screen performances of traditional “old-timey” American folk music performed by the original recording artists, exemplifies this trend. In addition, the films of Wes Anderson, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Sofia Coppola demonstrate how popular music can complicate narrative and cinematic conventions. The movement towards increasing degrees of musical eclecticism and intertextual self-reflexivity are shaped by the digitization of recorded music, which allows consumers to create their own personal, portable, and on-demand jukebox that supplies a constant stream of music, furnishing a soundtrack for everyday life. In the digital age, the musical design of films involves a complex collaboration among all the “authors” of prior eras, including the composer, director, and music supervisor. The music of Coen films bear the traces of the conditions, conventions, and practices of this history, not only because they are part and parcel of a tradition, but because the generic intertextuality of their films bridges the classical and post-classical eras. As a result, the history of the compilation soundtrack is useful in understanding how the use of popular music in Coen films both continues as well as departs from prior historical paradigms.

One of the main ways that my dissertation advances the conversation on popular music in Coen films is by considering how it is frequently enlisted as a means of blurring the lines between ironic and sincere modes of cinematic address. Though the discussion of irony

in art is old, a more recent discursive formation in film studies is located in a 2002 article by Jeffery Sconce. In “Irony, Nihilism and the New American ‘Smart’ Film,” Sconce suggested that filmmakers like Todd Solondz, Neil LaBute, Hal Hartley, Alexander Payne, Todd Haynes, P. T. Anderson, and Wes Anderson, shared a smart “sensibility” unified by “historical, thematic, and even stylistic cohesion” (351). Occupying a distinct niche within American cinema, smart films are “not quite ‘art’ films in the sober Bergmanesque art-house tradition, nor ‘Hollywood’ films in the sense of the 122-screen saturation bombing campaigns, nor ‘independent’ films according to the DIY outsider credo” (351). What marked these films was a “structure of feeling,” a Generation X postmodern sensibility that mixed “cynicism, irony, secular humanism and cultural relativism” (Buckland 1). The sensibility of smart films is expressed through an array of formal techniques, a “blank” style that relies on the frequent use of long shots, static compositions, and sparse editing. Rather than a form of “Brechtian distancing,” this technique maintains “a sense of clinical observation” (Sconce 360). The formal strategies of smart films are usually aimed at critiquing the cultural taste and emotional dysfunction of the white American middle class. Rather than seeing cynical detachment as nihilistic apathy or political disengagement, Sconce sees the smart film as a “semiotic intervention within politics” admirable for the way in which it rejects the bi-partisan cultural politics of the Baby Boomers (369). Since 2002, Sconce’s initial ideas have been extended and clarified, most recently by Warren Buckland, James Macdowell, and Geoff King.

Buckland traces the idea of a “new sincerity” manifesting in more contemporary strains of indie cinema. Rather than the new sincerity of Hollywood blockbusters posited by Jim Collins in films such as *Field of Dreams* (Robinson, 1989), *Dances With Wolves* (Costner, 1990), and *Back to the Future III* (Zemickis, 1990), which rejects postmodern irony and cynicism in pursuit of a lost purity, Buckland argues that the “new sincerity” of many

indie films signifies a more complex response. “The *new* of new sincerity,” writes Buckland, “signifies it as a response to postmodern irony and nihilism: not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead, in a dialectical move, new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism: it operates in conjunction with irony” (2). The result, according to Buckland, is a synthesis of ironic and sincere perspectives rather than a circumvention of postmodern irony in order to embrace some version of pre-postmodern earnestness. The synthesis of ironic and sincere outlooks described by Buckland is developed in more detail by James MacDowell in “Notes on Quirky.”

In the work of Paul Thomas Anderson, Wes Anderson, and Spike Jonze, MacDowell in “Notes on Quirky” argues that textual self-reflexivity creates a dual register that encourages an ironic *and* sincere treatment of characters and themes, as opposed to what many see as an ironic detachment suggestive of postmodern cynical nihilism. The terms irony and sincerity signify a range of emotions that invite either sympathetic or unsympathetic responses towards the narrative content. This sensibility exists on a “sliding scale of representational possibilities” determined by the strength of ironic detachment (9). Quirky films are comedies that use the distancing of deadpan and slapstick combined with moments of melodrama that “invites us to remain removed from *and* emotionally engaged with the fiction, view the fictional world as both artificial *and* believable” (9). Whether irony and sincerity are mixed misses the point; they are assumed to be, for “the existence of such a balance appears key” (9). In films like *Punch Drunk Love* (Anderson, 2002) and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004), characters are ironically mocked as well as genuinely celebrated through a subtle tone that “exists on a knife-edge of judgment and empathy, detachment and engagement, irony and sincerity” (13).

In “Striking a Balance Between Culture and Fun: ‘quality’ meets hitman genre in *In Bruges*,” Geoff King builds on the work of MacDowell and others and combines it with his

own research on “Indiewood,” a contemporary mode of film production that hybridizes the qualities of American indie films with those of the Hollywood commercial mainstream—an apt description of many Coen films. King argues that the film *In Bruges* (McDonah 2008) offers a “mixture of tonal registers within the text in which elements that generate a distinctive degree of irony and detachment are combined with more conventional/mainstream appeal to emotional engagement” (133). Set in Bruges, Belgium, the film tells the story of two Irish hit-men, Ken (Brendan Gleeson) and Ray (Colin Farrell), whose mob boss sends them to hide out in the city following the accidental killing of a young boy in the midst of a hit on a priest. While both characters are often portrayed in ways that accord with what an audience would normally expect of Dublin hit-men, including plenty of swearing and ironic distancing, certain moments in the film work to deliver more sincerely-coded messages. For example, a viewing of *The Last Judgment* prompts Ray to ask Ken whether he actually believes “in all that stuff.” “I believe in trying to lead a good life,” Ken responds. “Like, if there’s an old lady carrying her shopping home . . . Well, I don’t try and help her carry her shopping, I don’t go that far, but I’ll certainly hold the door open for her and that and let her go out before me.” Ken manages to deliver a heart-felt message wrapped in light comic irony, thus maintaining an even tonal balance that avoids the extremes of indifferent apathy or indulgent sentimentality. The stylization of *In Bruges* works as a “defensive layer” that protects a “sincerely intended core” designed as part of a “dual address” of, on one level, the “ironic, darkly comic, and somewhat detached,” and on another, a “more sincerely coded emotional engagement” (145). As a whole, I find the work of King and MacDowell to be a productive way to think about the Coens in general, but I find it to be particularly useful in considering the role of popular music, which constitutes a new line of research for both Coen scholarship and the topic of irony and sincerity in contemporary indie cinema.

My textual analysis of pop music in Coen films is informed by the “hermeneutical arch” described by Paul Ricoeur, which synthesizes “explanatory” and “interpretive” approaches into a two-stage reading process. As Ricoeur explains in “What is a Text? Explanation and Interpretation,” these modes are often regarded as opposite ways of reading a text. Explanation is often seen as a positivist form of analysis, one that relies heavily on objectivity and only seeks to explain formally how a text works by describing its structures and the relationships between them, while interpretation is widely conceived of as an attempt to understand a text in terms of what it means, *what* rather than *how* it signifies. The former is commonly regarded as objective and scientific, while the latter is often perceived as more subjective and humanistic. As Ricoeur argues, though, these polarized attitudes should more productively be seen as two stages of a holistic reading and critical thinking process. The textual operations of structuralism, often seen as the most “analytical,” is the first “stage—and a necessary one—between a naïve interpretation and a critical interpretation, between a superficial interpretation and a depth interpretation” (148). The second state, interpretation, involves understanding the text on the level of discourse, as a sender attempting to communicate with a receiver. “Reading,” says Ricoeur, “is like the performance of a musical score: it betokens the fulfillment, the actualization of the semantic virtualities of the text” (145). Both modes—explanatory and interpretive—will guide my reading of popular music in Coen films, an investigative attitude that is both science and art, objective and subjective, theoretical and pragmatic.

Coen films pose a set of complex analytical challenges aptly expressed in Coen biographer Josh Levine’s phrase, “that Coen brothers feeling,” which signifies “a messy combination of intellectual and emotional responses that don’t easily resolve themselves into a simple statement” (Intro). One of the most common ways film critics and scholars have explained “that Coen brothers feeling” is through the notion of postmodernism, especially the

politics of pastiche. The creative—or derivative, depending on your perspective—use of multiple genres within a single film and/or across different films has been a key artistic strategy for the Coens’ throughout their career.

The genres of film noir and American hardboiled detective fiction are two of the most prominent genres to influence their films (*Blood Simple*, *Miller’s Crossing*, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, and others), but the western (*No Country for Old Men* (2007), *True Grit*) as well as the screwball comedy (*O, Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *Raising Arizona*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*), are also intertextualized. If one were to unzip the meaning of genre to encompass the wide variety of ways it has been theorized (subgenres, cycles, generic elements, iconography, myth, and so forth), then one ought to at least mention the musical, the buddy film, the anti-war film, the hayseed film, the chain-gang film, the romantic comedy, the stoner film, the social problem film, the smart film, the quirky film, the black comedy, the art film, the gangster film, the baby film, the road trip film, the music biopic, the spy film, the thriller, horror, science fiction, melodrama, realism, surrealism, expressionism, farce, tragedy, the Hollywood film—just to be inclusive. A generous definition of genre leads to only a slight exaggeration in describing Coen films as genres gone wild.

But to what aesthetic and critical end are these prior genres used? What is the point of their pastiche? Are Coen films merely clever pastiches of previous genres and styles? Or are they more complex? The rub of this debate is clarified in a rigorous dialectical exchange between two prominent cultural theorists of the 1980’s: Frederic Jameson and Linda Hutcheon. Critics and scholars of the Coens tend to be split along the lines initially laid out by the arguments of these two figures.

Jameson conceived of postmodern pastiche as suffering from a kind of social and historical blindness, a “blank parody” that failed to engage in any thoughtful political critique

of history or social reality. As Jameson suggested in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, the modernist notion of parody was replaced by an a-critical postmodern pastiche: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter” (17). The random cannibalization of prior styles results in a loss of historicity, a weakening of the relationship between narrative representation and reality. Moreover, this play of past styles results in a flattening of emotional and psychological depth induced by a retreat from social and historical realism.ⁱ

On the other side of this debate sits Linda Hutcheon, who argued in *The Politics of Postmodernism* that postmodern imitation was a doubling of modernist parody rather than a regressive pastiche. “[T]hrough a double process of installing and ironizing,” Hutcheon argued, “parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (93). The problem with Jameson’s account, according to Hutcheon, is that it conflates the cultural logic of postmodernism with the economic logic of late-capitalism, an axiom of Marxist cultural theory. Rather than viewing postmodern texts as apolitical, Hutcheon sees such texts as a form of parodic dialogism that is “doubly-coded in political terms; it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (101). Postmodern parody sustains the life of that which is being imitated; yet at the same time often assumes an ironic, subversive view of that which is being parodied.

Scholars who are critical of the Coens’ style often echo the rhetoric of Jameson. In *Postmodern Hollywood: What’s New in Film and Why It Makes Us Feel So Strange*, M. Keith Booker faults *Barton Fink* (1991) for being “far more interested in the world of film than the world at large” because it avoids “criticizing the studio system,” makes “no attempt

at sympathetic presentation of the lives of the poor,” and fails to address “the McCarthyist purge of Hollywood” (143). In *The Films of Joel and Ethan Coen*, Carolyn R. Russell observes of *The Big Lebowski* that the “Coens’ mix-and-match, slice-and-dice appropriation of generic tropes . . . fails to contribute toward a whole that is greater than the sum of its diverse parts” (165). These views—that the Coens’ style is over-derivative, indifferent to socio-historical-political problems, and hopelessly fragmented—all elaborate the claims of Jameson. The result is a fairly unified line of arguments that has spawned an equally consistent line of counter-arguments.

Critics and scholars who praise the Coens often do so in ways that parallel the views of Hutcheon. In *Joel and Ethan Coen*, R. Barton Palmer argues that a “major point to be made about the films of Joel and Ethan Coen is that they are undoubtedly postmodern yet engage in a dialogue with genre and with classic studio films that does not slight the political and the cultural” (5). The Coens should be considered, according to Palmer, “among the exceptions to the general regime of pastiche in genre filmmaking” (60). Tracey Seeley argues that rather than seeing *O Brother* as a “theme park of American simulacra immediately destined to take its place beside L.A.’s City Walk or California adventure, the latest Disney horror,” the Coens’ “use of pillaged cultural materials is more substance than simulacra; what begins in apparent parody becomes a complex dialogic defense against the very commodification of art and culture that Jameson so laments” (98). The claims of both Seeley and Palmer are grounded in the arguments of Hutcheon: postmodern parody has the capacity to generate oppositional readings to dominant ideologies.

This debate has been a highly productive exchange for exploring the nuances of Coen films and establishing a robust critical framework. However, because this debate revolves so much around the issue of pastiche, the lion’s share of attention in Coen scholarship has been devoted to analyzing their use of prior film and literary genres and styles which, while

undoubtedly important, has inadvertently obscured other key aspects of their style—namely, the music. As part and parcel of the intertextuality of Coen films, popular music functions in ways that are no less important or complex than the engagement of prior genres like hardboiled detective pulp fiction, film noir, and screwball comedy. Because popular music generates dense networks of associations that preexist any Coen film, its relationship to the visual narrative begs to be analyzed. Can the use of popular music in Coen films be considered an extension of Jamesonian pastiche? Emotionally and psychologically flat? Apolitical-historical-social? Or can it work in the ways described by Hutcheon? As something that both re-activates as well as subverts that which is being parodied? Can it have depth? Can it be meaningful?

Since the explicit purpose of my dissertation is not to argue either for or against either of these critical perspectives, it will be more productive to situate these views on a spectrum, which more accurately captures how popular music works throughout the Coen oeuvre. Sometimes, popular music in Coen films is postmodern in the Jamesonian sense, that is, seemingly unconcerned with socio-historical-cultural issues, content to indulge in the associative, stylistic play of textual surfaces. At other times, however, popular songs can gesture oppositional readings to dominant ideologies in the way that Hutcheon argues. In the middle sit more complex views like that of Richard Dyer, who, in *Pastiche*, unpacks nearly every possible sense of the word—theoretical, social, historical, critical, formal—by considering multiple examples in an array of artistic mediums. A key perspective that emerges from Dyer's discussion is that pastiche engages in a complicated historical dynamic that scrutinizes both past and present, revealing continuities, gaps, and divergences, highlighting our “always already” heavily mediated experience of history. Another way to think about this issue is to consider the constructivist sensibility argued by Allen Redmon, whereby so many allusive, intertextual cues are incorporated into Coen films so as to enable

multi-directional readings of Coen pastiche. If a viewer wishes to see Coen pastiche as critically meaningful, there is plenty of evidence to support this view; if, on the other hand, a viewer wishes to see an empty imitation, this reading is also textually supportable. This is not to say that Coen pastiche is whatever one says it is; rather, it is to recognize that their films have the capacity to enable both readings, a kind of “something for everyone” approach that Thomas Elsaesser describes as, in a different context, an “access for all” postmodern textuality.

Since my analysis will be considering the use of popular music on the level of narrative, it will be helpful to organize that engagement by drawing on the work of David Bordwell, particularly in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, which was co-authored with Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson. In Bordwell’s chapter on style, he argues that the classical Hollywood group style is undergirded by three narrative systems: narrative logic, cinematic space, and cinematic time. Bordwell’s narrative logic is divided into four types of “motivation”: compositional, realistic, generic, and artistic. Compositional motivation deals principally with character and plot: classical films are motivated by unambiguous, goal-driven characters who are carried along two axis of action: heterosexual romance and the undertaking of a task or quest. Realistic motivation describes the type of reality classical films seek to represent, which Bordwell describes as a Bazinian-style realism. Generic motivation accounts for genre conventions that transgress realistic or compositional motivations (e.g. spontaneously breaking into song and dance—the privilege of the musical). Artistic motivation explains moments of self-reflexivity, which tend to be located near the beginning or end of classical films (5-20).

There is an outstanding issue to address in relation to Bordwell’s framework, however. Obviously, the Coens did not make films in the studio-era, which is the historical paradigm informing the classical style. Moreover, I am looking at how film style applies to

popular music more than other cinematic elements like cinematography or mise-en-scene, which forms the base of Bordwell's discussion. These two factors require that I consider how Bordwell's work has been applied in a period more historically appropriate to the Coens and how these narrative elements relate to the use of popular music.

While Bordwell has strenuously argued against the notion of a post-classical style in *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, Eleftheria Thanouli and others have suggested that what follows the classical style is a post-classical one, which broadly refers to Hollywood filmmaking after the studio era. Logically, this is the historical paradigm of the Coens. In *Post-Classical Cinema: An International Poetics of Film Narration*, Thanouli argues that while post-classical cinema continues many of the stylistic and narrative conventions of the classical period, it diverges from it in noticeable ways. Like classical films, post-classical cinema is character-driven; however, character development is intensified to a degree that slackens goal-oriented or plot driven behavior. This applies to many Coen films like *The Big Lebowski*, where many of the scenes that use popular music to characterize the Dude, like the "Gutter Balls" dream sequence laced with Kenny Rogers's 1968 "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)," seems more designed to play around with character idiosyncrasies than motoring the plot. As for generic motivation, post-classical films make the blending and bending of genres a self-conscious, commonplace activity. Mixing narrative genres is a Coen hallmark, and this generic hybridity is reflected in the diverse types of popular music in their films, thereby expanding the cultural eclecticism of Coen films beyond cinema and literature. The post-classical also departs from the classical in terms of depth and frequency of artistic motivation, the breaking of the so-called fourth wall of cinematic space through self-reflexive displays of technical virtuosity. This formal play calls attention to its own artfulness through a complex form of parody that, in effect, "acknowledges both its fictional status and its awareness of its lineage in film and

media history” (187). Perhaps the most applicable example here is the music of *O Brother*, which frequently breaks the fourth wall by starring many of the soundtrack’s musicians. The film shows a keen awareness of American musical history by integrating elements like the “crossroads” myth of Robert Johnson, using the live field recording of James Carter and The Prisoners, or tracing the historical emergence of radio.

The Coens are widely recognized and regularly celebrated as contemporary auteurs; thus, my analysis engages auteur theory. Historically, auteur theory has been one of the most visible and salient approaches in the study of film. The classic definition posits that the director is the most important influence in determining the shape of the final film product. A common analogy is that the director is to a film as an author is to a novel. In the classic view, the figure of the director is lionized as an artistic genius who through a combination of skill, talent, and indefatigable creative integrity is able to inscribe a personal vision in their films, one that successfully transcends the narrow confines of a crass, profit-driven industry. The theory was initially developed by film critics (many of whom became directors) in the mid to late twentieth century in the pages of the influential French film journal *Cahiers du Cinema*. In 1954, the journal published Francois Truffaut’s “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” which called for the creation of a “*cinema des auteurs*” that could serve as source of innovation in response to the prevailing mode of prestigious national filmmaking that Truffaut described as the “Tradition of Quality.” Truffaut’s ideas were taken up and developed by various other writers in the same journal who, through the early 1960s, developed a “*politique des auteurs*.” These writers were driven by a desire to inspire French filmmakers to move towards more formal and stylistic experimentation.

The idea of director as author migrated from France to Britain via the journal *Movie* before being introduced to the United States through the film criticism and theory of Andrew Sarris. Sarris’s work represented the first attempt to convert French-Anglo auteurism into a

unified theory for American academics. In “Notes on the Auteur Theory,” which appeared in the early 60s, Sarris argued that technical competence, a strong personal style, and deep meaning distinguished the work of great auteurs, whose best films could be explained autobiographically. Later, in 1968, Sarris published *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, which constructed a canonical group of “pantheon directors” whose personal cinematic vision had succeeded the oppressive, mass-produced conformity of a Fordist studio system.

In the 1970s, auteur theory fell into disrepute with the rise of structural semiotics, which shifted analytical attention from the author to the text. This critique was advanced by, among others, Roland Barthes, who claimed that privileging the author as the source of textual meaning was ideologically oppressive; thus, Barthes strived to re-configure the reader as the locus of meaning. As a result of this and related developments, by the 1980s auteur theory had been stripped of its intellectual credibility. However, in the 1990s, it was revived and reworked, a resuscitation pointedly expressed by Dudley Andrew: “Breathe easily. *Epuration* has ended. After a dozen years of clandestine whispering we are permitted to mention, even to discuss, the auteur again” (77). Far from returning to classic auteur approach of the mid-twentieth century, however, these critics conceptualized it to accommodate the challenges of contemporary cultural theory. Timothy Corrigan viewed the labeling of auteurs as a marketing strategy of the film industry. The auteur branding of New Hollywood directors like Scorsese and Coppola from the 1970’s onwards helped “guarantee a relationship between audience and movie whereby an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand-name vision whose contextual meanings are already determined, the way a movie is seen and received” (40). The auteur becomes part and parcel of the postmodern commodification and consumption of film; as such, authors can be “described according to the conditions of a cultural and commercial intersubjectivity, a social interaction

distinct from an intentional causality or textual transcendence” (41). The cult of star or celebrity persona that forms around certain filmmakers tends, in this view, to take on a life of its own and stands apart from the text itself. The text, then, rather than the author, is dead.

What much of this post-Sarris work debates is the notion of the author as a legitimate personal and influential force in the creative process versus the author as an ideological construction of social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Yet, as Jack Boozer reminds us in the context of the important role of authorship in film adaptations, “must we forget that in the end, it is always certain individuals who write a novel or a screenplay and who direct actors and films?” (22). The study of film adaptation and the individuals involved in it reveals to Boozer the need for a more balanced approach to the issue of cinematic authorship, one which recognizes that “great cinema is not solely individual expression, but neither does it seem only a summary mirror of cultural forces” (22). Studying film and culture should incorporate both micro and macro levels of analysis, approaches that can show how texts and authors are shaped by larger cultural forces but that also allow for the possibility that certain individuals can “bring something unique” to a culture as well as potentially “modify its direction” (23). Robert Stam articulates a similar line of argument in *Film and Theory*, suggesting that one can view the director as a “site of encounter of a biography, an intertext, an institutional context, and a historical moment” (6). In this vein, a director, or any other creative agent could be seen as one that conducts “pre-existing voices, ideologies, and discourses, without losing an overall shaping role” so that “a director’s work can be both personal *and* mediated by extrapersonal elements such as genre, technology, studios, and the linguistic procedures of the medium” (6). As Stam’s comments suggest, the result of the auteur dialectic appears to be a productive synthesis that considers the relationship between film and filmmakers in a more complicated yet no less compelling way.

The shortcomings of the auteur theory seem fairly clear. In practice, filmmaking is a highly collaborative process. The elements that combine together to produce a film are the result of a complex interaction among multiple agents, both personal and impersonal. Locating the personality of the director as the motivating or causal source for all textual features across a group of films ignores the influence of set, costume, and sound designers, the performance style of actors and actresses, cinematographers, editors, producers, and a wide variety of other individuals. Filmmaking is a large and complex collective effort, and to see the director as an all-powerful, omnipotent cause of the text disregards the complex realities of filmmaking that are readily apparent at almost any point in the history of the medium. On the other hand, it is equally problematic to assume that all contributions to the making of a film are equal in all historical periods. Indeed, in some cases, the director does have a significant and powerful influence on the final look and shape of a film. While the auteur theory should not be practiced in an uncomplicated way—the classic paradigm of the 1950s and early 60s—it is far too critical a concern in the filmmaking process to discredit.

While cinematic authorship can no longer be invoked in a straightforward, dogmatic way, it nevertheless continues to offer a useful, accurate, and interesting way to understand particular strains of cinema. A case in point is the work of the Coens. As Coen scholar Allen H. Redmon observes,

No amount of challenges to the idea of the authored film, or introductions of competing authorial voices, can altogether dislodge the desire for the directorially authored film. The enduring presence of directors like the Coens, who write, direct, and edit their own films, assure some that there is no need to abandon such a desire. An auteurist account might best explain their oeuvre.

(intro)

Indeed, the Coens have enjoyed an exceptional amount of creative freedom over the course of their career. As early Coen producer Ben Barenholtz put it, “Their objective is to have total artistic freedom. The priority was never the money. They want to work without interference. So I created a context. What director do you know who had final cut and total artistic control on his second picture? Well, that’s what Joel had” (Levine ch. 4). Their strong creative influence is often registered through criticism by the cast and crew of their films. Barry Sonnenfeld, who served as the Coens’ cinematographer on *Blood Simple*, *Raising Arizona*, and *Miller’s Crossing*, once described them as “control freaks” (Robson 296). Nicholas Cage, in a 1987 interview with David Edelstein, complained that the Coens had an “autocratic” nature: “Joel and Ethan have a very strong vision, and I’ve learned how difficult it is for them to accept another artist’s vision” (Allen 21). John Turturro, who starred in no less than four Coen films, observed that, “with Joel and Ethan, it’s a little hard to improvise” (Bergan 99). Part of the Coens’ creative influence is articulated through meticulous, pre-production storyboarding. J. Todd Anderson has served as the storyboard artist for nearly all Coen brothers’ films to date. On his role, Anderson said “I just try to be their extension cord. . . . [T]hey pretty much have a good idea within twenty or thirty degrees of what they want” (96). Given all of this, it seems reasonable to assert that the Coens represent the primary creative figures in the making of their films. While I generally agree with Redmon that an auteurist account best explains the Coen oeuvre, this statement raises a lot of questions on practical and theoretical levels.

To begin with a rather simple observation, auteur is singular while the Coens are plural. Right from the start, the Coens problematize auteur theory, which tends to celebrate singular individuals—Hitchcock, Welles, Hawks, Griffith. This issue is partly mediated by the fact that the Coens are often figuratively described as being two parts of one thing: a two-headed dragon, a two-man ecosystem. Moreover, the consensus seems to be from those who

have worked closely with them that their vision of the film is typically so closely aligned that it would be difficult if not impossible to separate their individual contributions. While that might seem to settle the issue on some levels—scriptwriting, directing, and editing—can the Coens be said to represent the “authors” of the musical design of their films? Nearly all the composed scores in Coen films are written by Carter Burwell, and T-Bone Burnett has been the principal figure in producing and selecting pre-existing popular music on films that rely on compilation soundtracks. Are Burwell and Burnett the “authors” of the Coens’ film music design? While these critical observations (and many others) make it tempting to jettison the idea of the auteur altogether, both Burwell and Burnett have stated in multiple interviews that they use the films themselves to guide their conception of the music, which points back to the Coens.

What do the brothers themselves have to say? In 2013, they participated in a panel discussion with Burwell on the “Art of the Score.” At one point the moderator, Alec Baldwin, asked the Coens the chicken-egg question: which comes first—the film or the music? Joel Coen’s answer: “it depends. There are cases where we know what kind of music . . . that we want to use when we are writing the movie, before we shoot it.” Baldwin attempts to clarify: “a style, you mean?” Joel: “or even just specific pieces of music. And that does inform how we’re thinking about the movie. . . . [T]here are other cases when we are shooting the movie that we start to crystallize an idea, not specifically, but generically And there are other times when we show the movie to Carter and we say, ‘what do we do here?’ We have no idea. It hasn’t been informed by a specific sense of vibe or tone or kind of music at all” (“Art of the Score”). In other words, there is no easy way to solve this issue once and for all, which suggests that, as much as possible, each use of music in Coen films needs consideration on its own terms. However, based on this and other pieces of evidence, I believe it is safe to say that, at minimum, the Coens play a meaningful role in

determining how music shapes their films and thus can be considered, in a context of collaboration, the “authors” of their films’ musical designs.

On a more theoretical level, with this study I would like to model a way to maintain the notion of the auteur but in a way that balances the influence of other agents, whether they are personal, as in the case of Burwell and Burnett, or whether they are impersonal, the result of a genre convention or an ideological determinant. While Joel and Ethan undoubtedly play a visible role in shaping the musical design of their films, figures like Carter Burwell and T-Bone Burnett are significantly involved, and impersonal forces like genre, technology, commerce, studios, social norms, and so on, are also strongly at play.

The study of auteurism and film music converge in Claudia Gorbman’s notion of the auteur melomane. Derived from the Greek words *melos* (song or music) and *mania* (madness), the term refers to directors whose love of music rivals their passion for film. The Coens’ love of music is literally expressed in the liner notes to the soundtrack of *O Brother*, where Joel Coen calls the film “a valentine to the music.” For Gorbman, auteur melomanes “treat music not as something to farm out to the composer or even to the music supervisor, but rather as a key thematic element and a marker of authorial style” (149). Gorbman proposes a canon of music loving filmmakers comparable to the Coens: Quentin Tarantino, Jim Jarmusch, Spike Lee, Woody Allen, Martin Scorsese. For these directors, music functions as “a platform for the idiosyncratic expression of taste, and thus conveys not only meaning in terms of plot and theme, but meaning as authorial signature itself” (149). Interestingly, Gorbman specifically mentions the Coens and Carter Burwell as an example of post-studio era collaborations between directors and composers/musical supervisors raised on “television and pop culture” that “resulted in an influx of new musical idioms on the one hand, and a vastly more flexible range of ideas concerning the nature, placement, and effects of music in movies on the other.” Gorbman situates the Coen-Burwell collaboration as part

of a tradition of notable director-music pairs such as Alfred Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann and Steven Spielberg and John Williams, or more recently, Wes Anderson and Mark Mothersbaugh, and Paul Thomas Anderson and John Brion.

In some ways, my study challenges Gorbman's conception of the Coens. Her emphasis on Burwell reveals that Gorbman is thinking about composed scores, which obscures how deeply many Coen films rely on pre-recorded popular music. For the purposes of my study, this means that I will focus less on Carter Burwell and more on T-Bone Burnett, the Coens' musical archivist and producer for *O Brother, The Big Lebowski*, *The Ladykillers*, and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Moreover, one of Gorbman's implications is that the Coens would be denied the status of film music auteurs because of Burnett, whose presence signifies a kind of musical outsourcing. However, as I mentioned previously, this is a complex issue that raises questions not only about Gorbman's distinction but the idea of the auteur altogether. The music we hear in Coen films is the result of a complex interaction among multiple agents, both personal and impersonal.

The blending of ironic and sincere perspectives through popular music in Coen films is intertwined with an array of narrative elements and narrating strategies. In order to understand what these are and how they work, I will adopt an approach developed by Smith in *The Sounds of Commerce*, a landmark study of popular music in film. Smith re-situates the notion of a two-tiered system of communication first proposed by Noel Carroll in "The Future of Allusion" in the context of the post-classical compilation soundtrack. As Carroll originally argued, New Hollywood filmmakers routinely engaged in allusive play by incorporating multiple layers of intertextual references to prior genres and styles. However, the interesting achievement of such films lies in how such allusions were woven into the film without disturbing the story. This meant, then, that these films could successfully engage two kinds of audiences, "the average filmgoer" who "made up the lion's share of Hollywood's

audience” and sought to enjoy “a genre film pure and simple,” and a “cine-literate” audience who desired to participate in “self-conscious, referential gamesmanship” (Smith 167). The most useful aspect of this dual address, Smith observes, is the symbiotic relationship between the two modes: “The second tier does not negate a general audience’s understanding of the film’s use of genre conventions, but rather enriches the film’s expressive qualities for an informed viewer” (167). Smith applies Carroll’s two-tiered system of communication to the use of popular music in these and other films, recognizing that such music represents a significant source of a film’s extra-textual associative network as well as serving traditional narrative functions.

“On one level,” Smith remarks, “an audience of uninformed viewers may interpret the song as background music” and will thus “make judgements regarding the overall style and its appropriateness to considerations of setting, character, and mood” (167). On another level, however, “an audience of informed viewers will recognize the song’s title, lyrics, or performer and will apply this knowledge to the dramatic context depicted on screen” (167). Moreover, as an auteurist tool, popular music “also serves as an expressive device to either comment on the action or suggest the director’s attitude towards the characters, settings, and themes of the film” (168). In sum, then, popular music supports many of the traditional functions of classical Hollywood film music, the overriding goal of which, as David Bordwell reminds us, is to tell a compelling story. Yet popular music also introduces additional layers of meaning by working as a self-reflexive tool that calls attention to itself—barring the device, as the Russian Formalists would say—and heightening a sense of the film as artifact. Beyond foregrounding the constructed-ness of all narrative, however, popular songs suggest a host of different ideas and attitudes about the meaning of the text in ways that overtly connect broader cultural associations with the immediate narrative situation. This communicative system is crucial to unpacking how the Coens play with ironic and sincere

tones in their films, which frequently cuts across the levels of discourse and story, allusion and narrative.

The complex textual density that distinguishes the Coens' use of popular music for narrative, intertextual, and tonal purposes can be glimpsed as early as their debut film, *Blood Simple*. Through a brief discussion of this film, this section offers a preview of the sort of textual analysis I will conduct in subsequent chapters.

Blood Simple turns on a James M. Cain style love triangle between Julian Marty (Dan Hedaya), his wife, Abby (Frances McDormand), and her lover, Ray (John Getz). As previously mentioned, Coen brothers films are often perceived as ironic in a negative, cynical way. This perspective is valid in many respects. For evidence, particularly in terms of the role popular music plays, one can turn to the scene in *Blood Simple* where Marty meets the private detective Visser to arrange the murder of Ray and Abby. Prior to this scene, Marty violently attempts to abduct Abby from Ray's house but not before Abby manages to escape by snapping his finger and kicking him in the groin, causing him to fall to his knees and vomit. If this wasn't humiliating enough, the film has Marty get into his car and race away from the curb only to realize that he is on a dead end street, which forces him to turn around and race back in the other direction in full view of his wife and her lover.

This tense scene musically transitions to the next by the energetic, opening drum beat of a ska-reggae cover of "Louie Louie" by Toots and the Maytals. Often simply referred to as "the Maytals," the band rose to prominence in the 1960s and 70s. Alongside similar groups such as Bob Marley and the Wailers, with hits like "54-46 (That's My Number)," "Monkey Man," and "Pressure Drop," the Maytals helped migrate reggae music from the island of Jamaica to the United States and Europe. The characteristically upbeat tone and rhythm of the group's distinct ska-style sound, with its three-part harmonies, rocksteady beat, and soulful vocals, disrupts the tight, brooding tension of the previous scene and frames the complicated

attitude of the next. The first shot focuses on Marty's broken finger, which is now in a splint. A facial shot reveals that Marty is barely able to contain his simmering rage, becoming ever more "blood simple," or psychologically unhinged, as a result of the humiliations in the previous scene. The song, which diegetically issues from a nearby car radio, suggests a happy, funky, quirky mood, presenting an ironic contrast to Marty's psychologically disturbed state. The darkly comic framing is reinforced by the inappropriate remarks of one of the pot-smoking teenagers, who says, "Hey, mister, how'd you break your pussy finger?" As it develops, the scene piles on joke after dirty joke at the expense of Marty's misery, including Visser, who remarks "stick your finger up the wrong person's ass?" This scene combined with others in the film—particularly the long sequence in which Marty is buried alive—often push the limits of mocking ridicule to become almost sadistic in nature. The popular music of this scene is interesting because, on the one hand, it intensifies the black humor of the scene through ironic juxtaposition, but on the other, it lightens or enlivens the overall mood of the film. The end result is an ambivalent, absurdist tone that subtly evolves and shifts in a protean-like manner. In concert with other elements like dialogue, acting, and setting, the pop music helps achieve a tonal complexity, the exuberant, lively tone of the Maytals' "Louie, Louie" perversely inappropriate to the dark content of the narrative. This scene offers a classic example of the Coens' signature dark humor whereby the audience is encouraged to laugh at situations that would otherwise be considered inapposite by normal social standards.

However, an earlier scene in the film assumes a radically different outlook, one that is more playful and uplifting. The tone of the scene is again achieved to a large extent through pop music. The first bar scene with the black bartender, Meurice, which is aurally and tonally contextualized by the Four Tops' 1965 Motown hit, "It's The Same Old Song," denotes a pronounced contrast to the twisted irony of "Louie Louie" and the characterization of Marty.

After Visser grotesquely tells Marty to “gimme a call whenever you wanna cut off my head. . . I can always crawl around without it” and leaves the office, the scene transitions into the bar, which follows Meurice as he steps up and over the bar, at which point the image cuts to a bar-level close-up of his sneakers. The all white Texas patrons of the bar applaud as Joan Black’s cover of Jim Reeve’s country hit “He’ll Have to Go” ends, which is being performed by a live band that announces they will take a short break. The camera, slipping into subjective focalization, follows Meurice as he parts the crowded dance floor before arriving at the jukebox, where he adroitly catches a quarter in mid-air, flipped by an urban white cowboy about to play another country song. “Hold it, hold it,” says Meurice, who inserts the man’s quarter and makes a selection. The iconic Motown sound of The Four Tops fills the bar, prompting a white redneck to shake his head in disapproval. The camera assumes a ground-level tracking shot that follows literally on the heels of Meurice as he re-crosses the dance floor, ascends the bar, performs a shuffle step, vaults to the other side, and resumes his conversation with an attractive young blonde who he was flirting with prior to his musical intervention.

In contrast to the overlook scene with Marty, at no point in this scene does it feel as if the audience is being encouraged to view Meurice in a distanced, unsympathetic way. His character is teased, for sure, but this is a far cry from the callous, sadistic way in which Marty’s character is treated. Cinematic technique is employed to structure this perspective. Meurice’s physicality is enlarged by the close proximity and angles that magnify his stature. His athleticism is repeatedly emphasized by the way he catches the quarter mid-air, adroitly pops up and over the bar, and the quick two-step. In the scene as a whole, Meurice is presented as confident, agile, intelligent, and charming, and considering the film as a whole, Meurice is probably the most “heroic” character in the conventional sense of the term. Comparing the contrasting ways in which Marty and Meurice are presented underlines the

Coens' range. While Marty is presented in darkly comic terms, Meurice is framed in a more playful, uplifting way. I am not arguing that the bar scene with Meurice equalizes the dark irony of the film as a whole, for it does not; nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these more lighthearted moments are key in fully accounting for the Coens' style. This more sincerely coded mode of representation has not been acknowledged or discussed as much as the corrosive sarcasm of Coen cinema. It is worth re-emphasizing at this point that it is *not* that Coen films clearly favor empathy over detachment, but that what makes their films intriguing is how they carefully integrate or manage both, creating an ambivalent, tonal complexity that is stimulating to observe as it evolves throughout the course of any one film. The popular music of Coen films plays an integral role in this dance of complex, shifting moods, that generates in viewers what Josh Levine calls that "Coen brothers feeling," which signifies "a messy combination of intellectual and emotional responses that don't easily resolve themselves into a simple statement" (intro).

The way popular music plays with tone is part and parcel of my larger argument that what distinguishes the use of popular music in Coen films is a rich density of meaning, a complexity that results from the music serving multiple functions, including baseline narrative development (setting, character, etc.), intertextuality (preexisting associations and their complex relationship to the narrative), motivating moments of self-reflexive play, and the expression of authorial attitudes. Once again, *Blood Simple* outlines many of these strategies, which will turn up again in many of the Coens' later films.

Technically, the first use of pop music in *Blood Simple* occurs when Visser meets Marty in his office to deliver photographic evidence of his wife's affair. The scene is accompanied by Joan Black's cover of Jim Reeve's 1959 country hit, "He'll Have To Go," which diegetically issues from the adjacent bar that is separated from Marty's office by a two-way window. The song is actually cued at the tail end of the previous scene, which

shows Marty calling Ray at the seedy roadside hotel room where he and Abby had slept together the previous night. The knowing Marty taunts the unknowing Ray: “Having a good time?” After trading a few tense remarks, Ray hangs up the phone, which stirs Abby awake, asking, “What was that?” To which the laconic Ray replies, “Your husband.” The last shot of the scene is a close up of a shocked Abby, which cues the short steel guitar intro of “He’ll Have to Go” as the scene cuts to an overhead shot of Marty’s cowboy boots propped on his desk next to Visser’s cowboy hat, two visual icons that align with the country song to signify Texas.

In this context, the popular music of the film serves several basic functions. It works on the level of editing, furnishing a sound bridge from one scene to the next, reinforcing a sense of continuing action that propels the film forward. Using music as an artful way to join shots is by no means exclusive to Coen films, but it nevertheless marks a frequent use, often in ways that are subtle and complex. Ray’s line of dialogue, “Your husband,” points directly to Marty, whose seedy Texas neon bar is aurally signified by the classic steel guitar of the country ballad, which establishes the more general narrative-cultural context.

On an intertextual level, the song adds additional layers of meaning. The opening lyrics, which are temporarily foregrounded in the soundtrack before being relegated to the background as the dialogue between Marty and Visser ensues, dramatically announce, “Put your sweet lips, a little closer to the phone.” This line injects a small dose of comic irony since we have just seen Marty and Ray speaking to each other on the phone in a way that is far from “sweet.” On a thematic level, the relationship between the song lyrics and the film as a whole suggest some interesting correspondences. Both deal with notions of lost love and infidelity. The tragic situation of “He’ll Have to Go” turns on a man in a loud bar speaking to a woman on the phone who is sitting next to her lover. The refrain of the chorus suggests that the woman will have to let her lover go to allow the speaker and the woman to be

together. On a general level, both the song and film deal with a heterosexual love triangle in which two men desire one woman. While on a literal level the song and the film diverge as in the film a man is speaking to another man, the general idea is the same—Marty is calling to get Ray to “go” so that he can prevent Abby from leaving him. In this way, the lyrics of the song comment on the action.

Blood Simple as a whole makes use of country music on multiple occasions, and as many critics have pointed out, these songs, in alliance with other elements, help distance the film from the crime fiction and noir genres upon which it so frequently draws. Noir is most associated with dense, claustrophobic, maze-like urban jungle settings. *Blood Simple* inverts this familiar trope through its rural Texas setting. Thinking about the role of popular music in many Coen films in this particular way offers insight into what makes their films innovative and original rather than merely derivative and pastiche, generically differentiating their films from the traditions they knowingly invoke. This is only possible on an intertextual level, for the viewer would have to be familiar with the stereotypes and conventions of mid-twentieth century crime fiction in order to grasp the full significance of these inversions. This distancing strategy is continued in the next scene with the use of The Four Tops’ “It’s The Same Old Song.”

Again, the music in this scene works in multiple ways. On one level, because the song issues from within the fictional world, it maintains the diegetic realism of the scene, a strategy that is sustained throughout the film. It also serves characterization, delineating Meurice’s identity as a northern, urban African-American who loves the music of Motown. The song adds an amusing comic irony to the scene, juxtaposing the cool, black, Motown listening northerner with all the other patrons in the bar who more or less convey the idea of white, country-music loving Texans. More than any other signature aspect of their style,

creating situational humor by constructing ironic incongruities like these is perhaps *the* defining element of Coen auteurism.

The music also justifies the widely discussed formal play of the sequence. The ground-level tracking shots and other unusual camera movements call attention to themselves as self-reflexive displays of technical virtuosity, what David Bordwell describes as instances of “artistic motivation.” The dynamic camera movements signify a playful, comic break from the tense, dark, slow-burning pace and tone of the film, which has been maintained by a relatively static camera. The toe-tapping rhythm and upbeat tone of “It’s The Same Old Song” provides artistic unity to what could otherwise be regarded as an unmotivated or “fragmented” moment in the narrative. These moments of cinematic play are not unlike the improvisations of a jazz musician, instances of loose, playful self-expression located between structured parts of a composition.

There are other moments of formal play motivated by popular music in *Blood Simple*, like the bar level tracking shot that glides up and over a passed out drunk, which is cued by the dramatic, scale-descending violins of Patsy Cline’s 1963 country hit “Sweet Dreams.” The extended sequence where Ray attempts to dispose of Marty’s corpse, which is complicated by the fact that Marty is not in fact dead, as well as the climactic confrontation between Visser and Abby, are both dramatically heightened and tonally complicated by vernacular forms of Latin music, the cheerful tone of which is blissfully unaware of the violence in the scene. Both scenes are also marked by meta-cinematic awareness. The scene with Ray and Marty is an attempt to outdo Hitchcock in *Torn Curtain* (1966), with the Hollywood convention of an easy, quick murder comically and grotesquely upended. The sequence ends with a striking, elevated long shot of Ray and his car in the middle of a freshly plowed field. The violent confrontation between Visser and Abby swerves towards the kind of B-grade horror films that both Joel Coen and Sam Raimi worked on early in their careers,

especially the moment when Abby stabs a knife through Visser's hand as he reaches for her through an open window in the next room. The audience is also treated to a visually dazzling shot of light streams that crisscross through bullet holes into a dark room. Much more could be said about the how this popular music works on the level of both story and discourse, but for the moment, my main point is that the playing of popular music in *Blood Simple* motivates moments of formal innovation, a recurring strategy in Coen films.

In addition to cueing cinematic play, the lyrics of the song comment on the form of the film, offering significant insight into how the Coens work with genre. *Blood Simple* is inspired by the crime fiction of James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett as well as the many noir films inspired by and associated with them. The title of the film is lifted directly from a line in Hammett's 1929 novel *Red Harvest*, in which the author's recurring protagonist, the anonymous Continental Op, worries that his prolonged immersion in a criminal underworld will cause him to go "blood simple," becoming as violent and deranged as those he is trying to bring to justice. Much of the film's plot and theme are derived from Cain, particularly *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, with their passionate, overheated love triangles that inspire acts of betrayal and murder by ordinary, everyday people, which in this context means white, middle-class Americans. As mentioned earlier, many critics of *Blood Simple* accused it of being too much Cain and not enough Coen, too much pastiche and parody and not enough originality. The film, however, is knowingly aware of its intertextual debt, and the key to properly understanding the source of Coen innovation lies in considering the refrain of The Four Tops' song: "it's the same old song, but with a different meaning since you've been gone." The film re-presents the figurative "same old song" of prior crime-noir stories but with a "different meaning" in 1980's rural Texas.

The song suggests a consideration of contrasts and continuities between the film and the many prior generic conventions upon which it relies. Postmodern interpretations of the

film as examples of Jamesonian pastiche would stress sameness, imitation, forgery, fakeness, while the music stresses difference at the heart of sameness, how both are incorporated, creating a back and forth interpretive movement between the film and its sources. No film noir would use pop songs like “It’s The Same Old Song” or “He’ll Have to Go,” and they would avoid rural settings. These intertextual inversions are refreshing and interesting precisely because they oscillate between what is old and familiar and what is new and different.

Overall, the popular music of *Blood Simple* develops baseline narrative functions like setting, editing, mood, and characterization, as well as activating more formal functions like self-reflexive displays of technical virtuosity and authorial commentary. The music is also enlisted in the tonal oscillation between irony and sincerity, which can be glimpsed by considering the radically contrasting ways in which Marty and Meurice are characterized. The pop music of Coen films is textually dense, operating on multiple levels and forming a complex and dynamic relationship with many other elements of the film. Indeed, popular music plays a central role in the creation of a tonally complex cinematic address that projects moments of sincerely-coded emotional engagement that furnish more heart and warmth to their stories and thus offsetting or ameliorating a postmodern discourse that is regularly seen as wholly ironic, skeptical, and disengaged.

CHAPTER 2

THE BIG LEBOWSKI

In 1996, after just over a decade of filmmaking, the Coens finally managed to produce a film that met all the usual standards of commercial feature-filmmaking success: impressing the critics, attracting a mass audience, garnering awards, and earning a profit. *Fargo* (1996), the so-called “film blanc” set in a remote region of the upper Midwest, won two out of seven Oscar nominations, including Best Actress for Frances McDormand and Best Original Screenplay for Joel and Ethan. At the prestigious Cannes Film Festival in France, *Fargo* was nominated for the coveted Palme d’Or, and Joel Coen was awarded Best Director. Budgeted at a mere \$7 million—a modest amount by Hollywood standards—*Fargo* grossed \$60 million worldwide at the box office. Contrary to the ambivalent critical reception of the Coens’ previous films, many pundits embraced *Fargo* for its effective balancing of style and story, a feat no previous Coen film had quite managed to pull off. Overall, the general consensus was that the Coens had finally decided to discard the sophomoric antics of earlier films, like *Raising Arizona* (1987) and *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), in order to pursue a more mature, disciplined filmmaking.

Then, two years later, came *The Big Lebowski* (1998), featuring the outlandishly picaresque adventures of a burned out hippy named Jeffery “The Dude” Lebowski (Jeff Bridges), and his blustery, tempestuous, Vietnam-vet bowling buddy, Walter Sobchack (John Goodman). Compared to the almost perfectly bowled game of *Fargo*, *Lebowski* was mostly gutter balls, earning a paltry \$17,451,873 in the first few weeks at the box office and totaling approximately \$28 million domestically (“The Big Lebowski”). The film earned no major awards, and critical reception was nonplussed, ambivalent, or downright scathing. “What’s up with these Coens?” wondered Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone*, a question many other critics were asking at the time (“Bowling For Laughs”). Peter Howell of *The Toronto Star* expressed

a similar sentiment in his review of *Lebowski* written at its world premier at the Sundance Film Festival: “It’s hard to believe that this is the work of a team that won an Oscar last year for the original screenplay of *Fargo*,” concluding that the film was “more sprawling than large, providing lots of laughs but an incomplete story” (“Coens’ latest”). Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* remarked that the “story is in truth disjointed, incoherent and even irritating. What you remember and enjoy about the film (if you remember and enjoy it at all) is not the forest but the individual trees, engaging riffs as only the Coens can concoct them that amuse and entertain though they connect to nothing else in the film” (“Nutcase Noir”). Todd McCarthy of *Variety* concluded that *Lebowski* “adds up to considerably less than the sum of its often scintillating parts, simply because the film doesn’t seem to be about anything other than its own cleverness” (“The Big Lebowski”). While the film featured amusingly idiosyncratic characters and a few stylish sequences, overall, most critics felt that the film was a giant leap backwards for Coen filmmaking.

Just over a decade later, however, in a follow-up piece to his initial Sundance review quoted above, Peter Howell claimed that *Lebowski* “may just be my favorite Coen Bros. film, and I’m generally a fan of the Coens.” Citing “festival fatigue” and a “malfunctioning funnybone,” Howell concluded that “[t]he things I considered flaws upon first encounter, namely the episodic plot and the out-there eccentricities of the characters, are now what I consider to be the chief virtues of *The Big Lebowski*” (“I love The Big Lebowski”). Howell’s critical turnabout is part and parcel of a broader pattern, for despite initially flopping in the cinema, after being released on home video, *Lebowski* subsequently underwent a massive cult revival. So significant was the film’s commercial and critical recovery, in fact, that it prompted *Rolling Stone* to label the ten years following the film’s release as “The Decade of the Dude,” and to declare the film itself as “the most worshipped comedy of its generation”

(Greene). Indeed, over time, *Lebowski* has managed to become one of the most cherished and re-watched of all Coen brothers films.

As in the case of many films that become cult classics, the main thrust behind the film's remarkable comeback appears to have been its enthusiastic reception by fanatical viewers who discovered something most mainstream viewers and critics had apparently missed. After generating an initial buzz simply through word of mouth, the film quickly drew the attention of media marketing departments, which, in response to such hype, deployed aggressive campaigns designed to capitalize on the film's rising cult status. In 2005, Universal Studios Home Entertainment released "The Big Lebowski Limited Edition Gift Set Achiever's Edition" DVD package, which included a collector's edition DVD with bonus features, a set of eight photo cards taken by Jeff Bridges on the set, four character-themed coasters, and a collectible bowling towel. As chronicled in the 2009 documentary *The Achievers: The Story of the Lebowski Fans*, the film has spawned an annual Lebowski Fest that features two days of live music and a bowling party where fans can dress up as their favorite characters. There is also a sizable market for Lebowski memorabilia that is sold on online sites like Etsy and eBay. Examples include the Dude prayer candles, t-shirts, and miniature figurines, a wooden bowling display set, fan art, fridge magnets, and shot glasses. *Lebowski* has even inspired the creation of a new religion, "Dudeism," the tenets of which are outlined in *The Abide Guide: Living Like Lebowski*. These and related developments prompt an important question: what *is it*, exactly, about this film that seems to inspire such radical degrees of fandom? What is it, exactly, that makes this film so *popular*?

The remarkable success of *Lebowski* calls for a critical accounting. One could argue that a number of different elements have contributed significantly to its popularity, including endlessly quotable lines, absurd black humor, eccentric characters, and highly stylized visuals. However, I argue in this chapter that an equally important determiner of the film's

success is its soundtrack, which incorporates an eclectic range of musical artists and styles that span multiple decades. These artists include Bob Dylan, Captain Beefheart, Elvis Costello, Yma Sumac, Nina Simone, Moondog, Kenny Rogers and the First Edition, the Monks, Henry Mancini, the Gipsy Kings, and Townes Van Zandt. The compilation soundtrack for *Lebowski* has become fetishized as much as the film itself. In 2013, in honor of the film's fifteen-year anniversary, *L.A. Weekly* published a complete guide to the music of film ("The Definitive"). A year later, Island/Mercury re-issued the *Lebowski* soundtrack on vinyl, featuring a cream-colored LP, alluding to the Dude's signature drink, a White Russian (Business Wire). In fact, upon its initial release, the soundtrack marked one of the few elements in the film roundly praised by critics. Todd McCarthy of *Variety* described the soundtrack as "[o]ne of the film's indisputable triumphs" ("The Big Lebowski"). The music of *Lebowski* is undoubtedly a critical textual feature of the film, one that has drawn the attention not only of fans and critics, but scholars, too.

Academic writing on Coen films has tended to rely heavily on the critical frameworks of postmodernism, an approach on full display in Diane Pecknold's "Holding Out Hope for the Creedence: Music and the Search for the Real Thing in *The Big Lebowski*." Pecknold argues that the pop music of *Lebowski* "repeatedly gestures to being out of place, out of time, and disconnected from coherent social and historical narratives, even while seeking to revive such narratives" (278). Pecknold's analysis is built on the theoretical tenets of Jean Baudrillard, particularly the idea of the loss of, and subsequent longing for, a sense of the "real" in postmodernity. Baudrillard argued that life in postmodern societies has become so overwhelmed by the consumption of Internet, television, film, and other forms of media that the line between the real and the imaginary has disappeared. Thus, we are left with nothing but simulations or copies of things. This loss of reality, according to Bauldrillard, creates a deep-seated desire—an obsession, really—to re-locate that which has been lost, a sense of the

authentic, the genuine, the truth, the “real.” However, since reality has become supplanted by nothing but simulations of it, the real can never be fully recovered, which produces a perpetual sense of loss and longing.

According to Pecknold, the Dude is caught in Baudrillard’s postmodern conundrum. He seeks out the “real” in a number of different ways, the “real” in this context meaning a sense of truth and authenticity. The Dude’s search for the truth—the reality behind the façade—translates to his desire to unravel the various plots and machinations that surround and constantly bewilder him throughout the film, including the question of whether Bunny Lebowski’s kidnapping is “real” or not. More pertinent to the current discussion is the way in which the Dude’s postmodern conundrum—the doomed quest for an “authentic” or “real” identity—is recapitulated by his favorite band, Creedence Clearwater Revival (CCR). CCR fashioned itself as a group attempting to return to a more authentic and roots-based kind of rock rather than trying to push the genre in more innovative directions as many of their contemporaries were doing (281). While the band attempted to market itself as an authentic revival of “down home” Southern roots-rock, in reality all of the band’s members originally hailed from Northern California. In fact, most of them had never even visited the South. As Pecknold remarks, “[T]he band’s very name—which invokes credibility or authoritative weight (*credence*) alongside the notion of imitating an authentic source (*revival*)—hints at a self-aware construction of a counterfeit past” (282). The way CCR knowingly constructed and disseminated a grass-roots identity for itself, one that appeared real and genuine on the surface but ultimately amounted to a simulation, is, according to Pecknold, analogous to the way in which the Dude constantly seeks but fails to locate “the real thing” in *Lebowski*. For the Dude, “the real thing” assumes many changing forms, from the rug that really tied the room together, to a briefcase full of ransom money, to his social identity, which is forever

stuck in the counter-culture era. Overall, the musical score and narrative of the film elicits a nostalgic longing for a state of authenticity that can never be recovered.

While Pecknold's analysis is thought provoking and insightful, I would like to re-listen to the music of *Lebowski* in a different critical key to offer fresh insight into the film and its music. In this chapter, I suggest a number of different ways to think about the music of *Lebowski*: how it works, ways to characterize it, and its significance in a broader context. *Lebowski* is a crucial Coen film because it indicates a consequential shift in the brothers' approach to music. With *Lebowski*, music becomes a dominant stylistic trait for the Coens, one that is just as substantial as ornate dialogue, black humor, vivid cinematography, and other features widely considered "Coen-esque." An important change motivating this shift lies in the fact that, before *Lebowski*, all Coen films relied heavily on the musical direction and scores of Carter Burwell; *Lebowski*, however, denotes the first Coen film soundtrack to be comprised entirely of pre-existing popular music under the curation of Joseph Henry "T-Bone" Burnett. The shift from Burwell's scores to Burnett's compilations is significant because it encrypts the increasingly central role Burnett and popular music will play in many Coen films to follow. I also introduce the idea that Burnett adopts a "curatorial" approach to the popular music to *Lebowski*. This method is characterized by the thoughtful selection and application of pre-existing music to film narrative in ways that approximate the scope and role of a museum curator, thus reaching beyond the typical Hollywood approach. Moreover, *Lebowski*'s soundtrack embodies Burnett's notion of a compilation "score," a unified, coherent, selection of songs designed to help tell the story of the film on multiple levels. Finally, I reflect on various ways in which the music of *Lebowski* is situated within a broader historical context, demonstrating levels of continuity and discontinuity with the aesthetic regime of classical Hollywood cinema. While many critics and scholars have labeled Coen filmmaking a form of postmodern pastiche, or blank parody of genres and styles past, I point

out ways in which *Lebowski* departs significantly from the conventions underpinning such prior stylistic paradigms.

Lebowski represents a key film in the Coen oeuvre because it marks a pivotal change in how the brothers approach music. Prior to *Lebowski*, the Coens relied exclusively on the guidance of Carter Burwell, a collaboration initiated in the brothers' first film, *Blood Simple* (1984). Burwell scored the Coens' next five films: *Raising Arizona*, *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Barton Fink* (1991), *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and *Fargo*. Of these films, the only one to include a substantial number of preexisting popular songs is *Blood Simple*. Especially notable in the film is its repeated use of the Four Tops' "It's The Same Old Song" which, in addition to developing basic elements like character and setting, also functions on the level of self-reflexive commentary. "It's The Same Old Song" can be read as suggesting two strategies for reading the film: that betrayal, murder, and miscommunication are the "Same Old Song"—that is, that they are common, recurring themes in mid-twentieth century film noir and crime fiction; at the same time, that *Blood Simple* "has a different meaning" than the "Same Old Song" of these prior genres because it is re-contextualized and culturally updated through a different setting—rural Texas in the early 1980s. Other popular, prerecorded songs used in *Blood Simple* include Toots & the Maytals' quirky ska-reggae cover of "Louie Louie," and a number of country-western songs, such as "He'll Have to Go" by Joan Black and Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams." After *Blood Simple*, however, the Coens tended to shy away from using pre-existing popular songs and relied more frequently on Burwell's instrumental scores—that is, until *Lebowski*.

It is critical to point out that, in a broad sense, all Coen films prior to *Lebowski* employ popular music in some way, shape, or form. The score of the Coens' second film, *Raising Arizona*, for example, features an innovative blend of folk, classical, and synthesized rock. One of the most memorable musical themes in the film is Carter Burwell's rendition of

Pete Seeger's "Goofing-Off Suite," an arrangement that blends "original music composed by Seeger with banjo renditions of folk songs, themes from the canon of Western classical music, and Tin Pan Alley tunes, such as Irving Berlin's 'Blue Skies'" (Smith 136). The film also features the well-known folk song "Home on the Range," which H. I. and Ed play to welcome Nathan Jr. into their home. Another piece of pop-inflected music featured in the film is a synthesized, orchestral leitmotif (described by Carter Burwell as a "Spanish Rock Opera") that is associated with the character of Leonard Smalls (Randall "Tex" Cobb), also known as The Lone Biker of the Apocalypse.

In the Coens' third film, *Miller's Crossing*, Burwell composed a score largely inspired by Irish folk music, which underlined the cultural background of the main character, Tom Reagan (Gabriel Byrne), and his Irish-American mob, headed by Leo O'Bannon (Albert Finney). The film's main orchestral theme is based on a traditional Irish ballad, "Limerick's Lamentation," and the assassination attempt of Leo is accompanied by the familiar Irish folk song "Danny Boy." In fact, the latter song was specially recorded for the film by the notable Irish tenor Frank Patterson. While the musical score for the Coens' fourth release, *Barton Fink*, is mostly understated and minimalist, it nevertheless includes an ostentatious swing jazz performance of "Down South Camp Meeting" at the USO dance scene. Jazz is also heard in several scenes of the Coens' fifth movie, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, as are pieces of classical music from Khachaturian's ballet *Spartacus*, certain sections of which are so well known they could be considered a form of pop classical. And while the Coens' sixth feature-film, *Fargo*, is not generally remembered for its use of pop music, the film's theme song is nevertheless inspired by "The Lost Sheep," a Scandinavian folk tune. Also, pop songs repeatedly appear in *Fargo* as diegetic music—that is, music that realistically issues from a source located somewhere within the story world—including Merle Haggard's "Big City," Boy George's cover of Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin,'" and Jose

Feliciano's "Let's find Each Other Tonight." All these examples suggest that while I claim that *Lebowski* marks a stylistic shift for the Coens in terms of pop music, this statement must be qualified by conceding that most Coen films incorporate popular music to some degree.

What makes *Lebowski* different from the Coens' earlier work is the large degree to which the brothers rely on preexisting popular music to power the narrative—that is, to tell the story. This is particularly true of characterization in the film. The Coen's decision to use mainly prerecorded pop music in *Lebowski* was driven by how they conceived of their main character, the Dude. While the Dude lives in 1990s Los Angeles, his identity is clearly a throwback to the counter-culture era of the late 1960s and early to mid 1970s. A similar character logic applies to other figures in the film, including the Dude's bowling buddy, Walter Sobchack, whose traumatic experiences in Vietnam tend to be his default frame of reference. This character design is also apparent in Maude Lebowski (Julianne Moore), the "big" Lebowski's daughter, whose art and distinct brand of feminism are both derived from the experimental Fluxus movement of the 1960s. Among other means, this sense of cultural displacement is signified through the playing of familiar popular songs derived from the eras in which these characters' identities were principally forged. The Dude is closely linked to CCR, Bob Dylan, Captain Beefheart, and Santana. Walter is also linked to CCR (especially the song "Run Through The Jungle," which is commonly associated with Vietnam) as well as The Monks, and Maude's character is connected to Meredith Monk.

As Carter Burwell explains in an interview in *Knowing the Score*, the Coens

knew they would have to use a lot of recognizable songs to capture that feeling of the Dude, this guy who's kind of trapped in the seventies, 'trapped' is not the right word, but in any case is living in his own time and space, and that time and space is certainly not the early nineties, which is when the action takes place. (Morgan 69-70)

As Burwell points out, many characters in *Lebowski* are stuck in the past, and in order to convey this sense of cultural dislocation, the Coens used pre-existing recordings of popular songs rather than Burwell's orchestral compositions, which, musically speaking, had been a regular, standout feature of Coen films prior to 1998.

Not only does *Lebowski* mark a turn away from relying so exclusively on the score music of Carter Burwell, it also marks a turn towards working with musician and producer Joseph "T-Bone" Burnett, who was recruited by the Coens to serve as *Lebowski*'s "musical archivist." The introduction of Burnett into the recurring roster of Coen collaborators is logically accompanied by an increased preoccupation in Coen films with the history of popular music, a shift that reaches well beyond *Lebowski* and into films like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *The Ladykillers* (2004), and, most recently, *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013). This interest manifests not only through the infiltration of pop music into diverse narrative elements like plot, character, theme, and so on, but also through the diverse generic composition of the soundtracks themselves, which rely on a mix of extant recordings, new recordings of prior songs, or recordings of new songs rendered in prior traditions.

Burnett's biography reveals a life steeped in the history of popular music. Joseph Henry Burnett III was born in 1948 in St. Louis, Missouri, and grew up in Fort Worth, Texas. For reasons he cannot recall, Burnett was nicknamed "T-Bone" by childhood friends. He was regularly exposed to a wide range of Americana music in his youth, particularly through Fort Worth's late-night music scene. Burnett played rhythm guitar in a local band, and at seventeen, he purchased his own recording studio, where he began producing the music of local groups as well as touring performers who would agree to visit his studio late at night after their gigs. In a 2010 interview, Burnett recalled that "[t]hese country musicians would drink a lot of whiskey, take a lot of speed, and want to stay up all night. They'd need a place to do it, so they'd end up at my studio" (Gill).

In 1975, while performing at the Other End in Greenwich Village, Bob Neurwirth introduced T-Bone to Bob Dylan, who invited Burnett to play backing guitar in his upcoming Rolling Thunder Revue musical tour. Described by Dylan biographer Robert Shelton as a “travelling electric hootenanny,” the tour was a veritable revolving door of roots music artists that included Joan Baez, Ramblin’ Jack Elliot, Joni Mitchell, Arlo Guthrie, and Robbie Robertson. According to Burnett, “I’ve lived the rest of my life on the fuel I got from the tour” (Gill). After the tour, Burnett formed the Alpha Band with fellow backing musicians David Mansfield and Steven Soles. After releasing three albums with the group, Burnett formed his own solo act and produced a number of albums throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, including *Truth Decay* (1980), *Trap Door EP* (1982), *The Criminal under My Own Hat* (1992), and *The True False Identity* (2006). Alongside his own career as a performer and songwriter, Burnett has produced music for a variety of notable groups and artists, including Los Lobos, Elvis Costello, Elton John, John Mellencamp, Roy Orbison, The Counting Crows, Diana Krall, and The Wallflowers. In 2009, Burnett received a Grammy for his work on *Raising Sand*, a collaboration between Led Zeppelin’s Robert Plant and traditional country music star Allison Krauss. Plant later described Burnett’s role in the project in quasi-scholarly terms: “It was like an Open University thesis on each tune, and why it was important as a piece of music. I’d never had a producer like that before, one who tells you to think about it like this” (Gill). Plant’s comment is important because it suggests that Burnett’s relationship to the production of music assumes curatorial, quasi-academic dimensions, an approach that is more than just about commercial imperatives; rather, it is an ethos that concerns the history and significance of the music itself.

Burnett was first introduced to Hollywood through his work as a musical director on Roy Orbison and Friends: A Black and White Night, a 1987 Cinemax television special dedicated to celebrating Orbison’s music. In a 2013 *Atlantic* article, Paul Elie remarked that

“once the show was rerun a jillion times during public-TV pledge drives,” Burnett eventually became “A-list in Hollywood” (“How T-Bone Burnett Plays Hollywood”). After working on *Lebowski* and a number of other Coen films, particularly *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Burnett produced a number of other award-winning soundtracks. Such soundtracks included the one he wrote for *Cold Mountain* (Minghella, 2003), which featured songs by Alison Krauss, Tim Erikson, Riley Baugus, the Sacred Harp Singers, and Jack White, as well as the one for *Crazy Heart* (Cooper, 2009), which debuted “The Weary Kind,” a song Burnett co-wrote with Ryan Bingham. Burnett also produced the soundtrack and composed the score for the Johnny Cash film biopic, *Walk The Line* (Mangold, 2005). More recently, Burnett provided music for *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), ABC’s TV series *Nashville* (2012), and the first season of HBO’s *True Detective* (2014). In 2013, Andrew Romano declared Burnett “America’s premier Playlist Maker—our country’s first Curator-in-Chief” (“The Coen Brothers’ Music Guru”).

The first contact between Burnett and the Coens occurred in the late 1980s, immediately following the release of *Raising Arizona*. “I must have seen it 20 times,” recalled Burnett. “It was as if someone was reading my mail or something. I felt such a kinship with the filmmakers that I just called them up to say, ‘Hey.’ And we wound up getting together and becoming friends” (Altman). Prior to *Lebowski*, Carter Burwell had been the main talent behind the music for Coen films, a collaboration established at the outset of the brothers’ career. For *Lebowski*, however, the Coens turned to Burnett to serve as their “musical archivist.”

In more conventional Hollywood films, Burnett’s role would typically be credited as a “music supervisor.” The change in title from “supervisor” to “archivist” is more than a nominal one, marking not only a key shift in how the Coens approach music, but also a key difference between classical and post-classical forms of Hollywood film music. As Jeff Smith

points out in *The Sounds of Commerce*, the shift in 1960s Hollywood cinema away from original orchestral scores towards recorded popular music created a concurrent shift away from a heavy reliance on film music composers towards music supervisors and engineers (162). In the 1980s and 90s, the role of the music supervisor became increasingly central to Hollywood film production, for “[a]s the back catalogs of publishers and record companies became increasingly valuable financial resources for Hollywood studios,” Smith explains, “the problem of managing various licensing arrangements created a number of new responsibilities,” which necessitated the role of the music supervisor (209). The purview of the music supervisor would come to include creating a film music budget, overseeing licensing, conducting contract negotiations with musicians, and protecting copyrights (209). The role of music supervisor can extend beyond merely managing the business side of a film’s soundtrack. The music supervisor is involved “in a number of decisions which shape the overall concept of a score,” as he or she participates in “spotting sessions, the selection of preexisting musical materials, the organization of prerecords, the screening of dailies, and the preparation of ‘temp tracks’” (210). Music supervisors hail from a variety of backgrounds that include music, film, business, and law, and their role in the production of a film’s music is often shaped significantly by these prior experiences (210). Burnett’s long-term involvement with the American music industry as both musician and producer is an important factor in understanding his approach to making Coen film soundtracks.

As Smith further elaborates in “O Brother, Where Chart Thou: Popular Music and the Coen Brothers,” Burnett’s change in title from musical “supervisor” to “archivist” has significant implications (149). For better or worse, it is typical in the Hollywood film industry for musical supervisors to be viewed as little more than “bureaucratic functionaries” whose roles are limited to managing “licensing arrangements, contract negotiations, and soundtrack packaging” (149). A musical “archivist,” on the other hand, occupies a rather

“different institutional niche, one whose mission is educational rather than commercial and preservationist rather than promotion” (149). Smith suggests at least three key consequences of Burnett’s shift in title to “archivist”: “(1) It implies a mastery of popular music history; (2) it portends an archeological function of the cinema in uncovering buried musical treasures; and (3) it suggests that films and filmmakers play a role in preserving and displaying popular culture artifacts” (148-49). I mention Smith’s insights not only because they are helpful and interesting in and of themselves, but also because I would like to go one step further and suggest that it is equally insightful to see Burnett and the Coens as “curators.”

Unlike the term “archivist,” the term “curator” aptly captures the range and scope of Burnett’s and the Coens’ film music activities, since this term implies more of an active, creative function, one that essentially combines the work of archivist as well as designer. Describing the Coens’ and Burnett’s approach to the music in *Lebowski* as “curatorial” more clearly aligns with the observations of Michael Z. Newman, who remarks that the highly allusive nature of the Coens’ style does the “critical” work of “selecting, collecting, foregrounding, curating, preserving, archiving, interpreting, and reimagining the media that have been significant in their lives and in the lives of the community that shares their specific cultural literacy” (154). Thus, the Coen oeuvre as a whole “functions as a kind of imaginative, creative literary and film scholarship, of history and criticism of twentieth-century popular culture” (154). Part of my purpose here is to explore—through the notion of curation—the ways in which pop music in Coen films accomplish “critical” work in all the different ways Newman mentions: selecting, collecting, foregrounding, and so on.

Many songs in *Lebowski* suggest the presence of a knowledgeable curator in how they are selected and placed in the film. In a 2013 interview for *The Guardian*, Burnett outlines a number of principles that guide his approach to selecting and applying film music, one of which is to use film as an occasion to introduce unfamiliar music to mainstream audiences.

“I’m a curator,” states Burnett, “if I hear something good, I’m going to want to point to that and say: ‘Here, check this out’” (Hebblethwaite). What Burnett describes is a kind of tastemaking, using film as a vector for exposing viewers to interesting music that has been marginalized or forgotten. The way Burnett and the Coens expose mainstream audiences to overlooked music is intriguing in that they tend to introduce songs that play with the line between familiarity and difference. Take the soundtrack for *Lebowski*, for instance. While it includes several obscure songs, many are nevertheless performed or recorded by recognizable names. For example, Bob Dylan is a familiar artist, but “The Man in Me” is an obscure track from an equally obscure album, *New Morning*. Most mainstream audiences would be at least generally familiar with Bob Dylan and his music, so when they hear “The Man in Me” played in the opening credit sequence of the film, they are most likely to recognize Dylan’s voice. They are less likely, however, to recognize this particular song, which allows the audience to simultaneously feel the pleasure of recognition *and* novelty.

The same logic applies to “Just Dropped In,” which is sung by a pre-country, pre-“The Gambler” Kenny Rogers, who was a then member of the psychedelic rock band the First Edition. The Gipsy Kings’ flamenco rendition of the Eagles’ “Hotel California” demonstrates a comparable blend of familiarity and unfamiliarity. All these songs present an odd, quirky spin on the familiar. These songs are not totally obscure, but they are not widely known, either. They signify “cool” or “hip” choices in that they occupy a political-cultural zone slightly left of the mainstream. The choices convey a sense of “This is Dylan, but not the Dylan you know,” or, “Check out this version of ‘Hotel California’—you won’t even recognize it at first.” “I Got it Bad (And That Ain’t Good)” is not just Nina Simone; it’s Nina Simone with Duke Ellington. “You’ve never heard ‘Dead Flowers’ until you’ve heard it covered by Townes Van Zandt,” the film seems to be saying. This is what I mean when I say that, as a viewer watching and listening to *Lebowski*, one cannot help but feel the presence of

a knowing, hip, musical curator, one who plays the role of both cultural historian and cultural tastemaker. It almost feels, at times, as if the film is an occasion for simply spinning and enjoying old records, ones that have been almost, but not entirely, forgotten.

The film music curation displayed in *Lebowski* is driven by a desire to avoid the obvious or the cliché (and, from the other direction, to avoid the unknown or obscure). This desire was pointedly expressed by Ethan Coen in an interview. He insisted that, for *Lebowski*, the brothers wanted “no lava lamps or that kind of shit. No Day-Glo posters on the wall of [the Dude’s] house. No Grateful Dead music on the soundtrack” (Zlabinger 97). This desire to avoid the trite helps explain why the Dude hates the Eagles, a group that would have been an obvious choice to broadly signify the cultural context of California in the 1960s and 70s. Instead, the Dude prefers the more authentic, primal sounds of Credence Clearwater Revival, a choice that is not as obvious as the Eagles, but not completely out of left field, either, for the band was just as popular and well-known as the Eagles and would be closely associated with California hippies like the Dude. Wanting to avoid the obvious but still remain within the bounds of the recognizable also explains why the filmmakers used the Gipsy Kings’ Spanish flamenco version of “Hotel California” rather than the Eagles’ original version, as well as Townes Van Zandt’s cover of “Dead Flowers” instead of the Rolling Stones’ original. As Joel Coen states, “The idea of using a song that’s recognizable, but a version which is much more obscure, had the right feeling to us” (Willman). The way the Coens avoid the obvious but stop short of the unknown in their song choices differentiates them from comparable indie filmmakers who use a lot of music, like Quentin Tarantino, whose choices often tend to fall on the more obscure end of the spectrum. When considering these song choices in the context of the auteur as a concept rather than a flesh-and-blood person, *Lebowski* unearths a number of songs and groups that project the image of the film’s “author” as someone with a refined and discriminating taste in popular music and culture.

Consider, for example, the choice of the Monks' "I Hate You," which plays in the bowling alley when Walter pulls a gun on Smokey (Jimmie Dale Gilmore). Formed by American GIs in West Germany in the mid-1960s, the proto-punk sound of the Monks, as well as their eccentric image, was explicitly promoted as anti-Beatle. The group employed lyrics and a tone that rejected love and happiness, and embraced a more skeptical, antagonistic stance towards mainstream popular culture. Captain Beefhart, Esquivel, and Yma Smac—other artists featured in *Lebowski*—are equally quirky, offbeat musical choices that suggest a deep immersion in the history of popular music. Collectively, these lesser known artists project the image of the musical curator as a kind of aristocrat of pop culture.

This eccentric sense of taste is authenticated or made credible in the film by casting actual musicians in a number of roles. The plot involves a gang of German nihilists that are involved in Bunny's fake kidnapping; one of them is played by Flea, the bassist of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, a Southern California band that has played an integral role in shaping contemporary American popular music. One of the other nihilists—the one who sacrifices her toe—is played by American musician and singer-songwriter Aimee Mann, formerly of the 1980s band 'Til Tuesday. The pacifist Smokey is played by the country music singer-songwriter and producer Jimmy Dale Gilmore. These casting decisions ratify the authenticity of music in the film and support its tastemaking agenda, as well as offer viewers the opportunity to engage in a game of recognition that turns on the not-so-familiar.

The identity and status of these musician-actors could easily suggest that this game is clearly made by and for pop music aficionados, an "in-group" form of film music trivial pursuit. On the other hand, viewers who lack this special knowledge can nevertheless enjoy and appreciate the film just as much as those who possess it, for I would argue that the film ultimately runs on a two-tiered system of meaning, an idea first developed by Noel Carroll. On one level, the audience can enjoy the film as an entertaining story; on another level,

viewers with certain forms of cultural literacy can enjoy the film as a game of allusions that are also meaningful to the narrative. This is not a zero-sum game, for the existence of one tier does not cancel out the other—rather, they co-exist. The music of *Lebowski* engages in this two-tiered strategy, suggesting levels of meaning that go beyond the nuts and bolts of a compelling story; or, at least it does for those who have the right knowledge, or those who are willing to engage in post-viewing research on the film (or in these days of ubiquitous smart phones, during the viewing process itself) to see what they might have missed. At the same time, however, the music can also be enjoyed and understood in purely narrative terms, for most audiences can still recognize the meaning of certain musical properties (such as rhythm, and tone), and the meaning of these properties in the context of the scene. Without knowing anything about the Gipsy Kings, most audiences can recognize their flamenco style and connect it to the character Jesus's Latino identity and all the cultural stereotypes and associations that attend it. However, for those who recognize that the Gipsy Kings are, in fact, playing a cover of the Eagles' song, there are added levels of meaning related to character (the Dude, who hates both the group and Jesus) and setting (suggesting stereotypical images of California in both the 1960s and 1990s) to play with.

Even songs that play mostly as background music in many scenes are, upon closer consideration, revealed to be thoughtfully chosen, or “curated”—that is, meaningfully selected and placed in the film. When the Dude first meets Bunny, for example, Esquivel's “Mucha Muchacha” blares from her portable stereo as she lounges by the pool. Commonly referred to as “space-age bachelor pad music,” Esquivel's musical style is often distinguished by its idiosyncratic musical elements (featuring exotic sounds and instruments), novel stereo effects, nonsense vocals, and complex yet playful harmonies and orchestrations. Another rather obscure (yet not totally unknown) figure in the history of popular music, Esquivel enjoyed a minor revival in the 1990s and early 2000s, a trend evident in Hollywood film

soundtracks like the one for *Lebowski*. As Rebecca Leydon observes, Esquivel's music is "closely tied to the particular representations of bachelorhood constructed in mass media" in the 1950s and 60s, particularly the images of the "leisurely bachelor" that often appeared in the early issues of *Playboy* magazine (167). "Mucha Muchacha" is an interesting choice to characterize the nihilistic decadence of Bunny in that it re-casts the "leisurely bachelor" as female rather than male.

Another instance in which a pop song assumes a subtle, diegetic presence, yet, once recognized, unlocks added layers of meaning, is the use of the Monks' "I Hate You" in the bowling alley where Walter pulls a gun on Smokey for supposedly crossing the line. While the Monks are considered a rather esoteric group in relation to mainstream-commercial pop music, they nevertheless enjoy a cult status among musicians and pop music aficionados for their cultural non-conformity and unconventional musical style. The Monks are often perceived as an anti-war group, a perception that is rooted in lyrics of songs like "Monk Time." On the surface, the aggressive tone and lyrics of "I Hate You" would seem to reinforce Walter's violent behavior towards Smokey, but more specific knowledge of the group actually reinforces Smokey's pacifist stance, since the Monks were well known for their anti-war position. This particular cultural context links up with the many other instances in which violence, aggression, and war are questioned in *Lebowski*. This is an example of a song that can be read in two contradictory ways, depending on how much the audience knows about it. While it can often be tricky to argue for authorial intention, one could nevertheless mount a compelling argument that "I Hate You" functions as an allusion that offers ironic authorial commentary on the scene; here, the film music auteur is using the song to critique, rather than condone, violence and aggression. However, without background knowledge of the song, the viewer could read the musical properties of the song—the primal rhythm and drum beats, the angry-sounding vocals, and the distorted

instruments—as sympathetic to violence and aggression. As this example suggests, it is not easy to control the meaning of a song precisely because of its two-tiered system of meaning—with musical properties and our perception of them on one tier, and background or intellectual knowledge (history and lyrics) on another tier. In any case, this tension should not detract from my main point here, which is that even songs that occupy mostly a background position in *Lebowski* are thoughtfully chosen and placed, thus reinforcing the presence of a knowledgeable, self-reflexive, curatorial film music author.

Musical allusions like many of the ones discussed above, because they might seem enigmatic to mainstream audiences, prompt the question of whether or not viewers of *Lebowski* who are among the musically uninitiated will understand these references or whether they are reserved exclusively for experts. Filmmakers, like the Coens, who rely so heavily on allusion for textual meaning are always open to charges of elitism, the idea being that the filmmaker has made a film that the average film-goer will not be able to understand or “get.” There are no easy answers to this issue. I would propose, however, that rather than assuming that the musical allusions in the film are planted exclusively for the benefit of knowing viewers, another way to think about this question is to return to the idea of a curatorial approach. Many of Burnett’s comments suggest that the use of less well-known music in *Lebowski* was motivated by a desire to rescue it from obscurity by re-introducing it to the public. From this perspective, while some viewers may not pick up on the associations upon first viewing, if they are intrigued enough, they will hopefully seek to learn more about it. The musical allusions of *Lebowski* can be seen as generative rather than elitist because the film re-circulates older music that might have otherwise remained marginalized or neglected.

The mention of authorship warrants discussion here. As I emphasized in chapter one, the notion of authorship in the context of film music design is a complex, multi-layered issue. Whether one considers the notion of the author in literal or symbolic ways, a film’s music

design often tends to be a collaborative, synthetic process, involving the influence of multiple agents and agencies. On the level of production, Burnett and the Coens support a collaborative approach. While the Coens already had a number of unusual songs in mind as they developed the script, including Dylan's "The Man in Me" and "Just Dropped In," Burnett, who according to Joel Coen "has such a wide and deep knowledge of music," introduced "a lot of the less obvious stuff, like Yma Sumac, Meredith Monk, and this track from an Italian soft-core porn music album" (Willman). What is significant about these remarks is *not* that they determine precisely who contributed which songs to the film, but that they gesture towards a symbiotic relationship oriented towards realizing the overall concept or vision of the film, what Burnett calls the "score." Burnett elaborated upon his notion of the "score" by emphasizing the difference between a "needle drop" and a "score":

Anyone can put a piece of music to a scene. You go to your collection, find 20 pieces of music and one of them may connect to the scene somehow. A score is different: it tells the story from beginning to end and it has to tell stories within that story. It has its own identity and that's a profound thing to create. (Hebbelthwaite)

Burnett's distinction between a "needle drop" and "score" is a crucial one, for it extends more value and meaning to musical choices in Coen films on both individual and collective levels. As Burnett points out, it is rather easy to match any number of different songs to any number of different scenes. The combinatorial promiscuity of scene and song in film was realized by George Lucas and Walter Murch in the process of selecting and applying music to *American Graffiti* (1973):

Walter Murch did the sound montages, and the amazing thing we found was that we could take almost any song and put it on almost any scene and it would work. You'd put a song down on one scene, and you'd find all sorts of

parallels. And you could take another song and put it down there, and it would still seem as if the song had been written for that scene . . . they just sort of meshed, no matter how you threw them together. (Lucas 40)

Lucas highlights how arbitrary the relationship between song and scene can be. Not just any song will work, of course, but there will likely be any number of viable options that offer some form of parallel or connection to any given scene. What Lucas reveals is that it is easy to do a “needle drop.” What is not so easy, however, is to develop a “score”—to tell a story, through music, from the beginning to the end of a film, and to tell stories within those stories.

The idea of the “score”—using music as a way to not only help tell or support the story on screen, but also to offer other stories within, above, below, or alongside it—suggests something important in considering the authorship of film music in *Lebowski* and other Coen films. It seems clear that, regardless of the individual contributions of Burnett or the Coens, their approach tends to be unified or motivated through the overall musical concept of the film. In this way, the collaborative relationship between Burnett and the Coens can be usefully characterized as one that is ultimately “score-oriented,” a relationship wherein all parties are committed to designing the music to tell a story as well as stories within stories. Moreover, Burnett’s remarks on what constitutes a “score” offer a useful interpretive strategy for reading film music, a process that involves trying to comprehend not only how individual songs function within individual scenes, but also how the whole score hangs together, to try to tease out what kind of story or stories the score is trying to tell.

There are a number of ways to apply this strategy. One is to consider the stories told by song lyrics, and then consider the meaning of those stories in relation to the story being told in the scene in which the song plays. The lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “The Man in Me,” for instance, tells the story of a man who needs a certain kind of woman to “get through” to him. The song is heard twice in *Lebowski*: in the opening credit sequence, and in the flying carpet

dream sequence. In the first instance, the song is used somewhat ironically, for while the song itself privileges conventional notions of masculinity, the exaggerated, humorous, cartoonish presentation of the male bowlers questions these gender ideals by ironically undermining them. The use of music for ironic purposes suggests that trying to figure out the meaning of stories within stories through popular music can be a complicated endeavor. In the second instance where the song plays, the dream sequence, the story of the song correlates more closely to the specific situation on screen, as it foreshadows the eventual sexual coupling between Maude and the Dude. Apparently, it takes a woman like Maude—that is, one who is more self-directed—to “get through” to the Dude, a character who is blown around by forces beyond his control, much like the tumbling tumbleweed of the opening sequence. In fact, it is only after Maude “gets through” to the Dude through sexual intercourse that he is able to decode the machinations surrounding Bunny’s kidnapping.

The Sons of the Pioneers’ nostalgic country-music song “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” which plays over the opening sequence, also suggests stories within stories. The lyrics of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” literally tell the story of a “roaming cowboy” who rides his horse “all day long” while the tumbleweeds “sing their lonely song.” The tumbleweed becomes a metaphor for the lonesome cowboy, “lonely but free.” The way the tumbleweed itself circulates through the urban spaces of L.A. foreshadows a similar pattern of movement for the Dude throughout the film, circumambulating the underbellies and overbellies of the city, just like the plot of the Raymond Chandler novel that inspires the title of the film. At the outset of the narrative, the Dude exists in a way that is similar in spirit to the drifting, carefree cowboy of the song. Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds seems to be precisely what the Dude did prior to the case of mistaken identity that sucks him into the plot. In fact, the Dude’s main motivation throughout the film seems to be to return to this relaxed, carefree “abiding” state, to borrow the Dude’s own terminology. Following every misfortune that

befalls him, the Dude either returns home or to the bowling alley to re-stabilize his existence. This shuffling between home and outside of home is an important structural binary in the film. Each time the Dude leaves home, he is violently assaulted in some way, either through physical brutality, or through violence inflicted upon his car, which is first stolen, and then finally torched by the German nihilists. At the end of the film, however, the Dude comes full circle, resuming his pre-rug urination existence, an existence that seems to mainly consist of his ability to peacefully and lazily “abide.” The Dude returning to a more drift-like existence at the end of the film is aptly captured by the final verse of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds”: “I’ll keep rolling along/Deep in my heart is a song/Here on the range I belong/Drifting along with the tumbling tumbleweeds.” The lyrics of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” tell a story that helps tell another story: the story of the film. The way in which these individual songs link up to help tell the larger story of the film truly embodies Burnett’s notion of a score as opposed to a collection of clever needle drops. Individually, songs tell micro-narratives (stories within stories), and together, they form something of a macro-narrative (the score). This kind of scheme or approach is what chiefly differentiates the practice of “scoring” from merely “matching.”

It is important to stress that, as stylistic devices, scores work in concert with many other narrative tools in a film. Music is designed to work in relation to other formal devices like cinematography, acting, editing, lighting, dialogue, and characterization. These elements work together to create a film’s overall style, which is itself part and parcel of a broader historical context. Historically, film music has played different roles in different contexts. In classical Hollywood, film music tended to play more of a secondary or supporting role to the narrative. As Claudia Gorbman famously observed, one of the primary design principles of classical Hollywood film music was that it be *unheard*. Gorbman is not literally implying that the music was to be silent, for it needed to be detectable by the audience, but that it was

designed to be unnoticed or *underscored*, existing just beneath the audience's conscious awareness. This design principle is in keeping with the broader goal of classical Hollywood style as argued by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, who hold that style is subordinated to storytelling for the sake of narrative continuity. However, Coen films like *Lebowski* belong to a different stylistic regime, one that is commonly referred to as post-classical.

The notion of a post-classical cinema is a vexed issue in cinema studies. The concept was initially developed to account for significant industrial and aesthetic shifts in Hollywood filmmaking following the break up and reorganization of the classical studio system around the middle of the twentieth century. One of the most outspoken critics of the “post” in post-classical has been David Bordwell. Along with Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, Bordwell initially outlined the industrial, ideological, and aesthetic contours of the classical Hollywood style in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. Since the book's publication in the mid-1980s, a variety of scholars, including Henry Jenkins, Steve Neale, Thomas Schatz, and Kathleen Rowe, have developed the idea of a post-classical cinema to make sense of dramatic changes in mainstream narrative films and filmmaking after 1960. Bordwell, however, has argued rigorously and persistently against such a notion, preferring instead to emphasize the continuation of classical norms, albeit in a more intensified form. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, Bordwell observes that while “some novel strategies of plot and style have risen to prominence,” these innovations are fundamentally underwritten by “principles that are firmly rooted in the history of studio moviemaking” (intro). A theory of the “post” classical is thus unjustified, in Bordwell's view, for while many changes have indeed arisen in the industrial organization and aesthetic features of Hollywood cinema, they should be properly regarded as extensions of, rather than a break from, studio-era principles.

Despite Bordwell's claims, many scholars have continued to develop the notion of a post-classical cinema. Eleftheria Thanouli, in "Post-Classical Narration," outlines a number of narrative strategies that define post-studio era movies (183-96). By systematically considering each component of Bordwell's three narrative systems of classical style, which include narrative logic, cinematic space, and cinematic time, Thanouli re-defines said systems by examining a range of contemporary films. Her analysis is based on a group of international "indie" films that include, among others, *Moulin Rouge!* (Luhrmann, 2001), *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *Amelie* (Jeunet, 2001), *Lola Rennet* (Tykwer, 1998), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999), and *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996). While Thanouli addresses many key ways in which post-classical cinema differs from classical cinema, she does not discuss film music.

In fact, discussions of post-classical film music are mostly absent from scholarly discourse. An exception is K. J. Donnelly's essay, "The Classical Film Score Forever? *Batman*, *Batman Returns* and Post-Classical Film Music," which outlines ways in which "post-classical Hollywood employs and orders music, both in terms of using classically inspired forms and more recent procedures" (142). Rather than arguing either for or against the notion of a post-classical cinema, suggests that it is more productive to analyze ways in which music in contemporary films is different from as well as similar to music in the classical era (142). Although I've suggested that *Lebowski* is a post-classical film, Donnelly's claim that the strategies of contemporary films both converge and depart from classical norms is a more reasonable and flexible one, and is the position I plan to adopt in discussing *Lebowski*. My goal here is not to argue either for or against the existence of a post-classical cinema; rather, it is to use the concept as a helpful analytical tool to unpack how music operates in *Lebowski*.

In post-classical cinema, music is typically intended to be *heard*, to play a central role in a film's meaning. It is designed to stand out, to be aurally foregrounded, to be noticeable and noticed by the audience. This is a different role for film music than the one it inhabited in the classical era, where it tended to play more in the background. Music in post-classical cinema, by contrast, tends to occupy more of a foregrounded position. In some post-classical films, music can even become so central or important so as to become a pilot of the visual action rather than merely being content to ride as a passenger. There are moments in *Lebowski* when the music seems to become a driver or conductor of other stylistic elements, as if the visual action is being designed around the music rather than the other way around. In the following section, I explore ways in which the popular music of *Lebowski* plays a primary, rather than secondary, role in driving or coordinating other post-classical stylistic elements of the film.

An important question to consider in the context of post-classical music is the notion of diegetic versus non-diegetic music. This concept is particularly important to understanding how music works in *Lebowski*. The basic difference between diegetic and non-diegetic film music is typically thought to reside in the audience's ontological perception of the source or location of the music, i.e., where the music is coming from. If the viewer perceives the music to realistically issue from within the fictional world of the film—a bowling alley jukebox, for instance—then it is said to be diegetic. If the source of the music is perceived to be issuing from somewhere outside the fictional world of the film, however, then the music is said to be non-diegetic. Both classical and post-classical films frequently rely on both strategies; however, they are realized within different aesthetic contexts. In post-classical film, many filmic elements, including music, tend towards self-reflexive stylization designed to attract the attention of the audience. In the classical era, however, technical elements like music

were conceived to be subtler and more unobtrusive, more “unheard,” in order to help keep the viewer focused on the story.

Lebowski is interesting because it shows both similarities and differences with the classical approach. The continuity *Lebowski* demonstrates with respect to the classical approach lies chiefly with the fact that the overwhelming majority of songs in the film fall within the category of source music. In nearly every instance in which a song is heard, the music’s source is made to seem to lie somewhere within the film world. A frequent source is the bowling alley sound system (presumably a jukebox, but I don’t recall it ever being visibly revealed in the film), which plays songs like Dylan’s “The Man in Me,” the Monks’ “I Hate You,” the Gipsy Kings’ cover of “Hotel California,” Booker T. & The M.G.s’ “Behave Yourself.” Many songs also issue from home and car stereo systems. Esquivel’s “Mucha Muchacha” plays from a small portable stereo sitting on a table next to Bunny; Captain Beefheart’s “Her Eyes Are a Blue Million Miles” issues from the Dude’s home stereo; CCR’s “Lookin’ Out My Back Door,” the Eagles’ “Peaceful Easy Feeling,” and a host of other songs issue from car stereos. Table 1, located at the end of this chapter, includes information on the source status of all songs that play in the film, and in most cases, the source of all of these songs is located somewhere in the mise-en-scene.

The strategy of attempting to uphold a consistent verisimilitude in how music is situated could suggest the Coens are devoted to upholding a conventional kind of realism. However, there are many moments in the film in which a conventional sense of verisimilitude is undermined through music. For example, the first song to play in the film is the Sons of the Pioneers’ “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” which accompanies The Stranger’s (Sam Elliot) voice-over narration. Technically, because there is no visible source shown on screen, the ontological status of the song would be considered non-diegetic. However, this status is not static; it evolves as the narrative unfolds. When the opening sequence cuts to the inside of

Ralph's supermarket, where the Dude is shopping for Half and Half, a Muzak version of "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" issues from the supermarket stereo system. The song transgresses the border between non-diegetic and diegetic zones as well as undermines a conventional sense of realism. After leaving the supermarket, we see the Dude merrily wending his way home, at which point the music assumes its former non-diegetic status—or does it? The Dude seems to be dancing his way home in rhythm to the song as if he is playing it in his mind. This would suggest that the song does have a "real" source within the film world: the Dude's consciousness. Whether or not this is true, the least one could say is that the source of the music is ambiguous, which indicates that the Coens' commitment to upholding a sense of conventional realism is rather weak, at best.

Another example that shows a blurring of both classical and post-classical strategies is the Jesus Quintana (John Turturro) bowling montage. After Brandt (Phillip Seymour Hoffman), the "Big" Lebowski's (David Huddleston) sycophantic servant, offers to pay the Dude to deliver the ransom money to Bunny's kidnappers, the dramatic opening notes of a flamenco-style guitar aurally join a visual cut to the next scene, which opens with an extreme close up of Jesus's purple pants and his two hands reaching down to tie the laces of lavender-colored bowling shoes. The acoustic guitar solo continues to play, a repeating, finger-strummed background rhythm scale decorated by dramatic riffs and flourishes. A medium shot shows Jesus placing his hand over an air dryer, revealing three large, jewel-studded rings and an abnormally long pinky fingernail colored with nail polish. As the guitar intro builds with energy, in slow motion Jesus prepares to roll the ball in comically exaggerated, highly sexualized body language as he lasciviously licks the bright pink bowling ball. Each moment of Jesus's ritual is captured slowly, ensuring the audience does not miss a single detail. After Jesus releases the ball, the camera tracks it all the way down the lane until it knocks down the pins. The next shot comes from behind Jesus, which, as is shortly revealed, is from the

perspective of his teammate, Liam O'Brien (James G. Hossier). After rolling a strike, Jesus turns toward the camera and engages in an ostentatious victory dance as the slow-building guitar solo turns into rapid-fire chord strumming and a strong percussive beat. A hyper-charged, deeply masculine voice starts singing vigorously in Spanish as a quick shot/reverse shot pattern shows Jesus further celebrating his strike by nodding his head and pointing to O'Brien, who reciprocates the gesture. The Dude, Donny, and Walter look on in stupefied amazement as Jesus blows them a kiss, following which, the camera, in time with the song, promptly cuts to a triumphant shot of Jesus throwing his hand up and pointing to the sky as the chorus switches to English, revealing the song to be a cover of the Eagles' "Hotel California."

I describe this sequence in such detail because much of its pleasure lies in its spectacular, moment-by-moment unfolding, but what is even more interesting is that when the sequence begins, the music exists in a rather ambiguous state. Where is it coming from? The mind of Jesus? The bowling alley? Or is it non-diegetic music that exists purely on the soundtrack? There is no dialogue throughout this sequence—it is narrated entirely by music and visuals, much like a music video. The volume of the music is temporarily amplified so that it occupies the aural foreground, which gives it more of a subjective, immersive feel, presumably for the purposes of dramatization. Only after Jesus finishes his flamboyant victory dance is it revealed that the music is actually issuing, not from the non-diegetic soundtrack, but from the stereo system of the bowling alley. In essence, the status of the song has been diegetic the entire time, but the viewer does not discover this until the end of the sequence, when the volume is turned down and it resumes its conventional place as diegetic background music. In this way, the music of *Lebowski* teases the boundary between realism and surrealism, objectivity and subjectivity, between classical and post-classical strategies. Jeff Smith further reminds us that, in this sequence, the "matching of music and

character is, of course, a common principle of classical scoring, and suggests that the Coens seek to adhere to conventions as much as deviate from them” (142). I would add that the conceit of revealing the music to be part of the *mise-en-scene* at the end of the sequence shows some degree of adherence to convention. At the same time, though, the way in which the music starts in a non-diegetic and highly subjective manner, yet evolves to become something different, blurs the boundary between the two ontological states, and in this way, keeps with the highly stylized, self-reflexive aesthetic of post-classical cinema.

This play between two ontological states of film music occurs again in the opening credit sequence, which showcases Bob Dylan’s “The Man in Me.” Like the sequence with *Jesus*, at the outset of this sequence, the music starts playing without disclosing a specific diegetic source—it simply starts playing as part of the soundtrack in the manner of non-diegetic music. Yet at the end of the sequence, it is revealed that the song has been playing in the bowling alley the entire time. This strategy helps ease the transition from highly subjective, stylized sequences of formal play and technical showmanship into a more naturalistic world or reality, where more classical modes of narration assume control of the narrative.

In “Bridging the Gap: Reconsidering the Border between Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music,” Jeff Smith offers another way to think about what is happening in these moments where the music seems neither wholly diegetic nor wholly non-diegetic. Smith points out that many critics have regarded diegetic music as a form of realism because it is routinely employed to maintain a naturalistic, everyday sense of reality, in which music always issues from a verifiable, concrete source. However, as Smith argues, “nowhere else in film studies is the notion of ‘diegetic’ wholly equated with a concept of realism,” for “[e]lements of *mise-en-scene* or cinematography, for example, are often treated in a highly stylized fashion, but a film’s departure from realism does not disqualify spaces and objects from being considered a

part of the film's diegesis" (4). Smith demonstrates that in films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene, 1920), *Midnight Cowboy* (Schlesinger, 1969), and *Dogville* (Von Trier, 2003), there are many elements that would not qualify as "realistic," so to speak, but would nevertheless be considered part of the diegesis. Smith argues that the particular ways music behaves in the two montage sequences just discussed should be regarded as shifts in the "expressive qualities of the music" that are "comparable to other kinds of expressive devices in the cinema, such as the use of slow motion in action or fight scenes" (14). In essence, music can be used as an expressive tool of the auteur, and therefore, in the moments just discussed when the presence of the music is noticeably increased, the effect is to heighten the presence of the auteur, the controlling presence of the director, or in the case of *Lebowski*, as I have been arguing, the presence of the curator. What this also means is that just because a lot of popular songs in *Lebowski* are diegetic, they do not necessarily point to a conventional formalism. Rather, the use of diegetic music in *Lebowski* means that the Coens tend to approach popular music as a way to support a plausible reality while at the same time exploiting it as a key expressive device for the purposes of intensified stylization and character subjectivity. The Coens use music in ways that exploit both classical and post-classical techniques. The classical side of their approach is located in the desire to consistently disclose a visible source for the music. The post-classical side is on display when the music acts as an expressive tool, appearing temporarily detached from the mise-en-scene only to later resume its "natural" place as stylistic intensification gives way to story continuity.

There are other ways in which the Coens' use of film music shows both conformity to and deviation from the classical era. Characterization is one of the driving forces of many Coen films, and in *Lebowski*, one of the driving forces of characterization is music. One of the situational comic ironies throughout the film is the incongruence between the setting of

the film—the early 1990s—and the personalities of the main characters, who are defined by the music and culture of earlier eras, particularly the 1960s and 70s. If, as a filmmaker, you want to create characters that are stuck in the past, how do you do it? Obviously, there are many ways, including speech, costume, props, and so forth; however, linking characters with certain kinds of music or certain songs offers a powerful tool. The Coens actually had this strategy in mind early in the film’s development, as Ethan Coen notes: “[W]e were trying to find signature songs for each of the characters, so the only thing they share is that nothing is particularly contemporary sounding. They’re all from previous eras, consistent with the characters, who had attitudes shaped by the ‘60s, ‘70s, or earlier” (Willman). Thus, the identity of many *Lebowski* characters is suggested by their musical choices or preferences. The Dude’s character is defined by a number of songs by Credence Clearwater Revival, Captain Beefheart, Bob Dylan, and inversely, by his intense dislike of the Eagles. In one way or another, all these songs and artists effectively associate the Dude with the counter-culture era of the 60s and 70s. Bunny’s (Tara Reid) highly sexualized waywardness is suggested by Esquivel’s “Mucha Muchacha” and a cover of “Viva Las Vegas.” Maude’s (Julianne Moore) eccentricity is expressed by her electronica record collection. The lounge lizard pornographer Jackie Treehorn (Ben Gazzara) is associated with the exotic and erotic sounds of Yma Sumac and Henry Mancini, while The Stranger (Sam Elliot), who is a cowboy, is closely linked to the Sons of the Pioneers.

In one sense, using music to develop characters is nothing new in film and shows that the Coens are, on some levels, rather conventional. Considered from a historical perspective, however, the use and noticeability of so much popular music marks a departure from classical norms. As Claudia Gorbman has emphasized, the “unheard melodies” of classical film music were intended to work mostly in subtle ways, existing on a level just below the viewer’s conscious awareness. Much of the meaning of *Lebowski*, on the other hand, relies on the

conspicuousness of the music: it is designed to be clearly heard and identifiable. One of the central conceits of *Lebowski*—the gap between the present tense of the story and the anachronistic personalities of many characters—would be lost if the songs and what they connote were not recognized by the audience.

One way to help give clearer definition to the Coens' approach is to compare it to a similar post-classical film that also relies heavily on popular music. Released just a year prior to *Lebowski*, Paul Thomas Anderson's (1997) revolves around the rise and fall of adult video star "Dirk Diggler" (Mark Wahlberg) in the pornography industry of the 1970s and 80s. The soundtrack is saturated with popular music, as the filmmakers utilize pre-existing songs to signify time and place, suggest authorial commentary, and develop characters. While the songs in *Lebowski* are used to highlight how many of the characters are culturally out of sync with the times, *Boogie Nights* tends to match the period of the music with the period of the film's setting. This difference was highlighted by Joel Coen in a 1998 interview, in which he stated that "the difference from *Boogie Nights* . . . is that *The Big Lebowski* doesn't really take place in the past. It's a contemporary movie about what's become of people who were formed and defined by that earlier period" (Ciment and Niogre 102). Furthermore, in relation to the narrative action, the meaning of the music in *Lebowski* tends to work in more associative—and less literal—ways, avoiding the Greek-chorus-style approach of *Boogie Nights*, whereby the music seems to comment more directly on the action. In one sequence, Rollergirl (Heather Graham) and Dirk Diggler (Mark Wahlberg) have sex in front of Jack Horner (Burt Reynolds) while Melanie's "Brand New Key" plays on the soundtrack, a song that features the memorable lyrics, "I got a brand new pair of roller skates/ You got a brand new key/ I think that we should get together and try them out, to see." On a metaphorical level, the lyrics of the song are well matched to the sexual action on screen. When Amber Waves (Julianne Moore) inadvertently misses a call from her estranged son during one of

Jack's parties, we hear the song "Lonely Boy" playing in the background. While Dirk, Reid Rothchild (John C. Reilly), and Scotty (Phillip Seymour Hoffman) go shopping for shoes, we hear K. C. and the Sunshine Band's "Boogie Shoes." Songs such as these share a fairly, referential relation to the visual action. Some songs in *Boogie Nights* are also used to undermine the status of certain characters. In the next scene, where "Boogie Shoes" continues to play, Dirk emphasizes to Rollergirl the fact that his shoes are "real Italian leather" while they dance. As Kelly Ritter points out in "Spectacle at the Disco: *Boogie Nights*, Soundtrack, and the New American Musical," in this sequence "Boogie Shoes" is used to "mock the vapid, image-related values that Dirk embraces" (171).

For *Lebowski*, Burnett has stated that he specifically avoided using popular songs in this condescending way: "I didn't want to use anything that commented specifically on the people or looked down on or really stood outside of them" (Willman). While this may have been Burnett's stated intention, it is questionable whether this strategy was followed in the film. As I mentioned earlier, there are moments in *Lebowski* in which the music does seem calculated to comically undermine the seriousness of certain characters, like the use of Mozart as applied to the "big" Lebowski, or the use of "Run through the Jungle" in the briefcase hand-off scene. Despite these few exceptions, my overall sense is that the music of *Boogie Nights* is more often than not used to make characters look quite pathetic while in *Lebowski* the music is a bit more playful towards characters. In fact, there are moments in *Lebowski* when songs lend a strong sense of sympathy to characters. Towards the end of the film, the Coens offer Townes Van Zandt's deeply melancholic "Dead Flowers" as a musical epitaph for the passing of Donny. In any case, while *Lebowski* and *Boogie Nights* are both post-classical in many of their musical strategies, *Lebowski* presents a more subtle, indirect, and evocative use of popular music than *Boogie Nights*, particularly on the level of character.

Music is also enlisted in *Lebowski* in the construction of post-classical cinematic space and time. In terms of space, post-classical films tend to operate according to the dictates of a “digital logic” that places an increased emphasis on the graphic properties of the image, resulting in a heightening of visual stylization (Thanouli 189-90). Moreover, the post-classical conception of cinematic time tends to be more flexible and more noticeably mediated than in the classical paradigm. Bob Dylan’s “The Man in Me” orchestrates both of these post-classical principles in the opening credit montage. After dunking the Dude’s head in the toilet and urinating on his cherished rug (the one that “really tied the room together”), Jackie Treehorn’s thugs realize they have mistaken the Dude for the “big” Lebowski. The percussive slam of the door as the thugs storm out of the Dude’s house imparts a beat that cuts to a black screen, which is followed up by a drum beat that cues Dylan’s song. Dylan’s “la la la” singing, as well as other playful elements of the song, suggests a whimsical, oddly psychedelic, quality that is visually matched by the Googie neon stars that appear on the title screen and that graphically mark the interior and exterior of the bowling alley. The plodding beat of the song, combined with the slow-motion rendering of the bowlers, creates a strange, ballet-like effect, which is comically undercut by the farcically grotesque presentation of the bowlers and their cartoonishly exaggerated movements and expressions. As Donny rolls, the volume of the music lowers and is relegated to the aural background while the dialogue comes to the fore of the soundtrack and the slow-motion visuals return to a more conventional speed.

The plodding rhythm of “The Man in Me” orchestrates the speed of the action on screen. The synchronization of music and action in film is commonly referred to as “mickeymousing” in film music discourse. Mickeymousing describes instances in which it appears that music is determining the rhythm of the action on screen. The slow motion of the opening montage sequence accords with the post-classical emphasis on the highly mediated

reduction and expansion of cinematic time. The frequent speeding up and slowing down of time in post-classical cinema is part and parcel of its formal self-reflexivity in that these stylistic choices serve as technical flourishes designed to be noticed by the viewer to stimulate an awareness of temporal mediation. As a whole, “The Man in Me” aurally dominates and directs the sequence, nearly overwhelming the visuals at times. While this sequence displays a number of post-classical features, it was nevertheless common in the classical era for displays of aestheticism such as these to appear in credit sequences. In such moments, the music would often depart from its “unheard” status in the narrative to temporarily assume more of a “heard” presence. In this sense, *Lebowski* demonstrates continuities as well as discontinuities with the classical regime. However, montages like the one featured in the opening appear quite a number of times in the primary narrative of the film. This is significant in that rather than being relegated only to the beginning and ending of the film, the norm in classical works, such a unique treatment of music throughout the film represents a pattern that speaks to the Coens’ distinctly post-classical style.

Another shift that distinguishes post-classical from classical cinema pertains to type of realism. Classical realism adheres to Andre Bazin’s conception of the screen as a windowed world that strives to be as transparent and inconspicuous as possible. The presentation of reality in post-classical cinema, however, strives to “capture the real in more contemporary terms by establishing a hypermediated realism,” one that not only makes the viewer aware of the presence of the filmmaker and his or her tools, but also “becomes hospitable to the most subjective experiences bringing as a corollary a high dose of subjective realism that attempts to visualize the innermost mental and emotional states” (Thanouli 186). *Lebowski* adopts this tendency towards hypermediated realism by incorporating a number of surreal dream sequences—what the Coens refer to as “Kafka breaks”—which serve to narrate

the Dude's unconscious. Music plays a key role in puppeteering these highly subjective, expressionistic sequences.

One of the clearest examples of music mediating reality is the "Gutterballs" dream sequence, which features "Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)." Written by Nashville singer-songwriter Mickey Newbury, the song became a hit single for Kenny Rogers and the First Edition in 1968. As a result of imbibing a drugged White Russian, courtesy of Jackie Treehorn, the Dude passes out. The narration enters into his intoxicated inner dream state, which is initiated by a classic Hollywood style title sequence in which a heavily phallic bowling pin penetrates two bowling balls. This title sequence cues the playing of "Just Dropped In." The song begins with guitar riffs played in reverse, creating an otherworldly sound that primes the psychedelic nature of the dream. A Busby Berkeley-style musical number ensues, replete with tightly choreographed movements performed by a large number of flamboyantly costumed dancing girls who form visually striking geometric patterns.

The surreal content of the song's lyrics, combined with the psychedelic associations of the song, musically underline the hallucinogenic imagery of the visual action. The rhythm of the song syncs with the movements and gestures of characters in ways similar to a number in a classic Hollywood musical. Following the parodic title sequence, a miniaturized Dude steps in time to the beat of the song; he is dwarfed by a *mise-en-scene* of a gigantic grey hallway highly reminiscent of German expressionist cinema. Images in the sequence often intersect with the lyrics of the song. When Rogers sings, "I tripped on a cloud and fell eight miles high" and "tore my mind on a jagged sky," the visual track reveals a wall of bowling shoes that extends all the way up to a full moon surrounded by clouds. The Dude continually moves to the rhythm of the song, dancing and stepping his way down a checkered stairway that infinitely recedes into outer space. The sequence as a whole, which is part Berkeley

pastiche, part music video, reveals how popular song can be enlisted as a post-classical strategy for rendering intensely subjective, hallucinatory states of mind.

The other instance in which the music and visual narration dive into the wreck that is the Dude's unconscious occurs when one of Maude's thugs knock him out. This cues the second playing of Dylan's "The Man in Me." While the first instance seemed, lyrically, to relate to the action on screen as a playful mocking of masculinity, in this scene, the lyrics have more of a direct relationship to the plot. The heterosexual relationship of the song foreshadows the eventual sexual coupling of the Dude and Maude, who both appear in the sequence magically flying over L.A. at night. Like "Just Dropped In," the psychedelic connotations of the "The Man in Me," both in terms of style and the extra-filmic associations of Dylan and his musical movement of the late 60s, imbues the sequence with a surrealistic connotation. Interestingly, the presence of the song has a realistic basis in the Dude's non-hallucinatory reality, for presumably, the "B" side of the cassette tape the Dude is listening to just prior to being knocked unconscious by one of Maude's henchmen stands for "Bob" (as in Dylan). In addition to frequently hosting highly subjective states of mind, these intensely musical sequences also intertextualize a number of different genres, another aspect to consider in *Lebowski's* post-classical approach to music.

In the context of genre, post-classical cinema "turns the hybrid and multi-generic films into the norm" while simultaneously undertaking "an archeological investigation into the past of the classical genres" (Thanouli 187). The popular music of *Lebowski* sponsors a post-classical approach to genre in a number of ways. First, much like *Blood Simple*, the Coens' debut film, the pop songs of *Lebowski* both distance and connect the narrative to its generic predecessors. The title of *The Big Lebowski* recalls Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and the crime/noir genre associated with it. Cinematic adaptations of Chandler's novel, and film noir in general, predominantly avoided popular song in favor of classical

underscoring. The 1946 version, directed by Howard Hawks and starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, was scored by none other than Max Steiner, one of the most well-known film music composers of the classical era. While *Lebowski* parodies the hard-boiled detective film genre in a number of ways, the use of pop songs in *Lebowski* sets it apart from more formulaic renditions of the crime/noir genre.

The music of the opening sequence of *Lebowski* also suggests an affinity for the western genre, which incorporated popular song more frequently than film noir/detective/crime films in the studio era. “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” a classic country-western song popularized by the Sons of the Pioneers in the 1930s, cues the opening sequence of *Lebowski*. Founded in Los Angeles in 1933 by Leonard Sly (more popularly known as Roy Rogers), Bob Nolan, and Tim Spencer, the Sons of the Pioneers made itself known in the burgeoning country music scene of the period by “demonstrating a level of musicianship that far exceeded most of the region’s groups and trading the well-worn string-band format for a pop-derived vocal trio” (Stimeling 78). With its melodramatic string arrangement, high-toned male vocal harmonies, and the sound effect of clippity-clopping hooves in the background, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” nostalgically invokes the romantic western. The lyrics deploy the familiar generic trope of the lone cowboy rolling along the wide, empty plains, like the tumbleweed of the title, a potent visual symbol that relates to the Dude, the genre, and *The Stranger*.

The Sons generically frame the first images of the film, which are captured through a low tracking shot of scrub brush desert, an iconic western terrain. The screen is overlaid with opening credits presented in an “old West” typeface as a deep, masculine, heavily accented voice-over announces the three magic words of the western: “Way out west,” which is as true a hallmark of westerns as “Once upon a time” is to fairy tales. Sam Elliot, star of contemporary westerns such as *Tombstone*, lends his voice to the voice-over narration,

speaking in a purposefully clichéd cowboy voice. *Lebowski* clearly announces the presence of the western genre and its accompanying cultural baggage by studding the opening sequence with potent triggers archeologically exhumed from a prior genre. More than just music is curated by the Coens—genres are curated, too.

Interestingly, as the sequence continues, allusions to the western evolve into allusions to the film noir/detective/crime genre. When the western is cued, the light on the ground is sunny and bright, but as *The Stranger's* (Sam Elliot) narration turns to the Dude and Los Angeles, light turns to shadow, and then to night. The camera follows a tumbling tumbleweed as it slips over the lip of a slope, giving way to a wide shot of a sprawling, modern Los Angeles. The tumbleweed moves in a way that makes it seem as if it is alive, assuming a character-like role in the film. It overlooks the city and then rolls through it, tourist-like, providing the viewer with a panoramic sense of its environs. The fade to black, along with an iconic shot of L.A. lit up at night, signifies the film noir/crime genre, which is associated with darkness in both moral theme and aesthetic, and is moreover often set in dense urban spaces, such as those found in California. As L.A. is revealed, a vibrating cymbal intrudes on “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” until it rises to a crash, creating a sense of fatalistic foreshadowing, a common noir convention. The tone of this sound effect literally and figuratively clashes with the light and breezy tone of “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” generating a sonic dissonance. At this point, both the crime and western genres have been fully invoked. The manner in which this sequence unfolds reinforces the argument that the Coen pastiche functions as a kind of survey of American history and popular culture. It is as if the tumbleweed rolls through a cultural narrative, one that sees the bright, sunny optimism of the early western evolve into the densely urbanized, overpopulated noir of Los Angeles; it is here in this scene that the currents of American history and culture ultimately converge.

The camera continues to track the tumbling tumbleweed as it rolls through familiar signifiers of LA: an overpass, a late-night taco stand, a car wash, until arriving at land's end—the coast of the Pacific ocean, the geographic and symbolic endpoint of American civilization. Aurally, this entire sequence is accompanied by the voice-over narration of *The Stranger*, as well as “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” both of which issue from a non-diegetic source located somewhere outside the visual action of the frame. However, the source status of the music evolves and changes as the sequence progresses. When the scene cuts to the interior of a brightly lit modern supermarket, “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” morphs into an instrumental Muzak version that diegetically issues from the speakers in the aisle where we are introduced to our “hero,” the Dude, who is dressed in boxer shorts, a robe, and jelly slippers—a slacker of the late 1960s stoner variety. After he buys his Half and Half, the scene cuts to a shot of the Dude merrily wending his way home, at which point the “Tumbling Tumbleweeds” morphs back into its original form and ends as the Dude enters his house.

This Dude is clearly not the heroic cowboy or detective of genres past. As is typical of Coen pastiche, genres are installed and then upended through quirky inversions; this particular twist is mediated by Robert Altman's 1973 film, *The Long Goodbye*. In Altman's treatment, Phillip Marlowe is played by a grungy Elliott Gould, a Bogart counterpoint. At the beginning of the film, Marlowe goes on a late-night run to a grocery store, like the Dude, but to buy cat food rather than Half and Half. When Marlowe returns to his apartment, he finds himself embroiled in a confusing mystery, just as the Dude returns home only to be beaten up by two men due to a case of mistaken identity, thereby launching the convoluted series of events that follow.

The similarities between *The Big Lebowski* and *The Long Goodbye* do not stop at plot, however. The protean nature of the musical soundtrack in the opening sequence of *Lebowski* strongly recalls the innovative film music strategy used by Altman in *The Long Goodbye*.

The soundtrack for Altman's film only contains two songs, "Hooray for Hollywood" and the theme song, "The Long Goodbye," which was composed by John Williams and Johnny Mercer. The latter song dominates the musical soundtrack of the film. Altman's idea was to have the song play repeatedly throughout the film in different styles, depending on the context of the scene. According to John Williams,

The music was a terrific idea—entirely Bob's. He said, "Wouldn't it be great if there was one song, this omnipresent piece, played in all these different ways?" We would go into a dentist's office or an elevator and there would be this ubiquitous and irritating music playing. It was threaded through, kind of like an unconscious wallpapering technique. (Magee ch. 3)

"The Long Goodbye" is first heard in the opening sequence, in which Marlowe is awakened by his hungry cat in his apartment. The song is played in the form of a smooth jazz instrumental that issues from the late-night party next door. Marlowe hums along to the song, at one point mumbling aloud, "Do you recognize the theme?" as a meta-diegetic gesture. After he leaves his apartment to buy cat food, a series of cross-cuts occur between the narrative paths of Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton) and Marlowe, both of whom are driving in their cars. A bluesy version of "The Long Goodbye" sung with male vocals issues from Lennox's car, while a lighter, more romantic version sung by a female vocalist plays in Marlowe's. When Marlowe enters the supermarket to buy cat food, the song morphs into a Muzak-style instrumental version played with high strings, and when Marlowe returns home, the song assumes its original jazz piano combo form. The evolution of a single song rendered in multiple musical styles that blur the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic space continues throughout the film. This innovative method is then re-applied to "Tumbling Tumbleweeds" in the opening sequence of *Lebowski*.

My point here is that all these generic strains (and more) are helixed into a distinctly Coen strand of intertextual DNA—genres are installed and inverted, not in a parodic sense of sarcastic mocking, but in a pastiche sense of formal play. This sticky ball of associations and texts constitutes what Jim Collins dubbed the “array,” or “the perpetual circulation and recirculation of signs that forms the fabric of postmodern cultural life” (246). This mode of creativity is not critical in terms of socio-historical morals or ethics (a Jamesonian perspective). Rather, it is more of a juxtaposition of multiple cultural sensibilities that together offer a new one: a highly (un)original film, a new derivative built on cross-specimens of classic genres and prior styles, strategies, and texts. This cross-breeding of textual specimens is a highly creative and generative practice, one that is driven by a curatorial urge to mine the past for material and strategies that can be re-presented anew, playfully shuttling between similarity and difference, old and new, familiar and strange.

To summarize, *Lebowski* is a significant and interesting Coen film for a number of important reasons. For one, it signifies a shift in the brothers’ approach to music towards the use of preexisting popular music under the direction of T-Bone Burnett. This shift is significant because it foreshadows the central role both Burnett and popular music will play in many of the films that follow *Lebowski*, such as *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, where popular music becomes one of *the* driving forces of the narrative. Starting with *Lebowski*, music becomes a key stylistic trait for the Coens, one that is at least as important as ornate dialogue, black humor, vivid cinematography, and other features commonly considered “Coen-esque.” The introduction of T-Bone Burnett is attended by the introduction of a battery of new approaches to the handling of film music in Coen films, including the notion of creating an overall score that tells a story and stories within stories, and the idea of film music as an act of auteurist curation. Furthermore, a productive, broad, historical way to understand how and why music becomes a formal driving force in the

narrative and cinematic style of *Lebowski* is to consider it as part and parcel of the larger stylistic regime of post-classical cinema. This stylistic system tends to privilege and use film music in a way that would have been seen as overstepping its boundaries in the classical era. In the post-classical *Lebowski*, music becomes an orchestrator of—rather than a subordinate to—the action, coordinating the film’s general style of characterization, plot structure, time, space, and generic engagement. Perhaps Roger Ebert said it best: “Some may complain ‘The Big Lebowski’ rushes in all directions at once and never ends up anywhere. That isn’t the film’s flaw, but its style” (“The Big Lebowski”). Situating *Lebowski* as a post-classical film helps to explain why so many critics and viewers seemed dissatisfied and confused by the film upon its initial release, for the very things that critics disliked about *Lebowski*—an incoherent plot, excessive stylization, self-indulgent characterization—over time, have come to be the very things most enjoyed and appreciated about the film.

CHAPTER 3

O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?

“The salient difference between this movie and anything we’ve done before is the music.

We’ve never used music like this before.” -Ethan Coen

“The Coens are not just inspired filmmakers, but brilliant archeologists, as well.” -T-Bone

Burnett

The catalytic role that music plays in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), the Coens’ eighth cinematic production, is suggested by two important intertexts in the film: Homer’s *The Odyssey* and Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941). While both allusions have been discussed at length in previous criticism of *O Brother*, their significance in the context of music has been overlooked. *O Brother* begins by citing the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, in which the poet-speaker invokes the muse:

O Muse!

Sing in me, and through me tell the story

Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,

A wanderer, harried for years on end....

The poet’s call for the muse to “sing in me” strongly foreshadows the crucial role music will play in the Coens’ film. Moreover, before it was ever transcribed, *The Odyssey* is thought to have been a loosely related collection of stories sung by itinerant performers called “rhapsodes,” literally “stichers-together of songs” (Rowell 246). With *O Brother*, the Coens assume a quasi-rhapsodic role, for music permeates nearly every scene in the film, beginning with “Po’ Lazarus,” an African-American work song, and ending with “Angel Band,” a traditional gospel-spiritual.

Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941) is another important text invoked by *O Brother*, and one which is directly alluded to via the title of *O Brother*. *Sullivan’s Travels* follows the

trials of John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), successful Hollywood director, who through a series of unfortunate events, finds himself incarcerated in a Southern labor camp. He and his fellow prisoners are treated to a showing of a Disney cartoon in an African-American church. Just before the inmates enter the church, the preacher (Jesse Brooks) leads the congregation in singing “Go Down Moses,” an African-American spiritual inspired by the biblical story in which God commands Moses to free the enslaved Israelites from the Egyptian Pharaoh. It is a powerful musical moment. The deep, mighty vibrato of the preacher is joined by the sorrowful, heart-felt refrains of the congregation. The image then crosscuts to the prisoners being marched through a dark, haunted-looking swamp towards the church; it then cuts back to the inside of the church, where the song accompanies the entrance of the prisoners. As they march down the center aisle, the camera zooms in on the prisoners’ ankle chains, which clank loudly as they take their seats. Once the aisle is clear, the camera frames the preacher standing tall at the back, arms spread, dramatically conducting the end of the song.

By having the prisoners sing a song about Moses freeing the Israelites in an African-American church, Sturges draws a powerful connection between slavery, imprisonment, and oppression in both days past and present. Symbolically, the song speaks to the historical racism experienced by African-Americans in the South, as well as to the brutal, inhumane conditions of incarceration experienced by Southern inmates, regardless of race. Like *The Odyssey*, *Sullivan’s Travels* also points to a key strategy of *O Brother*: harnessing the power of music to tell stories in ways that make us both feel and think about history, about song, about society.

The subject of this chapter is the music of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, an incredibly important film in the Coen oeuvre for the reason that it marks an unequivocal shift towards the use of popular music as a key stylistic aspect of the brothers’ filmmaking. As discussed in the previous chapter, *The Big Lebowski* (1998) represented the first Coen soundtrack to be

composed entirely of pre-existing popular songs and thus first indicated a rising interest in popular music. *O Brother*, however, goes one step further by situating the on-screen performances of popular music as a keystone of the narrative. If *Lebowski* suggested that the Coens were starting to seriously consider the use of pre-existing popular music to point their filmmaking in new directions, *O Brother* both cemented and intensified this strategy by creating one of the most unusual, best-selling, award-winning, and influential popular music soundtracks in the history of Hollywood filmmaking.

I argue in this chapter that *O Brother* is a significant film for at least three reasons. First, as just mentioned, the film marks the acquisition of a powerful narrative tool for the Coens: popular music. While music had always been an important element for Coen brothers films, the music of *O Brother* underlines in bold one of the fundamental contentions of this dissertation: that the use of popular music should be recognized as a key component of Coen auteurism, a stylistic hallmark as vital as dialogue, genre play, and other “Coen-esque” signatures. Second, a detailed examination of the production of *O Brother*’s soundtrack further develops the notion of a “curatorial” approach to the use of popular music in Coen films. While the terms *curator* and *curation* are often used rather indiscriminately in popular discourse, the goals and means employed by T-Bone Burnett and the Coens to create the soundtrack of *O Brother* suggest a deeper, more complex meaning. And third, the music of *O Brother* illuminates the degree to which Coen films are tonally incongruous, freely hybridizing the comic and the tragic, the humorous and the serious, the ironic and the sincere. These mixed tones/modes are achieved, among other means, through the music of *O Brother*. This insight helps to clarify a key critical debate surrounding not only *O Brother*, but Coen films in general: is their work devoted to nothing but cinematic cleverness? Or do they actually have something serious to say? I argue that the unruly pantone of attitudes suggested by the music of *O Brother* exposes the crux of this debate. The music of *O Brother*

demonstrates how comedy and tragedy, reverence and irreverence, can be, as they were in both *Sullivan's Travels* and *The Odyssey*, synthesized to create a complex, multi-layered, music-driven narrative film, one that makes us laugh and sing as much as it makes us think and reflect.

The *O Brother* soundtrack exhibits various types of roots or vernacular music loosely grouped under the inclusive umbrella of “American traditional music.” The Coens had been fans of vintage American folk music since college. They were initially exposed to it through popular music of the 1960s, which had created a revival of Americana folk music all its own. Artists like Bob Dylan frequently found inspiration in the folk music of figures like Woody Guthrie as well as in genres like ragtime and blues. The broad category of American traditional music includes the genres of blues, bluegrass, gospel, folk, and country, in addition to spirituals and work songs. While it would not be conventional to think of the aforementioned genres as “popular music” in the contemporary sense of the term, songs derived from such genres would nevertheless be considered forms of popular music in a wider, more historical sense. The *O Brother* soundtrack showcases older artists who played founding roles in evolving and sustaining these different music traditions, such as Ralph Stanley, Harry McClintock, John Hartford, The Fairfield Four, Emmylou Harris, The Whites, and The Cox Family. It also features newer, more contemporary artists who are playing critical roles in sustaining and re-defining these traditions, such as Chris Thomas King, Allison Krauss, Gillian Welch, and Dan Tyminski. The album features a handful of pre-existing vintage recordings like “Po’ Lazarus” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” but most of the soundtrack is filled with newly recorded arrangements of older, pre-existing traditional material, like “I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow,” “O Death,” and “Didn’t Leave Nobody But the Baby.”

The soundtrack for *O Brother* was critically and commercially successful, earning a total of five Grammy awards, including the coveted Album of the Year. This is a truly remarkable feat considering that this indie film soundtrack consisting mostly of folk music was competing against the likes of U2, Madonna, Bob Dylan, and OutKast. The album also won Best Country Collaboration with Vocals (“I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” the Soggy Bottom Boys), Best Compilation Soundtrack, Best Male Country Vocal (“O Death,” Ralph Stanley), and Producer of the Year (T-Bone Burnett). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* praised the music of *O Brother* by characterizing it as “an ear-candy score of bluegrass, gospel and country” (“O Brother”). To date, the soundtrack has sold over eight million copies, an impressive figure, not only for a movie soundtrack, but for a bluegrass/folk/country album, especially in an era of steeply declining album sales caused by the rise of digital music. In 2002, the album held the top position on the *Billboard* country music charts for a number of weeks. When the *O Brother* soundtrack lost its top spot, it still managed to spend more than a year on the *Billboard* top 200. The soundtrack also spawned a minor ancillary industry of its own, including a live concert album and documentary, *Down from the Mountain*, a concert tour, as well as a number of bluegrass albums, like *O Sister!: The Women’s Bluegrass Collection*, *O Brother: The Story Continues*, and Chris Thomas King’s *The Legend of Tommy Johnson*.

While film critics initially expressed doubts about the quality of the film overall, most immediately grasped the significance and achievement of the soundtrack. A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* remarked that while the Coens may “sometimes indulge in easy mockery of the South and its people, they also deliberately subvert such glibness through their brilliant and entirely sincere use of American folk music” (“Hail, Ulysses”). Another critic, Kenneth Turan of the *L.A. Times*, agreed with Scott, stating that while the film frequently indulges in the ironic mocking of much its story material, the Coens “treated one element with respect

this time around, that's made quite a difference [. . .]. 'O Brother's' music is more than pleasant background; it is a living presence, and with apologies to an excellent cast, just about the star of the picture" ("Coens Sing a Song of the South"). Both Scott and Turan underline a point explored further later in this chapter—that is, the role of the music in mediating between ironic and sincere perspectives on the narrative. As the commentary from Scott and Turan demonstrates, both critics recognize the dominant role music plays in *O Brother*, where it functions as a sincere, heartfelt counter to what is often seen as the Coens' rather cold and distant brand of comic irony; it is a refreshing source of authenticity that provides a sense of genuine depth to what is often seen by many critics and theorists as a superficial and overly derivative form of postmodern pastiche. Overall, in line with Scott and Turan, most critics viewed the soundtrack as an element of the film that furnished a sense of authenticity and sincerity that elided previous Coen films.

O Brother is a pivotal film in the Coen filmography because it represents a turn towards relying on popular music as a key formal device. That *O Brother* is an important film was not always clear to all, especially to academic critics writing within a few years of the film's release. Georg Seesslen opined that *O Brother* would likely be "seen in the future, in the context of the rest of the oeuvre of the Coen brothers, as a harmless, minor work, perhaps even as an unashamed little exercise in loosening up" (222). R. Barton Palmer was even less generous than Seesslen, characterizing *O Brother* as "an undemanding form of intellectual engagement" that was "dedicated to uncomplicated emotional uplift" (132-4). In fact, Palmer devotes minimal discussion to *O Brother* and instead invests his analytical attention in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), which he views as a more worthwhile film. Over time, *O Brother* has exceeded *The Hudsucker Proxy* in terms of both general popularity and scholarly attention. This achievement is due, in large part, to *O Brother's* soundtrack, which played an integral role in the conception and making of the film, a rather unusual role for

music to play in a Hollywood film, as music tends to play a more minor role in film production, overall. As was the case with *Lebowski* (1998) in the previous chapter, a close consideration of how *O Brother's* soundtrack was created allows one to more fully understand, specifically, how the Coens' approach popular music in their films.

As I mentioned above, one of the goals of this chapter is to consider the notion of the Coens and Burnett as film music “curators” in greater depth. What does it mean, in other words, to say the Coens adopt a “curatorial” approach to music in their films? One way to broach this question is to consider the discursive meaning of curate. Etymologically, curator and curate are terms of mixed heritage whose origins lie in both Latin and Anglo-Norman French. In the Roman Empire, “curator” was a general term applied to various kinds of public officers. In Medieval England, a curator was a religious figure—referring either to a priest's assistant (a “curate”) or to a spiritual pastor (one who “cures”)—whose function was to serve as a custodian of souls. By the middle of the 17th century, the term began to assume more of a secular meaning, signifying someone in charge of a museum, library, or other collection of historical artifacts, or simply someone charged with the care of something. In July of 2011, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) described a contemporary layer of meaning imposed upon curate: “to select the performers or performances to be included in a music festival, album, or program, or simply to select, organize, and present cultural content of one kind or another” (“curate”). That the contemporary meaning of the term shares such a close connection to music is noteworthy in the context of the present analysis, for it offers a precedent and strengthens the relevance of “curatorial” as a conceptual framework that can be usefully applied to the Coens' film music.

The noun curator and the verb curate have both become fashionable words in the popular English lexicon over the last decade, a trend that museum curators have been quick to criticize. As Alex Williams of the *New York Times* writes, “The word ‘curate,’ lofty and

once rarely spoken outside exhibition corridors or British parishes, has become a fashionable code word among the aesthetically minded, who seem to paste it onto any activity that involves culling and selecting” (“On the Tip of Creative Tongues”). Along these same lines, Christopher Borrelli of the *Chicago Tribune* also observes that the label curator “has flown from its ivory tower and become democratized” and “seems to connote: any thoughtful artisanal soul engaged in an activity that involves selecting, organizing, and discernment” (“Everybody’s a curator”). As these commentators imply, the term curator has become a cool way to describe someone who, through a perceived (by self or other) sense of discriminating taste, selects and presents things culled from myriad available options, mostly for the purposes of public and/or commercial consumption.

For museum curators, however, this superficial use of the term undervalues the complexity and depth of what they tend to see as more of a vocation. As Lucy Worsley, Chief Curator for Historical Royal Palaces, put it in a recent article for *The Guardian*:

In a world where department stores talk about “curating” their shoe selections or whatever, people think that curating just means choosing nice things. But this is only half of it. Our real job as museum curators is to look after artifacts from the past, *yet also* to be the repository of knowledge about them, to be an expert, to have spent 10,000 hours immersed in the subject. Curating isn’t just a matter of taste. It involves building up real knowledge of the items in your care. As the world gets quicker, and shallower, and bite-sized, retaining our ability to take a deep dive into history is more and more important. (“People think curating just means choosing nice things”)

As Worsley suggests, the word curator has two levels of meaning. The first level of meaning is rather shallow and applies to an individual who, through a self- or other-perceived sense of excellent taste, chooses and presents commodities for public consumption. The other level,

however, is deeper and more meaningful, referring to an individual who not only applies his or her discerning taste to thoughtful selection and presentation, but to one who also serves a quasi-scholarly function. As curator, the individual thus assumes the role of a knowledgeable and experienced expert whose choices are informed by sustained immersion in and devotion to the artifacts under their care. Considered within the latter framework, curators are more like passionate, well-informed guardians or stewards whose motives are not over-determined by commercial interests; rather, their interest is shaped more by a desire to preserve and re-present the material past, as opposed to merely consume or sell it. John Corbett, co-curator of the Wicker Park Gallery, says that curators provide “context” and “connoisseurship,” and that a “curator chooses, but not *only* chooses” (Borelli). Making discerning choices is an important part of being a curator, but the act of curation is not limited to that function alone. As Peter Taub notes, “Curation is more than a reflection of a person’s interests. It is scholarship, framing ideas, telling stories—showing the edge that exists between the thing curated and the rest of us” (Borrelli). Taub’s notion of curation as “scholarship, framing ideas, and telling stories” offers an apt, productive way to think about the goals and functions of music in Coen films. As highlighted in the previous chapter on *The Big Lebowski*, T-Bone Burnett conceptualizes his approach to film music as a way to tell a story, and stories within stories, a notion he refers to as the “score.”

Clearly, the curatorial work of the Coens and Burnett is different than the work of professional museum curators. However, the term nevertheless offers a compelling metaphor, a conceptual framework that helps capture what makes the Coens’ approach to using popular music in their films distinctive and worthy of detailed academic study. Considering how the soundtrack for *O Brother* was produced resonates with some of the broader semantics of curation as articulated by many of the museum curators above—providing context, connoisseurship, framing ideas, and telling stories. The making of *O Brother*’s soundtrack

suggests something more than merely selecting and matching songs to certain scenes; *O Brother* is more than just a movie with good music in it.

The Coens started thinking about the film that would become *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* as early as 1987. They conceived of it as the third installment in their “Hayseed Trilogy” of films culturally situated in the Deep South. The two films prior were *Blood Simple* (1984), which was set in Texas and used a number of pop songs spanning the genres of country, reggae, and Motown, and *Raising Arizona* (1987), which was set in the southwest desert and incorporated an eclectic mix of bluegrass, classical, folk, and other popular music genres. *O Brother* was initially shelved because of the high production costs, but the Coens started working on it again in the mid-1990s. As Ethan put it, the inspiration for *O Brother* “came largely from an enthusiasm for the music” (Mottram 161). The visual narrative was created to serve the music, a strategy that upends the conventional formal hierarchy of Hollywood cinema, which often places a premium on the visuals and relegates music to a supporting role. Georg Seesslen notes that *O Brother* “is one of the few films in which the music was there before the script, and the music is held together and made ‘to flow’ by the plot and not vice versa” (222). Seesslen adds that “if there is a Coen project to destroy filmic narrative,” *O Brother*, with its loosely plotted, music-driven story, is a key work in that program (222).

Having just completed a successful collaboration on *Lebowski*, when it came time to make *O Brother*, the Coens turned once again to T-Bone Burnett to produce the soundtrack. “Being so heavily involved in roots music, we called him before we’d even finished the script,” stated Ethan in an interview (“O Brother, Why Art Thou So Popular”). Burnett was a logical choice for the Coens, not only because of the success of their collaboration on *Lebowski*, but also because of Burnett’s extensive experience with various forms of roots music, a contemporary style that draws on elements of folk, rock, blues, country, bluegrass,

and other traditional American forms. As noted in the previous chapter, Burnett was a guitarist in Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue, a "travelling hootenanny" of groups and musicians, like Ramblin' Jack Elliot and Joni Mitchell, who were important figures in the folk music revival of the 1960s. This revival, much like *O Brother* itself, exposed an entire generation of listeners to traditional American music. Moreover, as a solo musician, Burnett's own music is considered a form of American roots rock. For these and other reasons, Burnett, rather than Carter Burwell (who handled the music for many previous Coen films), was a logical choice for the Coens to collaborate with on the music for *O Brother*.

Burnett received a call from the Coens asking if he "would like to make a movie on the history of American music" (Boilen). The fact that the Coens were thinking of the soundtrack for *O Brother* in these particular terms—that is, historically rather than purely commercially—reinforces the notion that characterizing their approach to film music as "curatorial" is intellectually insightful, for as mentioned earlier, meaningful curation involves assuming a broad historical perspective. After recruiting Burnett, the Coens reportedly sunk their entire promotion budget into the soundtrack, a decision beautifully described by ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox as "an act of curatorial love" (177). Regardless of what one might say about the impact of *O Brother*'s soundtrack, a deep passion for the music, rather than strictly commercial concerns, appears to have motivated its creation, an approach befitting a deeply devoted curator, or in this case, curators.

Whereas for *Lebowski* Burnett's duties fell mostly within the domain of a music supervisor, because the soundtrack for *O Brother* included both vintage recordings as well as new recordings of pre-existing material in a neo-style, Burnett's role conflated the purviews of both supervisor and producer. As a supervisor, Burnett was responsible for selecting and acquiring the vintage recordings. As a producer, he helped recruit musicians and groups to audition and record, suggested and researched songs, and oversaw the recording process.

Burnett's role in *O Brother* meets the high standards for film music supervisors set by Steven Chagollan, who suggested that "[t]he best music supervisors are sought for their combination of tastemaker, curator, producer, stickler for accuracy and verisimilitude. It's work that falls somewhere between artisan and technician, with the kind of talent-scouting ear associated with A&R executives at record labels" ("Add A Song, Make A Movie"). Burnett's versatility places him in a category that exceeds the Hollywood norm for soundtrack producers or supervisors, and shows his dedication to ensuring that the presence of music in film is anything but casual or incidental.

So important was the music to both Burnett and the Coens that the entire musical soundtrack was recorded before the film was even shot. This represents a very unusual strategy in the context of Hollywood cinema, where music is typically handled in the post-production phase. Considering these kinds of strategies underlines the fact that the Coens are truly "indie" filmmakers who engage in an artisanal, bespoke mode of film production, a mode that allows for such innovation to occur.

In April of 1999, the Coens held the equivalent of a music casting call at Ocean Way Studios in Nashville, Tennessee, the epicenter of the country music industry. The Coens and Burnett invited a variety of musicians and groups from the traditional American music community to audition. They asked contemporary singer-songwriter Gillian Welch, a notable Americana artist in her own right, to host the sessions. As Burnett recalls, we "didn't know if the members of the very tight knit old-time music community would look at us as interlopers" (Wild). Burnett's comments suggest that he and the Coens approached this project in quasi-anthropological or ethnographic terms, a mode of investigation that depends on the ability of the inquirer to access and secure the trust of a community or culture.

As it turned out, the Coens had little to worry about in this regard, for many of the musicians were already eager and devoted fans of their films. This is not surprising given

how thoroughly music is incorporated into the Coens' movies. In an interview with National Public Radio, Burnett testified that the "Coens have a tremendous following among the musicians of this country," a following that was initially generated through the strong presence of popular song in *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*, and cemented through the music of *Lebowski*, a film that Burnett claims "has been a staple on tour buses for decades" (Jurgensen). Burnett further remarked that "the people in the country, old-time mountain music community were so thrilled to be able to collaborate with these guys whose work we had all loved so much" (Boilen). Burnett's comments help account for how the Coens were able to recruit such an impressive roster of musicians for *O Brother*, a deep pool of talent that contributed significantly to the success of the soundtrack. The fact that Coen brothers films have amassed such a strong following among musicians also supports one of the central arguments of this dissertation, which is that music, especially pre-existing popular music, should be considered a vital feature of the Coens' style, one that can even surpass the signature elements for which they are known, like unusual cinematography, baroque dialogue, and genre play.

In the course of one day, the Coens and Burnett held a live audition where they listened to each artist or group perform in order to select which songs would be recorded and who would perform them. Approximately a month later, recording sessions were held at the Sound Emporium in Nashville. The context of these sessions reveals a number of interesting details. Prior to recording, the chief engineer, Michael Piersante, researched recording techniques and technology of the 1930s, the historical period in which *O Brother* is set. As a result, the music was recorded through a particular microphone configuration called a "Decca Tree." Named after Decca Records, the recording label that first developed the technique for commercial application, the Decca Tree features "three ribbon microphones set up on the points of an equilateral triangle with the single microphone closest to the singers and

musicians, who were standing about twelve feet away” (Wild). Decca Trees are often used to record orchestral style music because it is particularly suited for capturing the full ambiance of sound in space. The reason for using this particular recording method was to help make the music more vintage-sounding, which matched with other “old-timey” elements in the film like the cinematography.

The setting for these sessions, like the recording devices and methods themselves, was also unique. The music was recorded in “Studio A,” which Burnett remarked was “like playing inside a very good guitar. The room you record in is crucial to the way things sound, and what we were trying to do was make it feel as if you were there in the room in 1930—as opposed to making it sound old. We went the other way—we were, instead, trying to make the music sound new and vital” (Wild). Despite the fact that the film constantly toys with the idea of authenticity in a typically self-aware, postmodern way, the recording of the soundtrack for *O Brother* was oriented towards achieving a strong sense of authenticity in terms of musical texture and sound. Burnett’s perspective is interesting because *O Brother* and its music has often been criticized for engaging so freely in postmodern pastiche, a nostalgic re-visiting of the past that lacks depth and authentic historical engagement. But what Burnett is saying, and what I hear in the music, is a way of looking forward as much as it is looking back—the music of the film is, in Burnett’s view, more progressive than regressive. The innovative edge of the Coen-Burnett approach to music making lies in the creation of a sound that is alive and new rather than nostalgic and old.

The Coens insisted—ironically, perhaps—that the recording of the music be as “pure” as possible, in an attempt to recapture the vibrancy of the original recordings. “They were very adamant about it needing to be very pure,” stated Dan Tyminski, the voice of “Man of Constant Sorrow” and long-time member of Union Station, a bluegrass/country band most commonly associated with Allison Krauss. “It had to be one take, start to finish. No fixes.

No overdubs. No headphones. They wanted the instruments we played to be of that era, the microphones we recorded into to be of that era. I don't know if I've ever been in a studio and recorded without headphones" (Stewart). Tyminski's comments underline the care and integrity with which the Coens and Burnett approached the making of the *O Brother* soundtrack, taking great pains to preserve the integrity of the musical tradition.

While many critics faulted *O Brother* for being nostalgically trapped in the past, the circumstances of the recording sessions suggest that while the music may indeed be nostalgic, it is not necessarily trapped in the past; rather, it was recorded in a way intended to re-vitalize it, to make it relevant and contemporary while nevertheless maintaining a strong connection with tradition. The Coens could have populated the soundtrack with only vintage recordings, but the fact that such recordings occupy space next to new recordings of older songs in newer styles suggests that *O Brother* is more interested in creative re-presentation or re-working rather than mere re-cycling. Vintage recordings like "Po' Lazarus" and "Big Rock Candy Mountain" sit should-to-shoulder with re-interpretations, or even re-writings, of older songs like "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues," "Man of Constant Sorrow," and "Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby." These re-recordings do not constitute a radical re-fashioning, of course, but more of a considered re-situating, a thoughtful, curatorial, re-contextualization. The way in which the music for *O Brother* was recorded reveals a strong preservationist impulse, one that seeks to transmit a musical heritage to a new generation of musicians and listeners.

In total, the recording sessions lasted about three weeks. In May of 2000, seven months before the film's release, music from *O Brother* was performed at a charity concert for the Country Music Hall of Fame at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. The concert was made into a documentary film, *Down from the Mountain*, by the legendary D. A. Pennebaker, whose prior film work on music culture included a look at the life and work of Bob Dylan in

Don't Look Back (1967) and David Bowie in *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1973), as well as *Monterey Pop* (1968). While the promotional value of this event for the film cannot be ignored, the Coens' use of the profits to support the Country Hall of Fame, combined with their decision to hire Pennebaker to document the concert, suggest a strong desire to preserve and perpetuate traditional American music through film.

Another notable factor to consider in thinking about the Coens as traditional American music curators is how many of the musicians on the soundtrack were cast to appear in the film itself, a practice that began with *Lebowski* as discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike *Lebowski*, however, in *O Brother*, the musicians perform music as part of their roles. The Whites and The Cox Family, who perform "Keep on the Sunny Side" and "I am Weary (Let Me Rest)," respectively, appear as the two bands that play in support of the political campaigns of the two gubernatorial candidates featured in the film, Homer Stokes and Pappy O' Daniel. Similarly, members of the Fairfield Four, a group of traditional African-American gospel singers, appear as members of the chain-gang that sing "Po' Lazarus" in the opening sequence as well as the Gravediggers that sing "Lonesome Valley" near the end of the film. The only exception to the practice of having musicians actually perform music in the film is Gillian Welch, who appears as the woman who asks a merchant for a copy of "Man of Constant Sorrow" only to be told that it is sold out. While most of the soundtrack musicians make brief, cameo appearances, blues singer-songwriter Chris Thomas King plays a more substantial part as Tommy Johnson, executing a deeply soulful performance of Skip James's "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" in the scene where the three convicts fantasize about their future around a campfire.

These individuals are not simply musicians but are pioneers in the music industry, individuals who have made significant contributions to the evolution of traditional American music. As in *Lebowski*, the appearance of these musicians grants the film a degree of playful

authenticity, and bolsters the perception of the Coens as auteur melomanes, “or music loving directors,” to use Claudia Gorbman’s ascription. This textual strategy of casting musicians in music-based roles creates an image of the Coens as film music curators. The way in which many of these musicians are “displayed” in the film is not entirely dissimilar to the way in which objects are exhibited in a museum, though in a distinctly more cinematic way, which lends them a more engaging and broader sense of exposure than a museum since cinema can connect to a larger audience. Rather than objectifying the musicians as dead relics in an institutional context, as a kind of musical wax museum, they are given more of an active, dynamic representation, for the music they perform in the film reveals the richness and vibrancy of their skills, and, by extension, the musical tradition they helped to develop.

So far, my discussion of *O Brother* has focused mostly on the production of the soundtrack and its significance; however, equally important to consider is the role the music plays in the film itself. The music of *O Brother* serves many of the basic functions of popular music in film more generally. Songs like “Big Rock Candy Mountain” and “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues” help establish the setting—the Great Depression in the Deep South. Moreover, like *Lebowski*, some songs help develop certain characters. “Man of Constant Sorrow,” for example, highlights the perpetual, comic misfortunes of the film’s protagonist, Everett. Many songs also serve to reinforce certain themes and motifs through the film, like religion. “Down in the River to Pray,” “Keep on the Sunny Side,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “Angel Band,” and “In the Highways” all situate the Christian afterlife as a reward for earthly suffering.

However, the music goes beyond these basic functions to play more of a central—rather than merely supporting—role. One of these more advanced functions includes the many memorable musical performances in the film. For instance, Everett (George Clooney), Pete (John Turturro), and Delmar’s (Tim Blake Nelson) recording of “Man of Constant

Sorrow,” and the commercial success that accompanies it, ultimately results in their eventual liberation. In this way, music works not only to construct characters and establish setting, but to propel the plot, as well. Thus, these performances serve story-related functions but also exist as compelling set-pieces in and of themselves, as kind of musical “cinema of attractions,” to borrow Tom Gunning’s phrase, which refers to those moments of spectacle in film that are not strictly narrative driven or serve the story in any obvious, cause-and-effect way.

The way music is used in *O Brother* is also interesting from a genre and formal perspective. While many have considered *O Brother* to be a kind of musical, what separates it from the musical as a genre is that most of the music in the film is presented realistically. As Sesslen points out, *O Brother* “is both musical and anti-musical, in so far as the music never has the effect of a ‘metaphysical’ power on the characters. The music is rather *in* the scene and part of the story; it is a dynamic principle for the characters themselves” (222). In other words, rather than having characters spontaneously break into song—the narrative conceit of the musical—the music in *O Brother* occurs more naturally, emerging from the *mise-en-scene*. Everett, Pete, Delmar, and Tommy record “Man of Constant Sorrow” for money to fund their odyssey; Tommy performs “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues” while sitting by a campfire at night; the Baptist congregation sings “Down in the River to Pray” as they walk through the woods and down to the river as part of a religious ritual. This approach to music suggests that, on some level, the Coens are committed to upholding a rather conventional Hollywood brand of verisimilitude. On-screen musical performances are diegetically motivated by the plot, a strategy in keeping with the way music is situated in *Lebowski*, where the source of the music is consistently located somewhere within the characters’ fictional world.

There are also instances, however, in which music plays non-diegetically in *O Brother*. For example, an exquisite version of “I’ll Fly Away” by The Kossoy Sisters and Erik Darling plays over a montage sequence. Additionally, a guitar instrumental version of “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues” plays while the three convicts receive their “prophecy” from the African-American Tiresias figure that propels the flat car. Yet on the whole, the number of times that music appears diegetically in the narrative far outnumbers non-diegetic instances. Such a preference for the diegetic over the non-diegetic places *O Brother* in the tradition of New Hollywood films typified by an abundance of musical performances like Robert Altman’s *Nashville* (1975), films that are not, generically speaking, musicals in the classical Hollywood sense. Rather, they constitute post-classical hybrids by featuring a lot of spectacular musical performances that do narrative work but emerge from the fictional world naturalistically rather than fantastically as in the case of classical musicals.

All these narrative roles and functions of music in *O Brother*, while important to mention, have been at least acknowledged by previous critics and scholars. To offer something different, I propose to initiate a critical conversation on how the music relates to the vexed, unruly tone of *O Brother*. This line of analysis is important because it highlights a point of contention regarding the auteurs’ attitude vis-a-vis their subject matter. I contend that in *O Brother*, the music plays a crucial role in developing and maintaining a complex, carefully calibrated tone that walks a thin line between irony and sincerity, comedy and tragedy, earnestness and parody. A number of critics and scholars have claimed that the music of Coen films brings a more positive, sincere, authentic, and meaningful sensibility to the Coens’ characteristically cold, ironic, and heartless postmodern worlds. Carter Burwell has suggested that his music “provides warmth, humanity, and emotional weight to the Coens’ cool visual style and misanthropic stories” (Smith 131). In this same vein, Jefferey Adams, in *The Cinema of the Coen Brothers*, asserts that “[m]usic, it seems, is one of the few

things the Coens do not subvert or trivialize in their films” (intro). While highly suggestive, these observations tend to be offered in a rather cursory way, as passing comments that beg further elaboration. Indeed, there is an important link here between the “act of curatorial love” that characterizes the Coens’ approach to the soundtrack and the sincere, reverent manner in which the music is presented in the film itself. If the music of *O Brother* is said to be one of the few elements that the Coens do not mock or trivialize, it is worthwhile to try to figure out what exactly this means from the perspective of film analysis.

O Brother’s anarchic, “serio-comic” tone is established in the opening sequence through song, cinematography, and mise-en-scene. The film begins with a series of intertitle-like frames that present the credits in typography that evokes a sense of “old Hollywood,” signaling that the Coens are not only curators of music, but of other kinds of cultural artifacts from the past. These visual cues are aurally paired with the steady buzzing of cicadas, picks breaking rocks, shouts to work harder, and a call for “Po’ Lazarus.” The last frame to appear before the start of the primary narrative cites the famous opening lines of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, suggesting that what we are about to see is, like epic myth, a blend of fact and fiction, history and entertainment. However, the difference in tone between Homeric epic and a Coen brothers film could not be more dramatic, with the former being more consistent, and the latter, much more digressive. A wide establishing shot presents a field and sky rendered in washed out, quasi-greyscale colors, signifying yet another nod to the black and white studio era, particularly Victor Fleming’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The camera pans left to reveal an African-American chain gang breaking rocks under the watchful eye of stern white overseers. As the camera moves diagonally into a rising crane shot, the color palette of the frame subtly shifts, turning all natural foliage a burnt gold and brown, and everything else a chalky white, thus creating an over-exposed sepia look, an old-timey veneer.

The cinematography here could easily be seen as presenting a straightforwardly nostalgic view of the past, but the song keeps this rose-tinted perspective in check. The prisoners sing “Po’ Lazarus,” a live field recording of James Carter and the Prisoners—actual Parchman inmates—collected by Alan Lomax in 1959. The song, which like many folk tunes exists in multiple versions, tells the story of an African-American man named Lazarus who is on the run from the law because he robbed a commissary. The “high sheriff,” or judge, dispatches a deputy to “bring him dead or alive.” The deputy refuses, telling the sheriff he “ain’t gonna mess with Lazarus” because “he’s a dangerous man.” Deciding to bring Lazarus in himself, the sheriff finds him “hidin’ in the chill of the mountain” and announces his intent to bring Lazarus in by whatever means necessary. Defiantly, Lazarus responds, “I never been arrested by no one man.” This resistance prompts the sheriff to shoot Lazarus with a “mighty big number,” a .45 caliber pistol. Still alive, Lazarus is laid on a “commissary gallery,” where he suffers pain in his “wounded side.” Lazarus asks for a “cool drink of water,” but the authorities deny his request, simply walking away, leaving him to a slow and painful death.

The end of the song suggests that Lazarus’s crime might have been motivated by poverty as his sister is unable attend his funeral because she has no shoes. Lazarus is a bad man, but his bold defiance of the law would have been inspiring to Southern African-Americans like the ones represented in this scene, most of whom would surely have felt unfairly oppressed by it. The brutality of the law as a central theme is reinforced in the film through the portrayal of the prisoners and their white overseers. “No break,” grunts the head overseer in response to a plea for respite from one of his own white deputies. This refusal is made more brutal by the punishing conditions in which the prisoners work, breaking rocks in the heat and humidity of a Mississippi summer. A low tracking shot looks up at the prisoners as they swing their pick axes and chant in unison. The washed-out cinematography, as well as makeup and costumes, gives the prisoners a chalky, dust-bowl look, a kind of “down and

out” appearance. An overhead tracking shot follows the chains that bind them, a dualistic symbol that suggests both unity in suffering as well as inhumane, institutional callousness.

While appearing brutally realistic on some levels, the prisoners are adorned with rather cartoonish looking black and white uniforms that seem intended to parody chain-gang/prison films of the past, a tradition that includes everything from *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) to *Cool Hand Luke* (1967). In addition, while the prisoners are dusty from breaking rocks, it does not appear that any earnest attempt is made to make them look particularly overworked or abused. Despite the summer heat, they do not appear to be sweating. The prisoners swing their pick axes in almost perfect unison, and the scene includes multiple close-ups of the prisoners’ faces, faces that reveal a soulful immersion in their singing. In short, this scene is aestheticized, avoiding gritty social realism in favor of a postmodern hyperrealism that makes even the worst of tasks seem, visually and musically, aesthetically pleasing.

The scene as a whole denotes a rather convoluted signifier. The warm nostalgia of the “old-timey” digital color rubs against the dark and violent content of “Po’ Lazarus,” thereby telling the story of Lazarus within the larger story of *O Brother*. The representation of the prisoners themselves draws attention to the exploitative and oppressive dimensions of the situation while also remaining visually appealing. While the cinematography could invite a nostalgic, romantic view of the past, this longing is denied by the lyrics of the song, as well as many of the visual signifiers presented on screen, which suggest historical exploitation and oppression. The song functions as a spiritual palliative for the black prisoners. As Rowell points out, the song “not only makes the men’s work more palatable, the song also defies their circumstances, personifies their collective, and allows them vicarious escape” (257). At one point, an overhead tracking shot reveals the binding chains that run between the two lines

of prisoners, an image repeatedly juxtaposed with a cloudless sky to symbolically reinforce the prisoners' lack of freedom (Rowell 259).

The scene as a whole intertextualizes the social and racial ills of the Jim Crow South. We later learn from Everett (George Clooney) that the prisoners are from the Parchman Farm, which was established in 1904 by James Kimble Vardaman, Governor of Mississippi from 1904 to 1908. Vardaman was an infamous racist who prescribed hard prison labor as the only means to reform what he saw as morally deprived young black men. The Parchman Farm was described by historian David M. Oshinsky as “the quintessential penal farm, the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War” (2). These serious historical signifiers do not deny the song and chain gang a kind of lyrical beauty, but it is a beauty that is, like much blues music, the offspring of suffering, a suffering that leaves traces and scars that the cosmetics of the digital color grading cannot entirely conceal, but nor is it meant to. As Adina Hoffman notes, the cinematography is “grounded in a striking melancholy” and

imbues the film with a crucial sense of both the grandeur and poverty of these wide-open southern spaces . . . the cotton fields, swamps, and Podunk towns of 1930s Mississippi are clearly meant to recall hand-painted versions of famous photographs of the era by Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans, as well as the stagy sparseness of John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*. No matter how silly the proceedings become, there's something severe in these backdrops. The somber landscapes keep the film from becoming a mere cartoon. (“Cockeyed Caravan”)

For a film that many see as a comedy in the classical screwball tradition, this is a rather complicated opening scene, one that scrambles any sense of easy nostalgia. The old-timey-ness of the digital color grading considered in light of the intertextual historical referents and mixed tone suggests a deeply ambivalent view of U.S. history and culture, one that highlights its cultural beauty without turning away from its darker social injustices. In this scene, and

indeed in the film as a whole, pain and beauty, comedy and tragedy, irony and sincerity, all coexist, not always comfortably, in a tonally intricate zone of authorial expression.

On the whole, the scene in which the chain gang sings “Po’ Lazarus” strikes a rather somber, serious tone, regardless of its self-reflexive aesthetics. The scene that directly follows it, however, veers towards a significantly lighter, clownish mode. The next scene plays Harry McClintock’s version of “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” the overall tone of which is radically different from the song heard in the previous scene. While “Po’ Lazarus” has a plodding, steady rhythm intended to match the slow, steady pace of hard physical labor, “Big Rock Candy Mountain” features a quicker, bouncier rhythm. The emotional effect of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” is significantly more upbeat and whimsical than the grave and violent “Po’ Lazarus.” The action on screen in this scene is also more comical than in the opening sequence. Rather than an oppressed chain gang, the audience is treated to a fanciful escape scene. Still chained together, Everett, Pete, and Delmar flee through a field and then sneak into a farmyard to catch a chicken for dinner. All of these actions are presented in the manner of screwball slapstick antics, with the characters running in circles, arms flailing, while they futilely chase the chicken. The jovial, merry sound of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” is a perfect match for the exaggerated, comical attitude of the sequence, marking a drastic departure from the tone of the previous scene.

And yet, while the overall sound and rhythm of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” may sound rather innocent and capricious, the lyrics tell a different, much darker story, one that is as indicative, socially, of hard times as “Po’ Lazarus.” The sanguine, bouncy vision and tone of McClintock’s song only serves to underline the depressed social and economic conditions of the poor and homeless. The song tells of a hobo searching for the Big Rock Candy Mountain, a far away land where money grows on bushes, boxcars are always empty, and cigarettes grow on trees. As a fantasy clearly driven by want and deprivation, “Big Rock

Candy Mountain” represents a utopian dream underwritten by a dystopian reality. In this hobo paradise, “cops have wooden legs,” the “bulldogs all have rubber teeth” and “jails are made of tin.” Beneath the innocent charm conveyed by the musical properties of the song lie the harsh vicissitudes of an impoverished existence conditioned by economic depression and social injustice. As Content, Kreider, and White put it, “The lyrics of the song are a sad paen to a fantasyland . . . this is the pipe dream of men accustomed to harassment, hunger, and hard labor” (43). Moreover, Graham Raulerson remarks that the song “belongs to a long tradition of songs and poems depicting a secular utopia free of the stresses and concerns of everyday life,” songs whose “hyperbolic tenor” combines with the inversions of social hierarchies to “reveal an intensely satirical and subversive agenda” (425). “Big Rock Candy Mountain” couples a musical texture that is merry and dreamlike with lyrical content that points to a darker social reality. The stark juxtaposition of these light and dark sensibilities is characteristic of many folk songs, narratives that often feature a dreamlike, fanciful surface underwritten by elements of violence and oppression.

This dualistic aspect of folk songs and tales correlates to the tonal complexity of *O Brother*, and highlights the fact that the Coens invest a large share of narrative and aesthetic resources in the creation of tonal incongruities, either across scenes, within scenes, or even within songs. These incongruities are complex and multilayered, so much so that it is difficult, at times, to keep them straight as they twist and turn depending on the scene and cinematic elements in question. Attempting to describe and capture tone in cinema is difficult under most circumstances, but it becomes even more challenging (and game-like) when it comes to the Coens, who delight in presenting compound-complex states of mind through incongruous juxtapositions. As Roger Ebert acutely observed of the chain gang escape sequence discussed above, “From their peculiar conviction that they are invisible as they duck and run across an open field, we know the movie’s soul is farce and satire,

although it touches on other notes, too—it's an anthology of moods" ("O Brother"). Ebert's phrase, "anthology of moods," fittingly describes the convoluted mix of attitudes expressed by *O Brother* and its music.

Another way that the Coens play with tone in *O Brother* is by presenting the music in a sincere, earnest manner while simultaneously developing ironic, comedic elements in the action on screen. This system of emotional-tonal checks and balances prevents the reverential tone suggested by the music from spilling over into unchecked sentimentality, and also, by turns, prevents the comedic tone of the on-screen action from descending into inane silliness. An apt example of this strategy is when Delmar, Pete, and Everett witness a river baptism. Religious worshippers, dressed in ethereal white robes, rapturously walk through the woods singing the gospel song "Down to the River and Pray," which features the powerful voice of contemporary country-bluegrass singer Allison Krauss backed by a full church choir. All three characters are spellbound by the ethereal mysticism of the ritual and song. This sense of reverence, however, is quickly deflated when Everett amusingly observes, "I guess hard times flush the chumps. Everyone's lookin' for answers." Delmar then rushes out into the river to be baptized, effectively cutting off Everett's skeptical commentary. Delmar claims the baptism has cleansed him of all sin, including a gas station robbery, as well as the subsequent lie he told Everett wherein he claimed to be innocent of the crime. My point here is that the humorous antics contained in the dialogue and action on screen offers a comedic counterpoint to the serious treatment of the music playing in the background. Neither element completely undermines the other—rather, they are working in more of a synthetic, symbiotic relationship.

One of the reasons this relationship between music and narrative action is important to establish is that many critics have argued that the Coens do not take anything seriously, that their style of cinema is over-determined by postmodern irony. I am arguing that while

comedy and irony are indeed critical components of Coen cinema, they do not constitute all of it. Sincerity plays an equally important role in their films, and a good place to look for such sentiment lies in the presentation of the music. Critics such as Richard Blake have recognized and commented on the Coens' dualistic approach, calling *O Brother* a "highly entertaining mix of comedy and tragedy" that "[l]ike Sturges" continually moves "in opposite directions with startling suddenness, an effect that both confuses and exhilarates" ("Wily Brothers"). Blake's observations, though insightful, are not new, for many other critics have said similar things. However, typically these observations are articulated in an offhand, general manner rather than as the specific product of careful, close analysis. My goal here is to offer an explanation of not merely *what* is happening on screen, but rather of *how* it works, how it achieves an "anthology of moods," to use Ebert's characterization.

A number of other songs in *O Brother* contribute to its "anthology of moods." The main musical leitmotif (a song attached to a particular character) for *O Brother* is "Man of Constant Sorrow," which accompanies Everett throughout the film. The song was first released as "Farewell Song" by Dick Burnett, a former oil worker who became a wandering musician after he was partially blinded during a robbery. In 1913, he published the song as part of a songbook, and then in the 1950s, the Stanley Brothers recorded the song for Columbia and turned it into an instant classic. T-Bone Burnett initially suggested its use to the Coens during their collaboration on *Lebowski*, believing that it would be a fitting musical leitmotif to characterize the hapless protagonist, Jeffery "The Dude" Lebowski (Jeff Bridges). However, it failed to make the cut. When the Coens once again turned to Burnett to produce the music for *O Brother*, Burnett realized the song would apply equally well to the character of Everett, and would be a better overall fit with the traditional style of the soundtrack (King 255). More important for the purposes of my argument, Burnett felt that the song powerfully captured the patchwork pantone of *O Brother*:

The first song we had to get was “Man Of Constant Sorrow.” The song is, of course, a standard—there are probably fifty versions of it. The version we used for our template was the version the Stanley Brothers had done with two singers answering the last line of every verse—which is, of course, comedic and paradoxical as the tune is about a tore-down, blown-out cat with these other voices attesting to the veracity of his tragic state of affairs. Somehow this song captured the tone of the movie—epic and dead serious on the one hand and comic and affable on the other. (Wild)

Burnett’s remarks are highly insightful, highlighting as they do the comic-tragic, funny-serious, ironic-sincere outlook expressed by the film as a whole and embodied in its music.

“Man of Constant Sorrow” first plays in the “Crossroads Minstrel” scene. After stealing a car, Everett, Pete, and Delmar stop at a dirt crossroads to give a lift to Tommy Johnson (Chris Thomas King), an African-American blues guitar player who has, Faust-like, sold his soul to the Devil in exchange for wizardly guitar-playing skills. The character of Tommy Johnson is based on one of two historical African-American blues guitar players: Tommy Johnson and/or Robert Johnson. Both musicians are associated with the crossroads myth in which black musicians trade their souls for otherworldly blues guitar acumen. In *O Brother*, Johnson is on his way to a radio station in Tishomingo to earn money by “singing into a can,” that is, to make a record. The wily Everett senses an opportunity to make quick and easy money to fund their odyssey, so the three convicts accompany Tommy to the ironically named WEZY radio station.

As a whole, the recording sequence is full of chuckles. While Everett, Pete, and Delmar sing quite earnestly and effectively, their exaggerated facial expressions and wacky movements come off as cartoonish and hyperbolic. The camera cuts between the performers and the station manager, who responds in an eccentrically gleeful manner, with rolling eyes and maniacal facial expressions, to the music. The quirky, comic action is accompanied by a

seriously skilled musical performance, one that is easily overlooked due to the silly antics of the sequence as a whole. And as with “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” the upbeat and cheerful tone of “Man of Constant Sorrow” is juxtaposed with downcast lyrics. The song tells of a “man of constant sorrow” who leaves both his home and his lover in Kentucky, the place where he was “born and raised.” For “six long years” the speaker has seen nothing but “trouble,” has experienced no “earthly pleasures,” and is doomed to wander the world on the rails, alone and friendless, until he dies. Upon his death, the speaker instructs his lover to bury his corpse in “some deep valley,” after which she “may learn to love another” while the speaker lays “sleeping in my grave.” The only hopeful moment in the song arrives at the very end, where the speaker anticipates a lover’s reunion “on God’s golden shore.”

The outlook of the song is bleak, to say the least, and yet it is the centerpiece of one of the most memorable, funny, and energetic scenes of the film. The relationship between the song lyrics and Everett’s character is also more complicated than it might initially seem. One possible reading is that this relationship is an ironic one. Everett does indeed experience sorrows in the film, but many of them he clearly brings upon himself, often through deceit and trickery, which undermines a wholly sympathetic view as provided by the song. The comic, self-generated manner of his trials and tribulations, in addition to his frequent conman stunts, tends to mitigate any sense of genuine, heartfelt sympathy for the plight of his character.

On the other hand, there are moments in the film where the presentation of Everett’s character seems calibrated to elicit genuine sympathy. One such moment is the scene preceding the climactic musical performance of the Soggy Bottom Boys at Homer Stokes’s political rally. Outside the building, just after Everett suggests they will need to sneak in, Pete challenges Everett’s authority by enumerating the sorrows the trio has encountered under his leadership. Everett’s apology and earnest plea for support from his friends is expressed and

framed in a deeply genuine, touching way, despite his selfish, duplicitous behaviors throughout the rest of the film. Another abrupt, tonal departure from treating Everett ironically occurs in the scene near the end of the film, when the three convicts and Tommy are about to be hanged by Sheriff Cooley. Everett, who has until this moment played the role of the modern religious skeptic, unhesitatingly drops to his knees to pray to God while the Gravediggers, played by the Fairfield Four, sing a stirring acapella rendition of the traditional spiritual “Lonesome Valley.” Everett’s plea to God to see his daughters again, to recognize his long separation from his family, to accept his confession of guilt, and to forgive him for the sake of his friends, is sincerely coded and deeply moving. All in all, the relationship between “Man of Constant Sorrow” and Everett’s character moves back and forth between ironic and sincere representations, an oscillation that is entirely in keeping with the screwball genre.

Another important scene from the film in which “Man of Constant Sorrow” is played is at Homer Stokes’s political rally. In the scene, Everett, Pete, Delmar, and Tommy disguise themselves with long beards and pose as a hired band so that Everett can woo his ex-wife, Penny (Holly Hunter), away from her current fiancé, Vernon T. Waldrip (Ray Mckinnon). For their first song, the four, performing as the Soggy Bottom Boys, play a rendition of Jimmie Rodgers’s “In the Jailhouse Now,” a performance that establishes a comic framework for the scene. The outlandishly fake beards that make the band look like a hillbilly version of ZZ Top, combined with Pete’s hilariously stiff and awkward dance moves (and outrageous yodeling), are hilariously executed by the performers, inviting a kind of mocking yet playful teasing of their hayseed characters, as well as the form of hillbilly music associated with such types.

After the song ends, Pete and Delmar harmoniously sing the opening lines of “Man of Constant Sorrow,” which immediately elicits a rousing, standing ovation from the audience.

The Soggy Bottom Boys are confused because they are unaware of the song's meteoric commercial success following their initial recording of it at WEZY. The rousing performance is interrupted by Homer Stokes, who recognizes the four men from the KKK rally and announces that "these boys is not white. Hell, they ain't even old-timey." Stokes lists a number of supposedly profane acts committed by the Soggy Bottom Boys and reports that they are escaped convicts. The film then reveals that this entire event is being broadcast on the radio by showing a Ma and Pa Kettle-like couple listening to the show and expressing disapproval towards Stokes's behavior. The audience does not seem to care about anything Stokes has said—miscegenation, criminal activity, and soul-selling deals with Satan be damned—and kick him out of the hall to allow the Soggy Bottom Boys to finish their performance.

Some critics have read the way in which music triumphantly transcends social divisions in this scene as a form of historical wishful thinking, a nostalgic sentimentalism. Yet, this supposedly fanciful re-writing of history is undermined by the behavior of Pappy, who, ever the shrewd political opportunist, publically pardons the Soggy Bottom Boys and announces that they will be his "brain trust," which as Everett explains to Delmar, means "you and me and Pete and Tommy are gonna be the power behind the throne so to speak." Pappy and Homer Stokes both represent cunning Southern demagogues who recognize the political benefit of appealing to a romanticized old-timey folk culture as a means of generating populist support. In this scene, as in the film as a whole, old-timey-ness is situated as a contested site of multiple political, cultural, and economic interests, with several parties attempting to co-opt or appropriate it for their own narrow ends.

The Soggy Bottom Boys' performance serves yet another function, that is, in addition to offering the old-timey appeal seized upon by the film's political schemers, it offers comedic relief. Any sincere emotions one might feel for the Soggy Bottom Boys'

performance and music is ironically countered by the quirky way they are represented, with their inane fake beards, cartoonish yodeling, and spastic yet awkwardly stiff styles of “square” white Southern hick dancing. The complicated tonal dance between moments of sincerity and irony in this scene and others is not only intellectually stimulating to try to follow and map, but also artistically clever and critically serious; it balances an appreciation of the beauty and power of “old-timey” Americana with a self-reflexive sense of ironic knowingness. Put simply, the Coens manage to be funny and serious at the same time.

The memorable Klu Klux Klan rally provides yet another example of a scene in which the music collaborates with other formal elements to suggest a wide array of moods, a pantone of attitudes. After Everett and Delmar break Pete out of jail, they stumble upon a KKK rally that has been assembled to lynch Tommy Johnson. The sequence features two songs, the first of which is a chant sung by the Klan members. The chant is accompanied by a Busby Berkeley-like dance number that is as impressive, technically, as it is ridiculous, tonally. The chant sounds like a strange cross between the “High Ho” song sung by the dwarves in Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the “March of the Winkies” chant sung by guards of the Wicked Witch’s castle in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). This is a fitting musical blend to support the overall anarchic tone of *O Brother*, as it synthesizes the jolly optimism of *Snow White* with the dark foreboding *The Wizard of Oz*. Such treatment of music and narrative is a hallmark of the Coens’ style. The dissonance of the musical pastiche parallels the dissonance of the visual pastiche created through an ironic-comic inversion of disturbing historical subject matter via the Berkeley-inspired choreography. As Thomas Bjerre notes, “No doubt the Coen brothers are treading dangerous ground here, making an otherwise horrific situation into slapstick comedy, showing irreverence for the hallowed and controversial history of the South” (62). The incongruous mixture of tones through music and image in this scene and others elicits an equally

incongruous response in the audience: horror, shock, and disgust mixed with amusement, laughter, and irony, a confusing mix of intellectual, psychological, and emotional responses described by Josh Levine as “that Coen brothers feeling.”

After the Klan members finish their Nuremberg-like march—another disturbing reference suggested by the scene—the Grand Dragon, who the audience shortly learns is Homer Stokes, sings a stirring solo version of the traditional dirge “O Death” in preparation for Tommy’s lynching. Ralph Stanley lends his voice to the song, providing an aged yet pitch-perfect vocal texture that makes for a deeply chilling rendition. Prior to the introduction of this song, the music and action of the sequence suggested a wacky, irreverent framing of the action, but the performance of “O Death” suddenly shifts the tone into something dark and deadly serious, foreshadowing as it does the hanging of Tommy. This moment is no less tonally complex than many others in *O Brother*. The delivery of the song seems to be quite sincere—in other words, the delivery seems calculated to stir the emotions of the audience in a genuinely dramatic way. Joel Coen remarked that the brothers “wanted that horrific image to be amusing, at the same time as being horrifying or spooky” (Mottram 162). This dramatic presentation is reinforced by camera technique, which assumes a low angle in order to look up at the Grand Dragon, dressed all in red and symmetrically framed by two torches. This shot monumentalizes the Grand Dragon, placing him on a pedestal, or what is perhaps more fitting in the context of musical performance, a stage.

By way of contrast, to offer a sense of what an on-screen performance of “O Death” would look and sound like in a wholly different kind of film, one whose tonal approach is more straightforwardly dramatic, one could turn to the film *Songcatcher* (Greenwald, 2000). Released the same year as *O Brother*, the movie also features a compelling performance of “O Death,” as well as a number of other Appalachian folk songs. Set in 1907, musicologist Dr. Lily Penleric (Janet McTeer) is denied tenure at the university where she teaches, so she

decides to visit her sister, Eleanor (Jane Adams), who teaches at a schoolhouse located deep in the Appalachian Mountains. There, she discovers that the folk music performed by various members of the mountain community is descended from traditional Anglo-Scotch-Irish ballads and has been faithfully preserved through hundreds of years of geographic and cultural isolation. Dr. Penleric decides to preserve this musical tradition by venturing into remote parts of the region in order to record, transcribe, and eventually, disseminate the music to the outside world.

As in *O Brother*, “O Death,” is performed as a solo vocal in *Songcatcher*. In the middle of a barn dance, a fight breaks out between two members of the local community, Tom Bledsoe (Aidan Quinn) and Earl Giddens (David Patrick Kelly). Earl is seen as a betrayer of his community because he has teamed up with a coal mining company intent on exploiting the impoverished circumstances of the mountain people by buying up their land at ultra-low prices. Later in the evening, after Earl wakes up from his moonshine- and fistfight-induced stupor, he sings “O Death,” ostensibly to symbolize his role as the harbinger of death to the traditional life of the mountain community. Earl sings the first verse of the song and departs, which prompts other locals to sing the rest of the song.

The acapella performance of “O Death” in both films is powerful, but part of what separates them is the way they are presented, or their tonal context. In *Songcatcher*, the song is delivered in a serious, unbroken dramatic register, emphasizing the dark, violent undercurrent of folk life in Appalachia. *O Brother*’s use of “O Death” also suggests the theme of death in the midst of life, but in the context of a playful mocking, a ridiculing of a KKK lynching that parodies Hollywood musicals as well as other prior texts and styles. While both songs are clearly meant to inspire awe and reverence in the audience via musical spectacle, the tonal contexts of the songs are very different, a difference that brings into bold relief the multi-layered, cacophonous texture of *O Brother*’s nuanced narrative perspective.

The music of *O Brother* can be seen as moving towards what many cultural scholars have recently described as a kind of “new sincerity.” This new sincerity is different from the one initially described by Jim Collins in 1993, which was formulated to capture the way mainstream Hollywood films responded to skeptical forms of postmodern irony by “purposively evading the media-saturated terrain of the present in pursuit of an almost forgotten authenticity, attainable only through a sincerity that avoids any sort of irony or eclecticism” (257). This type of new sincerity, according to Collins, was serious in a reactionary kind of way. Films like *Back to the Future* (Zemeckis, 1985) and *Dances with Wolves* (Costner, 1990) attempted to circumvent postmodern irony and intertextual eclecticism by pursuing an earnest and sincere nostalgia for past genres. More recently, however, Warren Buckland has accounted for how postmodern irony has evolved since the early 1990s in Indiewood cinema, re-contextualizing the phrase “new sincerity” as a dialectical response to “postmodern irony and nihilism . . . not a rejection of it, not a nostalgic return to an idyllic, old sincerity. Instead . . . new sincerity *incorporates* postmodern irony and cynicism; it operates in conjunction with irony” (2). Buckland’s, rather than Collin’s, idea of a “new sincerity” allows one to better understand *O Brother* in that the music of the film often balances out the postmodern irony of the dialogue, acting, and other elements, which in turn, helps to keep the sincere tones of the film in check so that the film itself does not assume the form of the uncomplicated, earnestly nostalgic kind of mainstream, big-budget Hollywood films criticized by Collins.

As a whole, *O Brother* presents a complex mix of feelings and attitudes that are nevertheless precisely calibrated, creating a type of sincerity that works *through* postmodern irony rather than *around* it. As Jerry Saltz noted in a review of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, many contemporary artists seem to “grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of

mind” (Buckland 2). As I’ve suggested throughout this chapter, *O Brother* offers an interesting case study of this “compound-complex” state of mind, “that Coen Brothers feeling,” a sensibility that denotes a “messy combination of intellectual and emotional responses that don’t easily resolve themselves into a simple statement” (Levine 17). One of my major points has been that the music of the film makes a significant contribution to this messy feeling, this cinematic pantone of attitudes, and in this sense, music should be considered as central to the stylistic profile of Coen auteurism as other elements like innovative cinematography, genre play, and smart dialogue.

This notion of an “anthology of moods” is analytically useful because it explains why scholarly and critical views on *O Brother* and many other Coen films have been so divided. At the risk of some oversimplification, most scholarly views of *O Brother* fall into one of two camps: those who argue that *O Brother* and its music offer some form of meaningful social critique, and those who argue that it is more focused on delivering clever, yet ultimately lightweight, entertainment. Among those who see *O Brother* as a fanciful comedy that elides serious social questions is R. Barton Palmer, who, in *Joel and Ethan Coen*, labels the film as “an undemanding form of intellectual engagement” (132). While *O Brother* may be “witty and sophisticated,” in Palmer’s view, it is a film “dedicated to uncomplicated emotional uplift” and “avoids serious questions of any kind” (134). In a similar vein, Andrew Leiter argues in ““That Old-Timey Music’: Nostalgia and the Southern Tradition in *O Brother*, *Where Art Thou?*” that the music of *O Brother* encourages a nostalgic view of the South and Southern history that mitigates, or “softens,” the impact of historical injustices. According to Leiter, the Coens’ film

offers a purified regional voyeurism, in which the audience can enjoy the comedy and brutality widely associated with the South on screen but can do so relieved of their own social responsibilities . . . The soundtrack of *O Brother* . . . provides the

emotional antidote that turns the poverty, racism, and demagoguery of Depression Mississippi into palatable comic fare. (72)

James Mottram supports Leiter's view of *O Brother* as indulgent nostalgia. "This is, of course, Coen country," observes Mottram, "a world detached from our own, that dwells not on the hardships the landscape has to offer" (158). The point of all these critical views seems clear—*O Brother* offers a heavily nostalgic, comic vision of the South and the Great Depression, one that elides serious critical inquiry of any kind.

On the other side of this debate are those who stress that *O Brother* is anything but comic and light. Rather than viewing *O Brother* as a pointless pastiche devoid of social conscience, Allen Redmon argues that the "world through which the film's three heroes move is beset by social problems: economic hardship, familial instability, spiritual uncertainty, political duplicity, religious profiteering, and institutional bigotry" (93). Redmon's contention that *O Brother* is more than mere escapist entertainment is further developed by Hugh Ruppersburg, who suggests that *O Brother* does not shy away from social and historical ills:

[R]acism is at the heart of the world the film portrays, along with a system of law and government that discriminates against the poor, whatever their color, displaces farmers from their land (remember that Delmar's dream is to buy back the family farm), allows a governor to issue a pardon on the one hand to men who in the next scene are threatened with hanging by a sheriff who ignores the law. (19-20)

Ruppersburg concludes by stating that *O Brother* presents "an unfair and unequal world, one that doesn't quite make sense, like the one we inhabit" (20).

The music of *O Brother* offers a rich site of analysis, and a number of scholars, including Erica Rowell, have read the function of music in *O Brother* as a tool for transcending social divisions. As Rowell puts it, "With Everett's discovery of music's

mobilizing powers comes the conclusion that art of the masses—specifically music—can be a potent societal force. The exuberant reception of ‘Man of Constant Sorrow’ shows that blacks and whites can mix in harmony. Like comedy, music is a unifying cultural product—and a most democratic art form.” All these views, in one way or another, situate *O Brother* and its music as socially critical, pointing out ways in which it acknowledges and addresses various ideological issues, rather than using them simply for laughs and light entertainment.

While this debate is important and productive, it has created somewhat of an intellectual gridlock in Coen scholarship. Rather than attempting to argue for either one of these perspectives, I would like to add something new to this conversation by suggesting that the reason why these two views are equally strong in their evidence and reasoning is due in no small part to the deeply convoluted tone of *O Brother*, a tone that, depending on how it is read, is readily capable of supporting both interpretations. Those who see *O Brother* as an escapist fantasy claim that the possibility for social criticism in the film is overwhelmed by its whimsical, comedic tone. At the same time, those who see *O Brother* as a film that addresses serious social questions often emphasize the darker, more serious themes lying just underneath this comic surface. As I have argued, what makes *O Brother* a compelling, powerful film, or indeed what makes the Coens compelling, powerful filmmakers, lies precisely in the nuanced way in which their films orchestrate and manage this complex tonality, one that is light and funny at times, and dark and serious at others—and sometimes, both simultaneously. This tonal complexity can be glimpsed in different ways, but the music of the film, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, is a particularly rich and forceful expression of it.

As I have argued, *O Brother* is a pivotal film for the Coens because of the vital role popular music is given in the narrative. While *Lebowski* signaled a turn away from relying so heavily on the composed scores of Carter Burwell and towards the compiled, popular music

curated by T-Bone Burnett, *O Brother* intensifies the Coens' stylistic preoccupation with music to the point that it assumes complete control of the creative process and resulting film narrative. Indeed, after the musical odyssey of *O Brother*, Coen films will never sound quite the same, an observation that sets the stage for the Coens' next musically significant film, *The Ladykillers* (2004).

CHAPTER 4

THE LADYKILLERS

“Having gone through the last century of gospel music and discovered so much about it, I would love to have everybody over at my house and play them these things I’ve discovered.”

–T-Bone Burnett

“*The Ladykillers* features a combination of gospel music, hip hop music, and baroque chamber music. That’s actually one of the things that’s been very interesting about this project” –Joel Coen

“Welcome to the bottom of the trough,” wrote Christopher Orr in a 2014 retrospective piece on *The Ladykillers* (2004), the Coens’ eleventh feature film. To mark the 30th anniversary of *Blood Simple* (1984) for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Orr critically surveyed all Coen films to date. He rated *The Ladykillers* #16 out of 16. “It is, by a substantial margin, the worst movie the Coen brothers have ever made,” wrote Orr, “every one of the Coens’ first 10 films had at least something to recommend it. A failure as complete as *The Ladykillers*—a broad, slack, grating farce that bears little resemblance to the understated original—was completely out of character” (“30 Years of Coens”). More recently, during the release of the Coens’ latest film, *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), Devin Gordon of *GQ* also declared *The Ladykillers* the worst Coen movie ever, describing it as “[a]ll the Coens’ trademarks—silly accents, botched capers, diamond-precise set design, a general *eau du* quirk in the air—pushed to exhausting, irritating, unrewarding excess” (“The Definitive Ranking”). Like Orr and Gordon, Ann Hornaday of *The Washington Post* also ranked *The Ladykillers* dead last among the Coens’ other work, arguing that it was “emblematic of the Coens’ weaknesses for empty style” (“Our Definitive Ranking”). Indeed, nearly every online ranking of the Coen brothers’ films presents *The Ladykillers* as one of the most, if not *the* most, flawed efforts in almost every respect. Except for the music.

The Ladykillers soundtrack was received more favorably by critics; it was the only element, in fact, to be considered a point of meaningful differentiation between the Coens' re-make and the original 1955 Ealing Studios film of the same title, directed by Alexander Mackendrick and starring Katie Johnson, Alec Guinness, and Peter Sellers. A. O. Scott stated that while the story of the Coens' re-make was "a flimsy frame to be ornamented with diverting bric-a-brac," the soundtrack "swells with sanctified harmonies." Scott concluded that Coens had once again successfully "assembled a rich soundtrack full of half-forgotten, unforgettable American music" ("A Gang of Imposters"). Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* remarked that in the course of "updating the 1955 comedy of the same name [. . .] the Coens turn the film into an academic exercise [. . .] [a]s an experiment, it's fascinating. But damn if the fiddling doesn't suck the life out of the laughs" ("The Ladykillers"). Yet, Travers conceded, the music of the film was able to "stir things up like the script rarely does." Indeed, J. Hoberman grasped that the music, more than any other aspect, was the central attraction of the film: "the strategic deployment of incidental music ranging from Blind Willie Johnson to Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers suggests that the filmmakers' real investment is in the soundtrack" ("Dud Simple").

Hoberman's remark captures one of the central assertions of this chapter in particular, and indeed, my dissertation as a whole—that the significance of music to Coen filmmaking is only just starting to draw notice from critics. Despite the fact that most commentators identify *The Ladykillers* as one of the Coens' weakest efforts in their oeuvre, I suggest in this chapter that a close re-examination of the film's music—including its major role in the production process and its position as a complex textual feature—justifies a critical re-accounting. Supporting this argument is a detailed look at the projects and career trajectories of both T-Bone Burnett and the Coens between *O Brother* (2000) and *The Ladykillers*, which reveals on behalf of both artists a committed, sustained engagement with traditional and popular music

in film. I also consider in this chapter the role of music in the production process of *The Ladykillers*, which, as in the case of *O Brother* and other Coen films, transcends the typical Hollywood approach and is revealed to be as important as visual aspects of the film. The Coen-Burnett team once again resumes its curatorial approach to film music in *The Ladykillers* by excavating and re-presenting a half-forgotten musical genre, which in this case is barbershop-style quartet gospel music of the early to mid-twentieth century. This genre is blended in novel, striking ways with other musical genres in the film, including hip-hop and baroque. Songs from these genres are utilized in the narrative for the purposes of characterization, ironic counterpoint, tonal complexity, authorial commentary, curatorial exhibition, and other related cinematic ends. *The Ladykillers* ultimately shows how multi-layered, polyvalent, and versatile music can be for the Coens, who rightly deserve to be included in the canon of filmmaker-auteur melomanes, directors for whom music functions as the inspiration driving their craft.

In the years between the releases of *O Brother* and *The Ladykillers*, Burnett and the Coens show a sustained engagement with both film and music, an interest that becomes deeper, wider, and more complex with each project. In 2002, the Coens expanded their relationship with popular music beyond film and into the music industry itself by partnering with Burnett and Columbia to form a record label, DMZ. According to Burnett, who runs daily operations, the creation of the label represented “an ongoing quest to create a fairer environment for artists to do their work, a place where they can be supported and encouraged” (Harrington). Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the zone of cultural production for recording music described by Burnett is similar to the one the Coens occupy in the film industry—that is, an artist-oriented, artisanal, “indie” kind of production site. As Burnett further notes, “We’re specialized in that we don’t have a quota. So, we’re only going to do things that we think are really, really good. We don’t have an A&R staff, so we’re

going to allow people to make records without meddling” (Farinella). In the context of Hollywood filmmaking, the Coens have enjoyed a remarkable degree of creative freedom over the course of their careers, dwelling in a zone of cultural production best described as “Indiewood”—a part-Hollywood, part-independent industrial hybrid. DMZ was conceived to cultivate a similar set of circumstances for musicians. In fact, DMZ’s board of directors includes a number of notable figures from the indie film and music industries, including writer and actor Sam Shepard, German filmmaker Wim Wenders, singer-songwriters Elvis Costello and Tom Waits, even Bono of U2. DMZ’s first release was an album by Ralph Stanley, a prominent figure featured on the *O Brother* soundtrack, followed by a number of soundtracks built on American roots music, including *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002), *Cold Mountain* (2003), and *A Mighty Wind* (2003). The creation of DMZ adds further weight to the notion that the Coens’ interest in music is not incidental to their films; rather, they are genuinely interested and fully engaged in contributing to the evolution of traditional American music. The Coens are not just quirky filmmakers who make films with good music in them; as it turns out, their films merely represent a kind of creative outlet for expressing their love and passion for music.

Within the same period between *O Brother* and *The Ladykillers*, the Coens released a number of films that continued to show a keen interest in the use of popular music over the more conventional symphonic variety. After *O Brother*, the Coens released *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001), which tells the story of a barber named Ed Crane (Billy Bob Thornton). Set in the 1950s, Ed tries to escape a banal, meaningless existence by attempting to launch the piano career of a teenage girl named Rachel “Birdy” Abundas (Scarlett Johansson). However, Ed’s plan backfires in an unexpected, tragic way. Ed arranges for Birdy to visit a famed piano teacher, and after listening to her play, the teacher informs Ed that Birdy’s skills are mediocre, at best. On the ride home from the audition, Birdy tries to give Ed oral sex,

which causes him to swerve off the road and crash into a ditch, seriously injuring both of them and thus ending his relationship with Birdy.

Given that the film's plot revolves around an aspiring pianist and her would-be mentor, it makes sense that the musical soundtrack is dominated by pre-existing forms of classical music, especially Beethoven piano sonatas. But rather than relying exclusively on pre-existing recordings, which would be more typical for mainstream Hollywood films beholden to tight budgets, many of the piano pieces were newly recorded especially for the film, and performed by the esteemed pianist Jonathan Feldman. It is these kinds of creative decisions—to shape and craft music in their films in ways that go beyond the typical industrial Hollywood approach—that situate the Coens within a more artisanal film music paradigm.

The Beethoven sonatas lend the film a lyrical, introspective mood, providing an elegiac tone to visually parallel the gray scale cinematography. While Ed is typically deadpan in his interactions with other characters in the film, his voice-over narration reveals a deeper, more complex inner life, the emotional nuances of which are expressed not only through his words, but also, more forcefully perhaps, through the sonatas, which consistently accompany his monologues. As Kristi A. Brown observes, “Only when Beethoven is playing—diegetically and nondiegetically—does Ed Crane share something beyond the facts, something about himself” (151). Ed never speaks, never opens up, without the music to provide emotional context, and thus the film's music offers an alternative means of representing his character outside of words or visuals. While Ed is presented as an unsympathetic character in the film overall, the music acts as an affective counterpoint, creating a more tender, sympathetic figure. As one online reviewer pointed out, while much of the music encourages a gloomy, brooding outlook, it also has “a sad sort of romanticism about it that is tinged with the slightest bit of hopefulness” (Goldwasser). The music of *The Man Who Wasn't There*

conveys a nuanced, dappled mood, one that complicates the emotional presentation of the main character, who is unsympathetic on some levels and sympathetic on others, the true mark of the Coen anti-hero.

Next, the Coens released *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), which centers on the schemes of a prolific divorce attorney named Miles Massey (George Clooney). Massey suffers a mid-life crisis and falls in love with Marilyn Rexroth (Catherine Zeta-Jones), a gold digger who habitually marries and then divorces wealthy men in order to achieve financial and social independence. While the film was unsuccessful by all measures, it is nevertheless a notable work in connection with the Coens' interest in popular music. The compilation soundtrack showcases songs by Simon & Garfunkel, Elvis Presley, Tom Jones, and Big Bill Broonzy. In terms of pop music, with four of their songs featured in the film, the presence of Simon & Garfunkel tends to stand out the most.

"The Boxer," originally released as a lead single on the duo's 1970 album, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, initiates the story in the opening sequence. Donovan Donaly (Geoffrey Rush), a television soap opera producer, raucously sings along with the song while driving home in his convertible. The music and scene as a whole sets a lightly comic, almost serene, tone, until Donaly arrives home to discover that his wife, Bonnie (Stacey Travis), is sleeping with a local pool cleaner named Ollie (Jack Kyle). At this point, the story veers sharply towards the quirky black comedy the Coens are known for: Donaly pulls a gun, a struggle ensues, and Bonnie assaults him with one of his own Daytime Television Lifetime Achievement Awards. The cheerful tone created by the music is a set up, in short, for the Coens to execute their trademark bathos, a comic sensibility created by a sudden shift in mood from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the serene to the vulgar.

The same song plays again during the end credits of the film as a folksy, acoustic cover by roots musician Colin Linden, who also, as it happens, contributed to the *O Brother*

soundtrack. Linden makes a cameo appearance in the film as Father Scott, who officiates the phony marriage between Marilyn Rexroth and the bogus oil tycoon Howard D. Doyle (Billy Bob Thornton). Prior to the nuptials, Father Scott strolls up the aisle playing an acoustic guitar and singing a cover of Simon & Garfunkel's "April Come She Will." Once again, the Coens cast a soundtrack musician to act and perform in the film. This self-reflexive move heightens our awareness of the film as a film as when the audience recognizes a musician playing a musician it disrupts the illusion of the fictional world. This strategy also calls our attention to the music in particular as an important cinematic device for the auteurs. Linden delivers a smooth, soothing version of the song that is framed in a reverential, sincere manner. Yet, the overall context of the scene is ridiculously comic, for the ceremony is nothing but a sham. In a way, then, the music works as a sincere counterpoint to the comic irony of the action, encouraging the audience to admire and enjoy the music on one level, while also experiencing a sense of wry amusement at the ridiculous antics of the story on another.

Interestingly, when Miles confronts Marilyn after the wedding ceremony, Linden can be heard playing a cover of "Punky's Dilemma" in the background. This song denotes a meaningful intertext in the context of the history of popular music in film. In addition to "Overs," Paul Simon gave "Punky's Dilemma" to director Mike Nichols to be used in the *The Graduate* (1967), a landmark soundtrack in the study of film music. Nichols was not satisfied with either song, which prompted Simon to write "Mrs. Robinson" instead, which went on to become one of the most well-known soundtrack songs of the New Hollywood era (Eliot). The lyrics of "Punky's Dilemma" are, apropos of the Coens' absurdist sensibility, rather ludicrous, beginning with the line, "Wish I was a Kellogg's Corn Flake." The song pokes fun at the culture of California, the primary setting of *Intolerable Cruelty*, and the Hollywood film industry. The lyrics are playfully, nonsensically comic. The speaker of the

song is “takin’ movies” while “floatin’ in my bowl” of corn flakes and “relaxin’ awhile, livin’ in style/Talkin’ to a raisin who occasionally plays L.A./Casually glancing at his toupee.” While the song might seem rather casually placed in the film, rarely are allusions such as these accidental in Coen films. They are usually intentional, and typically, their purpose is to engage in a kind of ludic game of recognition with the viewer. Furthermore, at least with this particular allusion, the Coens acknowledge an awareness of film music lineage, particularly popular, pre-existing film music, and their presence within this history.

While the Coens were making *The Man Who Wasn’t There* and *Intolerable Cruelty*, T-Bone Burnett was busy working on a number of Hollywood movie soundtracks, including *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002) and *Cold Mountain* (2003). For both films, Burnett re-deployed many of the same strategies initially developed for the *O Brother* soundtrack. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* concerns Sidda Lee Walker (Sandra Bullock), a successful New York playwright originally from Louisiana, who divulges painful childhood memories of her psychologically unstable mother, Vivian Walker (Ellen Burstyn), in an interview with *Time* magazine. Sidda’s highly public confession creates a deep schism between mother and daughter, one that the mother’s childhood friends, who call themselves the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, seek to mend by revealing to Sidda painful truths about her mother’s past.

The story swings between past and present, and the shifts in time are established through the use of popular song, which sets the scene for cultural periods spanning the mid-twentieth century to present day. The soundtrack is populated by a variety of musical genres that, unsurprisingly in the context of Burnett’s wider body of work, fall under the broader heading of “American roots music,” including blues, jazz, contemporary R&B, folk, rock, gospel, and country. However, as is also typical of Burnett, the soundtrack engages in a re-excavation and re-exploration of a distinct, half-forgotten musical form: traditional Louisiana

Cajun music. A vintage recording of Blind Uncle Gaspard's "Assi Dans La Fenetre De Ma Chambre" opens the film and sets the cultural context of the story. Additionally, folklorist and singer-songwriter Ann Savoy contributed a number of songs to the film in this traditional ethnic style, and actually performs a few in the film itself. These tracks include "C'est Si Triste," "Lulu Revenue Dans La Village," and "C'est Un Pache de Dire Un Mentire." Overall, as with *O Brother*, by scouring the archives of American roots music and publically exhibiting his discoveries to filmgoers in order to deliver a musical re-education, Burnett adopts a distinctly curatorial approach to the creation of a film music soundtrack, an approach that is, of course, commercial and profit-driven on some levels, and ethnographic and preservationist on others.

Burnett's curatorial take on film music is further exemplified by approximately half of the nineteen tracks on the album that were newly recorded for the film, thus granting the music a sense of originality and creativity typically reserved for a classical score. Original songs include Lauren Hill's "Selah," and Bob Dylan's "Waitin' for You," the latter of which was written exclusively for the film. The soundtrack also includes newly recorded covers of classic songs, like "Sitting in the Window of My Room," performed by Allison Krauss, and "Yesterday Could Only Be Tomorrow," by Tony Bennett. Macy Gray sings Billie Holliday's "I Want to Be Your Mother's Son-In-Law" and Taj Mahal performs Fats Waller's "Keeping Out of Mischief Now."

In addition to his work on *The Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Burnett also served as executive music producer for *Cold Mountain* (2003), Anthony Minghella's film adaptation of Charles Frazier's bestselling novel. Set mostly in the mountains of North Carolina during the American Civil War, a wounded Confederate soldier, Inman (Jude Law), escapes the horrors of war and military service to reunite with Ada (Nicole Kidman), to rekindle a relationship that had only barely begun before the onset of war.

The soundtrack for *Cold Mountain* combines original score music composed by Gabriel Yard with various forms of vernacular American music. In the same way that he represented Cajun music in *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, for *Cold Mountain*, Burnett revived traditional shape-note gospel songs, in addition to producing contemporary covers of traditional songs, and newly written songs composed and performed in traditional styles. Artists who contributed to the soundtrack include Sting, Alison Krauss, the Sacred Harp Singers, and, most notably, Jack White of the White Stripes, who not only contributed five songs in traditional styles, but also played a minor role in the film as Georgia, a travelling musician. Once again, Burnett enlisted popular, recognizable artists to record traditional songs in traditional styles, but through a distinctly contemporary perspective—a “neo-traditional” approach, in other words.

It reportedly took Burnett over a year to produce the *Cold Mountain* soundtrack, which eventually won a BAFTA award for Best Film Music. It was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Score, as well as a Grammy for Best Compilation Soundtrack. Both “Scarlett Tide,” written by Burnett and Elvis Costello, and “You Will Be My Ain True Love,” written by Sting, were nominated for Best Original Song at the Academy Awards and Best Song Written for Visual Media at the Grammy Awards.

The soundtrack was aptly described by one online reviewer as “a veritable dictionary of traditional country and Americana” (Monger). Amanda Petruisich of *Pitchfork Review* remarked that Burnett had once again “burrowed back into his yellowing sack of nuggets and emerged with a fistful of gritty, mid 19th century classics and long-lost Americana.” As Petruisich’s critical appraisal indicates, for *Cold Mountain*, Burnett once again adopted a curatorial approach to film music. He exhumed traditional American roots music genres, and then assembled notable contemporary artists who are part and parcel of this tradition to record both classic and new songs in order to re-disseminate such forms through the broad

reach of popular film.

The reason I have enumerated these various projects by Burnett and the Coens is not only to move in a diachronic, historical fashion through their work, but also to show that these projects reveal trends and patterns that shed light on my primary case studies. Overall, in the period between *O Brother* and *The Ladykillers*, both the Coens and Burnett continued to be deeply involved with popular music in film, applying it in ways that were both similar to and different from the *O Brother* soundtrack. But despite the time they spent apart, working on their individual projects, the creative sensibilities of the Coens and Burnett once again converged as they embarked on their second collaboration, *The Ladykillers*.

Initially, the Coens were hired to work on *The Ladykillers* only as scriptwriters. They were recruited by their long-time friend and early collaborator, Barry Sonnenfeld. Sonnenfeld struck a deal with Disney to remake the 1955 Ealing classic, but it fell through, so after having already invested a certain amount of time and energy into the script, the Coens decided to direct it themselves (Bradshaw 200). According to Joel Coen, the main creative starting points for the project included relocating the setting of the story from post-war London to the contemporary South, and recasting Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson) as “a Southern Baptist church lady.” This cultural-geographical-temporal re-situating is what gave the Coens the idea use gospel music in the film (Reid 196). Like *O Brother*, the music of *The Ladykillers* co-evolved with the development of the script in the pre-production phase prior to shooting. As Burwell notes, “Long before the film was shot Joel Coen had this idea of combining gospel, hip-hop and baroque music in some way [. . .]. There were scenes in the film which called for music of one or another of these genres, and the gospel had been recorded prior to shooting” (“Carter’s Notes”). As with *O Brother*, the music of *The Ladykillers* pre-existed the film, an inversion of the typical production process followed by most Hollywood films where the music is added after the film is shot. This strategy, used by

most Hollywood filmmakers, encourages more of a “decorative” approach to music, treating it as adornment, adjunct, or annex to the film. However, for the Coens, the music colors the conception and making of the film, so much so that it seems to occupy a privileged position over some of the more conventionally important aspects of production, such as those that are visual in nature. Indeed, this reversal of the typical Hollywood approach to soundtracks once again reveals how central music is to the films of the Coen brothers.

The Ladykillers soundtrack is structured by three main musical genres: gospel, hip-hop, and baroque. The soundtrack focuses primarily on the African-American gospel tradition, with a pronounced emphasis on black barbershop quartets of the 1940s and 50s, a period widely considered the “golden age” of the genre. This distinct niche is represented on the soundtrack by a number of 1950s vintage recordings by the Soul Stirrers, including “Come, Let Us Go Back to God” (originally written by the “father of gospel music,” Thomas Dorsey), “Jesus, I’ll Never Forget,” and “Any Day Now.” The Soul Stirrers are generally regarded as one of the most influential groups in the history of gospel music. Founded in East Texas in the mid to late 1920s by Silas Roy Crain, the Soul Stirrers reached the height of their popularity in the 1940s and 50s, propelled by a young Sam Cooke as lead vocalist. One of the group’s primary contributions to the evolution of the gospel tradition was the perfection of the “switch lead,” whereby one vocalist begins a song and then passes the lead on to another singer mid-song. The group was so influential to the gospel genre, in fact, that it was documented by John Lomax in 1936 for the Library of Congress.

In 1940, the Stirrers made two more notable contributions to American history: they became the first black gospel quartet to land its own weekly radio show, and the first black gospel group to perform at the White House, playing on the lawn for Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill (Burford 437). The group’s traditional gospel music would evolve, though, after Sam Cooke joined the group in 1950 and synthesized its sound with

contemporary stylistic trends in pop music. Cooke then left the Stirrers to pursue a career in mainstream music, achieving commercial success with hits like “Chain Gang” (1959) and “Twistin’ the Night Away” (1962). Despite his later departure from the group, Cooke nevertheless exerted a considerable influence on the Stirrers, allowing the group as a whole to reach beyond gospel and shape the development of early rock and roll, effectively paving the way for groups like the Temptations and the Four Tops, both of which declared the Soul Stirrers a crucial antecedent.

While the Soul Stirrers were an audible presence in the landscape of American popular music and culture around the mid-twentieth century, when *The Ladykillers* was released in 2004, both the Stirrers and the genre they helped to create occupied a marginal, even somewhat obscure, status; it would be fair to say that the Stirrers were, at the time of the film’s release, more of a footnote in the history of American popular music. The status of the Soul Stirrers in particular, as well as traditional African-American gospel in general, vis-a-vis American mainstream music and culture was similar to that of bluegrass and old-time music when *O Brother* was released: a half-forgotten relic of the past, the interest of a relatively small cadre of devoted admirers. The genre was considered to be “historical.” While *The Ladykillers* did not stimulate the same kind of revival for gospel that *O Brother* did for old-time music, the soundtrack nevertheless represents yet another effort on the part of the Coens and Burnett to use film to resuscitate a traditional musical genre by moving, survey-like, through its historical canon.

In addition to the Soul Stirrers, a number of other notable black barbershop quartets populate the musical soundtrack. Claude Jeter & the Swan Silvertones’ “A Christian’s Plea” is sampled in Nappy Roots’ “Another Day, Another Dollar.” Bill Landford & the Landfordaires’ “Trouble of This World” and “Troubled, Lord I’m Troubled” serve as theme music for the film as a whole. The soundtrack also includes a vintage recording of “Let Your

Light Shine on Me” by blues legend Blind Willie Johnson. Vintage recordings and artists such as the ones listed above constitute a kind of cultural intervention, an attempt to re-educate or re-orient the public with respect to a tradition of American music at a time when such music is all but drowned out by a contemporary music industry with a very short memory and a myopic focus on stardom and glamour.

In addition to featuring pre-existing vintage recordings, the soundtrack incorporates gospel songs recorded especially for the film by notable contemporary practitioners of the genre. These figures include Donnie McClurkin, who sings a cover of the Soul Stirrer’s “Come, Let Us Go Back to God” and “You Can’t Hurry God,” as well as Rose, Freddy and Lisa Stone of Sly & the Family Stone, who accompany the Venice Four and the Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir in many of the gospel performances featured in the film itself. The Stones are also sampled in some of the hip-hop tracks in the film. As with *O Brother* and other projects, the Coens and Burnett enlist contemporary artists who are products and practitioners of a distinct musical tradition to record new material that connects both past and present. Also like previous Burnett and Coen projects, these musicians appear on screen as part of the film narrative itself. In this case, the Stones are visible in the sequences that feature the performances of Mrs. Munson’s church choir, which are captured in a documentary-like manner, using film as a way to record the performances for the sake of posterity as well as to tell a story.

In a way, Coen-Burnett soundtracks like *The Ladykillers* could be seen as moving survey-like through the history of American popular music. If this were a course on the history of gospel music, the Coens’ soundtrack is the syllabus. And like any syllabus, the selection of songs and artists on the soundtrack implies a thesis, makes connections, draws comparisons, and suggests a canon. Burnett’s remarks reveal a desire to create an anthology of gospel music:

I've heard all my life that rock and roll was born from gospel music, but it wasn't until I went back and listened to the whole canon of gospel from the last century that I realized it actually *was*. Listening back, you can hear, in one form or another, almost every rock and roll song ever sung. So we've gone back and rediscovered for ourselves some of the great gospel music that people have left behind—The Soul Stirrers, Bill Landford and the Landfordaires, Blind Willie Johnson, Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones. (“‘The Ladykillers:’ Production Notes”).

Burnett's observations capture the essence of his and the Coens' curatorial approach to film music, which is fueled by a desire to revivify American traditional music for a contemporary culture that has since moved on, to use the powerful disseminator of film to remind and show audiences of the present how today's music evolved from the past.

Another key genre on the soundtrack is hip-hop, presenting a number of tracks that, like many of the gospel songs, were recorded, and in these cases written, especially for the film. Kentucky-based hip-hop group Nappy Roots contributed three tracks, “Trouble of This World (Coming Home),” “Another Day, Another Dollar,” and “Trouble In, Trouble Out.” Burnett stated that the decision to invite Nappy Roots to work on the project was “because they are Southern. This story is very Southern, and they're a group that brought us a lot of variation.” Variation is the operative word here, for all of the group's recordings on the soundtrack reflect a stylistic synthesis of contemporary hip-hop and traditional gospel.

“Trouble of This World (Coming Home)” and “Trouble In, Trouble Out,” are both built on the traditional song “Trouble of This World,” a track that was first recorded by Bill Landford & the Landfordaires, and which also appears on the soundtrack in its original form. The lyrical and rhythmic style of “Trouble of This World (Coming Home)” follows hip-hop conventions while featuring a gospel-style chorus sung by members of the Stone family. By

contrast, “Trouble In, Trouble Out” samples the original song at the outset and then shifts into hip-hop mode for the duration of the track. Both Nappy Roots’ “Another Day, Another Dollar” and Little Brother’s “Sinners,” are hip-hop songs that sample “A Christian’s Plea,” originally recorded by Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones. In effect, these songs suggest a kind of musical thesis that link, both stylistically and thematically, traditional gospel to contemporary hip-hop, drawing parallels among genres that define the historical development of African-American music and culture. These songs are in a sense analytical, posing hypotheses and conducting inquiries through musical rather than verbal or visual language.

A point worth re-emphasizing is that many of the songs on the soundtrack were recorded and/or written especially for *The Ladykillers*. While this may not seem significant at first, it becomes so when one recognizes that such a practice is typically regarded as the purview of the classical score. Connected to this is the common misconception that curators and the act of curation lack creativity in the true sense of the word, that curators, in short, do not *make* anything (this is perhaps why there is currently no Academy Award that recognizes the work of musical supervisors). While this is a specious belief, the Coens and Burnett nevertheless go beyond mere curation on *The Ladykillers* soundtrack—that is, beyond the thoughtful selection of pre-existing recordings—to become something more generative, something more substantially contributive to the realms of both popular music *and* film.

The soundtrack is shot through with Burnett’s creative and musical contributions. He is involved in almost every song in one capacity or another, serving as producer, writer, even musician, as he plays guitar on “Come, Let Us Go Back to God.” It is clear from his work on *The Ladykillers* and other Coen films that Burnett’s role extends well beyond the usual duties of a musical supervisor. Instead, Burnett assumes the role and status of a classical film music composer, someone who both creates and produces film music from a popular, rather than classical, tradition. Burnett can be considered a kind of half-composer, half-supervisor, half-

producer, and his soundtracks are half-score, half-compilation. Indeed, as these hyphenated descriptions suggest, the soundtracks of Burnett, and by extension, the Coens, occupy a liminal, hybrid space, one that blurs established categories to create a new, third category: creators of soundtracks who utilize popular songs that are especially written and/or recorded for a particular film. In other words, what the Coens and Burnett have in essence achieved is the creation of popular music scores.

In addition to gospel and hip-hop, the third musical genre represented on the soundtrack is classical, or Renaissance baroque, to be specific. While the presence of gospel and hip-hop is realistically motivated by the time and place of the film, the presence of classical music is justified by an absurd plot point lifted directly from the 1955 version, which is that Dorr and his motley gang pose as a classical music ensemble. Interestingly, prior to shooting, the Coens visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art to learn about baroque instruments. They soon discovered that “gathering together period instruments is pretty difficult. People who have them don’t tend to want to lend them to movie companies” (“‘The Ladykillers:’ Production Notes”). The Coens hired a master luthier named Danny Ferrington to hand-make the odd assemblage of period instruments the characters pretend to play in the film. Seemingly trivial facts like these become meaningful because they reveal how seriously the Coens take the representation of music in their films. Even the smallest details, once recognized, reveal a sense of careful consideration and textual meaning. One such detail is the headstock of Dorr’s violin, which is carved in the shape of a raven, signifying his deep passion for the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe, the frequent recitals of which are always accompanied in the film by a transcendent-sounding piano musical theme provided by Carter Burwell.

Another instance of the thoughtful and deliberate placement of classical music in the film occurs in the scene where Dorr and his gang first meet in Mrs. Munson’s basement. In

order to maintain their cover story, they play Boccherini's "Minuet" from Gawain's portable stereo. Generally speaking, it is a well-known classical piece, one that most viewers are likely to recognize. On an intertextual level, the piece musically alludes to the original 1955 film, which was, interestingly, responsible for its popularization in the first place. Most critics have missed this crucial detail. In the 1955 version, "Minuet" is introduced under the same set of circumstances as the 2004 remake (when the gang convenes for the first time in the old lady's house). One key difference, however, is that "Minuet" recurs in the 1955 version as intermittent non-diegetic music that accompanies the presence of Mrs. Wilberforce (Katie Johnson) as she wends her way through the train station to pick up a parcel for Professor Marcus that, unbeknownst to her, holds the stolen money.

The minuet has a light, courtly, high-European elegance that exemplifies the rococo style of Western classical music Dorr and his ensemble claim to play. It also inspired "Baroque Troubles," one of Carter Burwell's contributions to the score, which he describes as a "faux-baroque" version of the gospel song "Trouble of This World." This piece was designed to be "intercut and mixed with gospel and hip-hop versions during the 'heist' montage," which Burwell cites as "a high-point of the film." *The Ladykillers* represents the first Coen soundtrack to literally combine the curated music of Burnett with the scored music of Burwell. Moreover, one would be hard-pressed to locate an odder, more incongruous admixture or juxtaposition of musical genres than gospel, hip-hop, and baroque in one montage sequence.

In addition to "Baroque Troubles," Burwell also composed a faux-British heist theme "typified by bongos and bass and sometimes incorporating harpsichord in a nod to all those British detective films and serials which used jazzy harpsichord riffs." He composed themes for individual characters, as well, such as the one for Dorr: a soft, sonata-like piano piece titled "Helen Thy Beauty Is," which plays during his poetic recitals of Poe's "To Helen," and

when he is hit on the head by a piece of gargoyle statue and plunges to his death in the final scene of the film.

Like other Coen films before it, *The Ladykillers* employs music to create a complex tone. A. O. Scott points out that the “sublime” music of the film is “immune to mockery,” providing a “curiously effective counterpoint—and a measure of redemption—for the worldly, and sometimes world-weary, humor the Coens purvey” (“A Gang of Imposters”). Scott’s comments on the role of music in Coen films echoes those made by many pundits before him, who likewise argue that the music mitigates the Coens’ strong brand of black comedy and postmodern ironic stance by introducing a sincere emotional-tonal counterpoint. While I agree in many respects with the observations of Scott and others, upon closer inspection, the relationship between music and image in *The Ladykillers* is more nuanced than it may initially appear.

Conventional film music theory has it that the relationship between music and image generally assumes one of two forms: parallel or counterpoint. When the music parallels the image, it is said to support or reinforce the intended meaning of the action; when the music acts as counterpoint, it works against what appears to be the main drift or spirit of the image. However, popular music uses musical properties to not only communicate meaning, it also uses lyrics, which adds another layer of signification for analysis. The relationship between a song’s lyrics and its musical properties, like tone, pitch, and rhythm, can also be considered in terms of parallel and counterpoint relationships—one supporting the other or clashing with it—and the meaning of both elements can further be triangulated with the meaning of the image. An apt example occurs in the opening sequence of *The Ladykillers*.

The music starts at the very outset of the film with the opening credits, a common Coen strategy designed to create a sense of anticipation while simultaneously establishing a number of basic narrative elements. As in *Lebowski*, both music and image in the opening

sequence of *The Ladykillers* are thematically linked to credit typography. The Soul Stirrers' gospel song "Come, Let Us Go Back to God" is paired with a typeface that connotes a sense of the biblical and the gothic, both of which function as important visual and thematic motifs in the film as a whole. Following the credits, the film opens with an image of an upward shot of a blue sky full of white, cotton clouds pierced by rays of brilliant sunlight, signifying the heavens and God. The camera then tilts down and captures a close-up of a gargoyle statue posted on a bridge. The gargoyle's grotesque facial features—wide eyes, large nose, open mouth—along with the presence of a scythe, suggests it is intent on harvesting the souls of the damned. Intertextually, those in the audience familiar with Coen black comedy will likely chuckle at the cartoonish, disturbing-looking statue, which is radically juxtaposed against the prior image of a sublime sky. These moments and others reveal the Coens' strong penchant for bathos, a comic sensibility that revels in undercutting the sublime with the ridiculous, in creating worlds in which nothing is allowed to remain sentimental, sincere, or pure for long. As the perspective widens to reveal a number of other gargoyle statues perched along the bridge, a black raven—both an allusion to Poe and a plot foreshadowing—alights atop the head of the gargoyle. The point of view cuts to an overhead shot of a tugboat towing a garbage barge as it emerges from under the bridge. As the acapella harmonies of the opening song swell, the camera assumes the raven's point of view, still perched on top of the statue, and gently tilts up to reveal that the barge is slowly moving towards a small island situated in the center of the river's mouth, a landfill overflowing with refuse. This image fades out and is replaced by a straight, low-level shot of a small, square, brick city hall, which is neatly framed by two large trees on both sides of it and nothing behind it, suggesting a vast emptiness surrounding it. The song and sequence ends, and the primary narrative begins.

The Coens are particularly adept at crafting vivid, engaging opening sequences such as these. While there are a number of notable elements, most relevant here are the subtle twists

and turns of mood suggested by the interaction between song and visuals. The tone of the song is, apropos to the name of the group performing it, soulful and stirring, and furnishes a sense of emotional uplift that is visually and symbolically paralleled by the upward gaze of the camera towards the heavens, as if in worship. While the tone of the song, in conjunction with the symbolism of the image, suggests a beatific moment, this attitude shifts as the camera both figuratively and literally comes down to earth, revealing the demonic statues, raven, garbage scow, and island landfill, all images that connote the moral degradation of a sinful, damned earth. Furthermore, while the Stirrers' "Come, Let Us Go Back to God" might *sound* redemptive, the lyrics trade heavily in apocalyptic, end-of-days imagery, a conventional rhetorical strategy designed to amplify the urgency and importance of seeking redemption. The first verse of the song goes like this:

The earth is in a blaze, the world is in a maze.

The way of life today, is strange and odd.

What happened across the sea, may come to you and me.

Oh, come, let us go back to God, go back to God.

Conflagration, confusion, alienation, impending doom —these images project a rather horrifying, nightmarish scenario. The second verse continues to develop the Judgment Day motif:

There is trouble in the air, destruction is everywhere.

And men are being trampled, beneath the soil.

And nations, great and small, have now begun to fall.

Oh, come, let us go back to God, go back to God.

While the ultimate goal of the song is to inspire salvation, at times, the force of its apocalyptic imagery overwhelms its redemptive aims, and it instead portrays an irredeemably dark, fallen world. The juxtaposition of an uplifting musical tone with gloom-and-doom

lyrics is a form frequently found in many of the folk songs in *O Brother*, like “Big Rock Candy Mountain” and “Man of Constant Sorrow,” both of which deliver grim circumstances in an upbeat musical envelope. In general, the Coens seem to be attracted to uncanny admixtures of polarized emotional/moral/psychological states, to incongruent ontologies.

While in some ways the sublime sounds of *The Ladykillers* may be redemptive, they are also deeply damning. This aesthetic binary structures many of the other traditional gospel songs heard, repeatedly and in different forms, throughout the film. Bill Landford & the Landfordaires’ “Trouble of This World,” for instance, is a cheerful, toe-tapping tune about someone poised on the verge of death who is celebrating leaving the vicissitudes of life on earth behind and positively anticipating “going home to live with God.” The blend of dark, apocalyptic lyrics with happy-sounding musical properties is perfectly suited to the Coens’ aesthetic sensibilities, which revel in ironic incongruities.

As in many films, certain songs, genres, or styles in *The Ladykillers* are linked with particular characters, and are deployed to suggest a variety of personality traits and attitudes. In classical film score criticism, a piece of music that refers to a specific character is called a “leitmotif,” a term derived from Richard Wagner’s use of a similar strategy of signification in the context of opera. As Justin London points out, “In filmic contexts the introduction of musical leitmotifs is highly conventionalized,” involving “the simultaneous presentation of the character and his or her leitmotif, especially when we are given a striking presentation of both early on in the film” (87). In *The Ladykillers*, “Come, Let Us Go Back to God” and the genre to which it belongs become inextricably linked to the character of Mrs. Munson, whose love of Golden Age gospel is established by the many scenes in which she plays it on her living room record player and those in which she attends choir performances at the local black Baptist church. The lyrics of “Come, Let Us Go Back to God” are well-matched to Mrs. Munson’s character in that they complement her deeply religious moral worldview of a

fallen society in urgent need of reform.

The scene that follows the opening sequence shows Mrs. Munson walking to the sheriff's office to lodge a moral-musical-cultural complaint about the local "Funthes boy," who "done gone down to the Costco in Pascagoula and got hisself a blastah—and he been playin' that music!" "That music" includes songs like "Left My Wallet in El Segundo," what the old and cranky Mrs. Munson calls "hippity-hop music," music that definitely *does not* make her want to go "hippity-hop." Such songs use the "N" word, which prompts Mrs. Munson to reflect, "Two thousand years after Jesus! Thirty years after Martin Luther King! The age of Montel! Sweet lord a-mercy, izzat where we at?" Mrs. Munson's tirade is peppered with biblical phrases inspired by the Book of Daniel, which includes a number of apocalyptic visions. At one point, she tells the sheriff, "many, many tunkalow parzen," which is a malapropism of the Aramaic Biblical phrase, "mene, mene, tekel upharsin." The phrase refers to the "writing on the wall" that prophesies the demise of the corrupt Babylonian King Belshazzar, who has been "tried and found wanting" by God and whose final judgment assumes the form of a Persian invasion. This allusion to dark religious prophecies in a highly comedic context recapitulates the inherently incongruent structure of Coen humor. Mrs. Munson ends her complaint to Sheriff Wyner and his deputy by quoting John the Apostle, "Behold there is a stranger in our midst," a phrase that foreshadows the entrance of the devilish Dorr. The scene then cuts, creating a visual "beat" that re-cues the playing of "Come, Let Us Go Back to God," which accompanies Mrs. Munson on her walk home through town. Various storefronts are boarded up and neglected; the town in general is shown to be in a state of material (read moral) decay, thus triangulating the meaning of song, setting, and character.

If one of the principal assumptions of auteur theory is that distinct formal and thematic patterns reoccur and evolve throughout a director's oeuvre, then one of the Coens' signature

ontological preoccupations is a fallen world on the verge of apocalypse, a vision that is often conveyed through religious imagery, discourse, and, of course, music. The damned world motif reaches all the way back to the Coens' debut feature, *Blood Simple*. While conversing with Visser, for example, Marty conspicuously extinguishes his cigarette in a golden calf ashtray. In biblical terms, the golden calf represents mammon and idol worship. Another reference to religious prophesy occurs when Ray drives to the desert to dispose of Marty's body, and a midnight religious sermon on Judgment Day issues from the car radio. Likewise, in *Raising Arizona*, this "Hell on earth" motif is embodied in Leonard Smalls, otherwise known as the Lone Biker of the Apocalypse. Smalls is assigned a musical leitmotif described by Carter Burwell as a "Spanish Rock Opera" that deploys "early sampling technology to create dementedly swooping sopranos" that are paired with fire and brimstone imagery while Smalls leaves what H. I. describes as a "scorched earth in his wake." Similar to their allusions to the Book of Daniel in *The Ladykillers*, in *Barton Fink*, the Coens frequently allude to the story of King Nebuchadnezzar, which also deals with a darkly prophetic dream. These eschatological allusions can be found in one form or another in nearly any Coen film, and in *The Ladykillers*, it is strikingly expressed through both gospel and hip-hop, which work in tandem with other narrative elements, like dialogue and symbolism.

As mentioned earlier, the music of *The Ladykillers* is constituted by three main genres, each of which comes to be associated with a particular character. While traditional African-American gospel tonalizes and colors the deeply religious outlook of Mrs. Munson, Renaissance baroque music characterizes the persona of her antagonist, "Professor" Goldthwaite Higginson (G. H.) Dorr (Tom Hanks). On the surface, the two genres, gospel and baroque, seem historically, culturally, and stylistically removed from one another, yet in the film, they are used to suggest a number of similarities between the equally culturally and racially opposed Dorr and Munson. When Dorr and Munson first meet, Dorr explains he is

currently on a one-year sabbatical from the University of Mississippi at Hattiesburg, in order to pursue his “passion [...] for the music of the Renaissance.” Dorr informs Mrs. Munson that he is a member and director of a “period instrument ensemble that performs at Renaissance fairs and other cultural flora throughout central and southern Mississippi.” Dorr’s penchant for early music symbolizes his culturally anachronistic personality, which is also expressed by his highly formal style of speech and dress. He wears a cape with his formal white suit, and uses words like “forthwith” when ordering waffles. He is clearly out of touch with the present. This aspect of Dorr’s personality manifests in the “revulsion” he feels “for modern popular music, and all other contemporary manifestations of contemporary decay.” Dorr’s remark reveals that both he and Mrs. Munson share a similar outlook towards the present (that it is both base and corrupt), and that the past offers a more morally and aesthetically desirable model of culture, society, and behavior. Furthermore, Dorr cleverly divulges that the kind of music his “band” plays “was composed to the greater glory of God. Devotional music. Church music.” “Gospel music?” asks a hopeful Mrs. Munson. “Well, inspired by the gospels certainly,” responds Dorr.

In one sense, Dorr is clearly emphasizing the superficial affinities between his and Mrs. Munson’s musical-cultural predispositions for the purposes of executing his criminal plan. And yet, one gets the sense in this and other moments in the film that Dorr’s archaic, cultural leanings towards Western neo-classicism are genuinely his own. One also gets the impression that while the relationship between Dorr and Mrs. Munson functions generally in the film as a major source of situational comic irony—their cultural and racial differences being so absurdly polarized, a dynamic that generates a lot of humor through their exchanges—on some level, they seem to share a sincere reverence for the past. For both, this romanticization of the past is fed by an aversion to a culturally and morally debased present, which is embodied in the musical genres associated with each character; and like the characters they

represent, these discrete genres—baroque and gospel—are more similar than they first appear.

Music infiltrates the narrative on levels other than character, though. Dorr's passion for and knowledge of early modern music is typically expressed through ludicrously ornate dialogue that offers a rich source of humor in the film. When Mrs. Munson initially shows him the basement, Dorr utters a series of goofy animalistic sounds supposedly designed to test the acoustics of the space. In the same scene, Dorr informs Mrs. Munson, "These earthen walls are ideal for baffling the higher registers of the, ugh, lute and, ugh, sackbut. That's why so much music of the cinquecento was played in crypts and catacombs." His high diction and arcane knowledge are mostly lost on the no-nonsense, straight-talking Mrs. Munson, who reminds Dorr she has no patience for his kind of "double-talk." The radical incongruence between the two characters' language and modes of expression is comically reiterated throughout the film. Following the elegant twists and turns of Dorr's baroque dialogue, and chuckling at the absurdity of his use of academic diction in rather banal situations, is a frequent source of comic and intellectual pleasure in the film as a whole. When Dorr's gang arrives at Mrs. Munson's house for their first gathering, they pull up in a large vintage hearse, which prompts Mrs. Munson to ask, "Somebody die?" Dorr responds, "No, the hearse is simply a vehicle commodious to accommodate all of the members of our ensemble. And of course our instruments, contrived in an age ignorant of miniaturization." Dorr's hyper-educated language and phrasing is funny mostly because it is so over the top in relation to the rest of the characters, who tend to speak in vernacular forms of English. When Mrs. Munson interrupts one of the group's "rehearsals" in order to show Dorr a handmade fife belonging to her late husband, Othar, he states they were about to take a break anyway, as the "glissandi on this particular piece are technically very demanding." Mrs. Munson, in turn, shows off a bit of her own musical instrument knowledge when she supplies a factual

detail concerning her husband's fife, informing Dorr that the "Israelites called it a kalil." Not to be outmatched, Dorr inquires whether Othar "ever turned his lip to the shofar?" A moment of silence ensues, indicating Mrs. Munson has no idea what a shofar is. Dorr quickly adds, "The ceremonial ram's horn, sounded by the priests of the Hebrews?" As if Dorr was suggesting something vaguely sexual, Mrs. Munson vehemently denies any knowledge of it: "No, I don't know nothin' 'bout that. Othar never blowed no shofar!" The end of this line is one of the most memorable pieces of dialogue in the film, and the main point here is that it is connected to music, which plays an important role in many elements of the film, including dialogue and humor.

The period ensemble cover story is also employed to provoke a number of laughs. If it was a comically absurd conceit to have a rough-looking, working-class gang of post-Victorian London men successfully pose as classical musicians in the original version, it is even more improbably laughable that Dorr's motley gang should do so. The humor of the situation rests on the incongruence between the identity of the characters and the kind of musicians they are claiming to be. While Dorr's elegant and culturally refined identity seems appropriate to the general stereotype of a scholar and performer of early modern Western classical music, the members of his gang do not. Gawain MacSam, a young, hot-tempered, African-American janitor, is supposedly the bassoonist; the General, a nearly mute, chain-smoking, Vietnamese donut-shop owner and tunneling expert plays the viola da gamba; Clark Pancake, an irritable-bowel-syndrome-suffering demolitions expert plays some kind of massive French horn; and Aloysius "Lump" Hudson, a muscle-bound, dumb football jock, is the "sackbuttist." Each time they are shown holding the instruments is a cheap sight gag to the audience. The comedy of these and other scenes in the film is courtesy of its emphasis on music, which functions not only as a formal-narrative tool, but also as a major part of the film's thematic content.

As I've suggested, traditional gospel music characterizes Mrs. Munson, and classical baroque music characterizes Dorr. Finally, hip-hop music—the third major genre on the soundtrack—is most closely associated with Gawain MacSam. We are first introduced to the oddly named Gawain as he reluctantly pushes a cleaning cart through the Bandit Queen riverboat casino. As he does so, Weemac Funthes (Jason Weaver) explains the finer points of Gawain's janitorial duties, a job he has taken only in order to serve as the proverbial "inside man" on the heist. The introduction of Gawain's character, which is heavily attended by hip-hop music, provides the Coens with an occasion to indulge in some formal play.

The first shot of the sequence in which Gawain is introduced is a close-up of the back of a portable stereo— a frequent source of diegetic music in the film as a whole—which plays "Trouble In, Trouble Out," by Nappy Roots. The volume of the music turned up so that it fully saturates the soundtrack. The point of view is as if the camera is sitting on top of the cart. The camera then tilts up to reveal our first glimpse of Gawain, who is trying to lose himself in the song by moving his head to the beat in order to escape the drudgery of a job he feels is beneath him. In this moment, the soundtrack temporarily assumes the subjective hearing of Gawain, presenting the music to the audience in a way that suggests we are listening to it in the same immersive way that he is. The music temporarily becomes an expressive tool for externalizing to the audience his character's internal state. The audience hears, in other words, not only *what* Gawain hears but *how* he hears it.

The next image presents a reverse shot from the same position on top of the cart, which shows Weemac explaining how to empty the garbage cans. Rather than a standard over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shot pattern, the camera is placed in an unusual position next to the stereo, assuming the cart's point of view. In the next few shots, the camera and music assume a more conventional background volume as Weemac and Gawain converse. As they enter the enclosed walkway connecting the boat to the mainland, the camera shifts to an extreme

ground level shot next to the cart's front left wheel before assuming more conventional positions through to the end of the scene. This kind of unconventional camera play recalls some of the Coens' early experiments in *Blood Simple* and *Raising Arizona*. Such play is significant because it was typically attended by, as in the case with *The Ladykillers*, a noticeable increase in the presence of popular music, the energetic nature of which seems to license these displays of technical virtuosity, enhancing their overall sense of dynamism, a means to intensify kinetic energy.

Generally speaking, the most explicit association between the hip-hop music and Gawain's character is his identity as a young African-American male. This link is repeatedly made in the film. Nappy Roots' "Another Day, Another Dollar," for example, spills out of the car driven by the two young African-Americans who try to rob the General's donut shop. Interestingly, the lyrics of both hip-hop songs on the soundtrack echo the theme of many traditional gospel songs in the film, enumerating the pitfalls of a fallen, sinful world and the ongoing struggle for redemption. In "Another Day, Another Dollar," for example, the speaker raps, "I think we runnin' outta time/Cause the days are dark/A world of sin is what we're livin' in/Temptation outweighs preservation." The chorus of "Trouble In, Trouble Out" states: "Trouble in, trouble out/Trouble's what this world's about/Troubles of this world/The devil's in this world." As in "Come, Let us Go Back To God" and other traditional gospel songs on *The Ladykillers* soundtrack, the lyrics of these hip-hop songs draws on Biblical discourse to situate the speaker within a corrupt world full of evil and temptation. The hip-hop music updates and localizes the tropes of traditional gospel music to the contemporary South. Courtesy of the hip-hop, Gawain becomes something of a symbol for the plight of modern African-Americans against crime, poverty, drugs, and other contemporary forms of socio-cultural iniquity.

Another scene that deploys both song and visual action in strikingly expressive ways is

the scene in which the General attempts to murder Mrs. Munson in her sleep. The song that accompanies this sequence is “Weeping Mary,” a traditional gospel tune sung in a distinctive shape-note style by the Rosewell Sacred Harp Quartet. As noted earlier, many shape-note style gospel songs were featured in *Cold Mountain*, one of Burnett’s prior projects. However, in contrast to the way this music is used in the battle of Petersburg scene, its use in *The Ladykillers* is decidedly more comic, even if darkly so.

While most of the songs in *The Ladykillers* are assigned naturalistic sources, some, like the song in this scene, are non-diegetic, meaning they emanate from somewhere beyond the fictional world and can only be heard by the audience. No source of the music is shown on screen, and Mrs. Munson is sound asleep, so it is doubtful that the source is the record player in the living room. In such moments, because the connection to verisimilitude is severed, it would seem easier to read the source of the music as the filmmakers, as a moment of authorial expression. One might be further inclined to interpret the music as coming from the filmmakers themselves due to the unusual behavior of the camera throughout the sequence, which calls attention to presence of the auteur. As the General prepares to strangle Mrs. Munson, the lyrics of the song are made clearly audible, stating, twice, that “they crucified the savior,” a phrase that in effect situates Mrs. Munson as a Christ figure. Given the broadly comic, exaggerated way her character is portrayed in the film as a whole, it is likely that we are intended see such a suggestion as more or less ironic. Near the end of the sequence, the lyric “and ascended in a cloud” is sung when we see a dead General. His attempt to murder Mrs. Munson logically dictates that he is definitely not destined for ascension, which implies another ironic comment. Overall, then, the song seems to act as an ironic counterpoint to the action rather than paralleling it.

This counterpoint is not only expressed through the inverse relationship between lyrics and action, but also through the idiosyncratic musical qualities of the song itself, which are

comic in an odd, eccentric sort of way. Arguably, this is one of the darkest moments in the film, when the rather harmless antics of Dorr and his gang take a vicious turn in not only deciding to murder Mrs. Munson, but in dispatching the sinister General to do it. The use of canted angles, darkness, and shadow throughout the scene suggest a disturbed state of affairs. While the raw choral force of “Weeping Mary” is effective in building drama as the General creeps upstairs, it also has a strangely comic quality to it, probably owing to its overblown style. Or perhaps the counterpoint of the song is located in the anempathetic nature of the music, the way in which it seems to be blissfully unaware of the dark and violent action unfolding on screen. In any case, my overall sense as a viewer is that, somehow, the use of “Weeping Mary” helps turn what is arguably the darkest moment in the film into something that is still dark, but comically so. The absurdly comic tone of this particular scene is helped along by shots of the changing expressions of Othar’s portrait, as well as the slapstick moment when the Jesus-themed cuckoo clock suddenly chimes and causes the General to swallow his cigarette, which, in a state of panic, then causes him to drink the glass of water holding Mrs. Munson’s dentures. He rushes out of the bedroom, trips over the cat and violently falls down the stairs to his death. The mood of the scene is multi-layered and subtly evolves as it develops, constantly shifting from deeply sinister and surreal to and absurdly comic and slapstick.

The music of *The Ladykillers* also electrifies a number of montage sequences. While this strategy is nothing new to Hollywood feature-filmmaking, it is the complex, multi-layered way in which the Coens do it that is of interest and significance. One of the most notable examples is the sequence in which Dorr and his gang tunnel to the riverboat casino vault. The process involves removing dirt, shoveling it into large garbage bags, and sneaking it out of Mrs. Munson’s house and into the hearse. The gang then drives to the bridge and dumps the bags onto the garbage scow that passes underneath on its way to the island landfill.

Three different styles of music play in three different settings within the montage; each setting reveals a diegetic source for the music located within the story world. In the basement, baroque music issues from Gawain's portable stereo; traditional gospel is played on the record player in Mrs. Munson's living room; and hip-hop emanates from the hearse's car stereo. Each piece of music is a stylistic variation of a single song—"Troubles of This World," by Bill Landford & the Landfordaires. The first is a piece of faux-baroque music composed by Carter Burwell titled "Baroque Troubles," the second is the original Bill Landford version, and the third is "Trouble In, Trouble Out," a hip-hop version by Nappy Roots. As the gang shifts from one setting to another, so does the style of music, and in the moments when the setting shifts between basement to first floor and back again, the two musical styles of baroque and gospel play simultaneously, yet in a rhythmically synchronized way.

Overall—and particularly as far as music is concerned—it is an impressive montage sequence, one of the most innovative and striking of any Coen film. As is typical with the Coens, the sequence thrives on odd juxtapositions that are made to somehow fit together—in this case, the musical genres of baroque, gospel, and hip-hop. The eccentric mix of musical styles parallels the eccentric mix of characters.

Occasionally, though, the lyrics of the songs parallel and comment on the action. As Dorr and company walk up the stairs from the basement and into the first floor of Mrs. Munson's house, the line "going up to see King Jesus" can be clearly heard, suggesting, allegorically, that the basement—the domain of Dorr and his gang—is hell and that the first floor—the domain of Mrs. Munson—is some sort of godly, sanctified space. The intersection of lyrics and action is made even more noticeable on the bridge as they dispose of the bags of dirt. When Dorr steps out of the hearse, the lyrics "Trouble in, trouble out/Trouble's what this world's about/Trouble's in this world/The devil's in this world" are

clearly audible. As Lump peers over the bridge into the garbage scow below, the lyric playing in the background says, “You up the river without a paddle,” and when Lump is passed a bag of dirt and dumps it over the edge of the bridge, we hear “Pass me the body bag/Watch me dump ‘em/ It ain’t nothing for you to get squashed like a pumpkin.” The mood of each piece of music fits with the mood of each space—both the basement and the first floor of Mrs. Munson’s house are light and comic, which generally fits with the tone of the music, while the bridge scene is dark and gloomy, which is matched by the dim, spooky tone sound of the hip-hop song. In this scene and others, the lyrics of the song intersect with the action in ways that are both literal and figurative. One way the lyrics are suggestive is that they foreshadow the deaths of the gang’s members, who are eventually disposed of in the same way as the dirt from the tunnel.

A curious feature of this montage sequence is the diegetic placement of the music. It is conventionally understood that the purpose of diegetic music is to maintain a sense of verisimilitude or realism. However, the montage sequence under discussion “troubles” this assumption. Technically speaking, all of the music in the sequence emanates from diegetic sources. “Baroque Troubles” plays from Gawain’s boombox, a fact that is established earlier in the film and is confirmed at the end of the sequence when one of the characters hurriedly presses stop on the stereo as Mrs. Munson enters the basement. “Troubles of This World” presumably plays from the record player in Mrs. Munson’s living room. I say “presumably” because the record player is never shown on screen; however, other scenes in the film establish that it is Mrs. Munson’s habit to play gospel records while in the house. “Trouble In, Trouble Out” presumably plays from the car stereo of the hearse. Again, I say “presumably” because the car stereo itself is never shown on screen, but given the pattern established by the two previous examples, plus the Coens’ consistent habit of situating popular music as source music, it is a fairly safe inference. All of the music in this sequence,

then, is, technically speaking, diegetic. However, the presence of mediation—that is, the presence of the controlling hand of the auteurs—is so strongly felt throughout the sequence that it undercuts the sense of realism diegetic music is purportedly designed to uphold. It would be difficult *not* to notice, for instance, that “Baroque Troubles” and “Troubles of This World” perfectly synchronize as the gang sneaks through the main floor of the house. Viewers listening reasonably closely to the music will realize that “Baroque Troubles” is, in fact, a baroque version of “Troubles of This World,” and that it serves as the inspiration for Nappy Roots’ “Trouble In, Trouble Out.” Once the audience notices that the lyrics of “Trouble In, Trouble Out” suggestively parallel the action on screen, and that the speed of the music is increased to match the hurried actions of the characters as they rush to cover up their operation from Mrs. Munson, the relationship between diegetic music and realism becomes a tenuous one.

What sort of music is this? In “Reconsidering the Border Between Diegetic and Non-Diegetic Music,” Jeff Smith points out that, despite the conventional notion that the function of diegetic music is to maintain a sense of realism, “nowhere else in film studies is the notion of the ‘diegetic’ wholly equated with a concept of realism. Elements of mise-en-scene or cinematography, for example, are often treated in a highly stylized fashion” (4). Instead, Smith posits a distinction between diegetic music and aural fidelity, or “the extent to which the sound is faithful to the source as we conceive it” (6). Film music can remain firmly anchored within the diegesis, yet “depart from the conventions of aural fidelity”; thus, “the nonrealistic treatment of diegetic music is merely comparable to other kinds of expressive devices in the cinema, such as the use of slow motion in action or fight scenes” (14). Smith’s insights suggest that the music in this montage sequence, rather than existing in an ambiguous state between diegetic and non-diegetic, a zone Robyn Stillwell refers to as the “fantastic gap,” is decidedly diegetic, but used as a stylistic expressive tool, a mediating

device that heightens the presence of an author.

This insight applies to a number of other musical moments in Coen films. Consider, for instance, the “Hotel California” montage sequence in *The Big Lebowski* (1998). While the music is technically diegetic, being that it plays from the bowling alley jukebox as so many other popular songs in the film do, the carefully crafted way in which it is synced with the action on screen heightens not only a sense of immediacy and dynamism, but also signifies a moment of cinematic showmanship that temporarily disrupts the illusion of verisimilitude and foregrounds the auteur. The idea, then, is that scenes like these are intended to be read as narrative intrusions by the filmmaker, writ large. Yet at the same time, the attempt to maintain some degree of verisimilitude by consistently situating the music as part of the diegesis suggests an attempt to also adhere to convention, even if it is a rather half-hearted commitment at times. What all of this adds up to is that the Coens seem to have one foot planted in classical form—with their desire to maintain some semblance of realism—and another in post-classical—marked by the desire to disrupt a sense of naturalism through authorial mediation. The status of music in many Coen films can be accurately described as often maintaining a diegetic status, yet frequently manipulating aural fidelity for expressive, authorial purposes. This artistic experimentation represents a consistent pattern that contributes to a broader map of the strategies commonly employed by the Coens in terms of their use of popular music.

Another key musical-visual feature of *The Ladykillers* is the lively choir performances at Mrs. Munson’s church. In the first performance, which follows the introduction of each member of Dorr’s gang, the choir sings a version of Blind Willie Johnson’s “Let Your Light Shine on Me,” which is later played as a vintage recording at the end of the film. The second choir performance is an arrangement of the traditional gospel song, “Trouble of This World,” which plays over a montage sequence that crosscuts between the church and the riverboat

casino as the gang executes their heist.

These performances are intriguing for the documentary-like way in which they are captured. Perhaps nowhere else is it more evident that music is an element of Coen films that tends to be treated sincerely than it is in these church choir performances. The presence of the camera is minimized so that the choir remains the center of attention, and both performances rely heavily on multiple close-ups that encourages recognition of the performers by the audience. While the behavior of both the choir and the congregation are exaggerated and a bit cartoonish, they are light comic touches that suggest a teasing admiration rather than a satiric mocking. The reverential ways in which these scenes are performed and rendered on camera suggests that what is being captured is of historical, rather than merely aesthetic, importance. Many of these performers are skilled and accomplished figures in the world of contemporary African-American gospel music, including Rose, Freddie, and Lisa Stone, the Venice Four quartet, Kristie Murden, and choir leader Ricky Grundy. The choir depicted on screen is a real church choir, comprised of the Venice Four Quartet and the Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir. To those in the audience familiar with contemporary gospel music, these “reveals” or “exhibitions” offer the pleasure of recognition; for those not in the know, these moments seem calculated to incite a desire to research and identify the performers. As a whole, these strategies are a nod towards a mode of film music curation that is both historical in its acknowledgment of a rich tradition, and educational through its exhibition of lesser-known cultural treasures.

This celebratory presentational style of the performance accords with other musical moments in Coen films where professional musicians are shown performing on camera, as in the on-screen performances of the Whites, the Cox Family, and the Fairfield Four in *O Brother*. This non-fiction, documentary-like style of capturing of the performers lends further support to the notion that Burnett and the Coens’ interest in music in film goes beyond the

typical Hollywood treatment. While commercial imperatives cannot be ignored, the Coens and Burnett nevertheless regard film not only as a way to tell stories, but as a way to recover and re-popularize older, traditional forms of music that have been eclipsed and obscured by contemporary pop music. The fact that the Coens also consistently choose to cast real musicians to perform the music on screen suggests not so much a desire for realism, but a desire for authenticity, to be perceived as having a genuine interest in the music, which serves as a way to ratify the authenticity of the musical text, and, by extension, the musical and cultural credibility of the auteurs.

The final scene of the film signifies a classical return to order. After Dorr and all the members of his gang have, ironically, done themselves in, Mrs. Munson returns to the sheriff's department to report the theft of the casino money. Neither the sheriff nor his deputy believe Mrs. Munson's story, writing her off as a demented old lady and telling her to keep the money, which she decides to give away. A vintage recording of Blind Willie Johnson's "Let Your Light Shine on Me" plays as Mrs. Munson exits City Hall and happily walks home, but not before her cat, Pickles, once again escapes, runs to the bridge, and drops Garth Pancake's dismembered finger onto the garbage scow to be deposited with the rest of the sinful trash on the landfill island. As the end credits appear, the vintage recording of "Let Your Light Shine on Me" musically morphs into a church choir performance, which is exhibited next to the rolling end credits, providing the film with a sublime musical bookend.

To conclude, *The Ladykillers* is a noteworthy soundtrack and film in a number of respects. From a broad perspective, it is another Coen movie that, like *O Brother*, situates popular music as a central attraction. While critics have tended to chastise *The Ladykillers* for being one of the Coens' weakest efforts, the music redeems the film in a number of ways. Not only does examining the music reward critical re-viewing, but it also firmly demonstrates that, occasionally, the music of Coen films has the capacity to outshine all other elements.

The production background of the soundtrack highlights the fact that the Coens' approach to film music is anything but routine or conventional; rather, music is a dynamic force in the pre-production, conceptualization phase of their films. That many songs on the soundtrack were newly recorded and/or written especially for the film highlights that the use of popular music in film can be as generative and original as classical scores. By showcasing traditional gospel music in *The Ladykillers*, the Coens and Burnett once again manifest their desire to revisit America's musical attic in order to re-exhibit half-forgotten musical artifacts and revive them through film.

In terms of the role music plays in the film itself, it is once again deployed to suggest complex moods and outlooks within and across scenes, establish the setting, aid in characterization, and serve as a source of authorial commentary. Like *O Brother, The Ladykillers* includes many of the soundtrack musicians performing in the film, and the documentary-like way in which they are captured not only imports a sense of respect and sincerity when all seems to be silliness and irony, but also implies that Coen films function like a historical document that works to preserve and re-transmit American musical traditions. In a way, both Burnett and the Coens function as creative historians who engage with the past in unconventional ways; nevertheless, it *is* a valuable and interesting engagement, one that finally has to do as much with the way history is imagined as it does with empirical fact. The music of *The Ladykillers* reiterates in a number of concrete ways the notion that popular music is not only an important component of the Coens' cinematic style, but that it can be the very center of it, almost to the point where the film serves as a vehicle for the music rather than the other way around. The high value the Coens place on the popular music in their films, and the crucial role it plays in terms of both production process and formal features, evidences the broader argument that the Coens deserve to be added, along with figures like Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and Wes Anderson, to the canon

of directors Claudia Gorbman calls auteur melomanes—music-mad directors of American cinema.

The next chapter explores a film that represents the Coens' most direct and complex engagement with the history of American popular music to date: *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013). While *Lebowski*, *O Brother*, and *The Ladykillers* all incorporated popular music in substantive and novel ways, what distinguishes *Inside Llewyn Davis* is that it situates music and musicians as the very subject matter of the film. It is, I argue, a culminating text for Burnett and the brothers' cinematic interest in, and auteurist preoccupation with, the cultural history of traditional-popular American music.

CHAPTER 5

INSIDE LLEWYN DAVIS

“It bypasses everything else. There’s an alchemy that happens. The combination of the music and the narrative idea—there’s an alloy you don’t get any other way” –Joel Coen

While all the Coen films discussed in this dissertation offer interesting, meaningful engagements with popular music, in each case, music has been incidental to the story. By “incidental” I do not mean to trivialize its role or importance. As I have taken pains to show, the opposite is true: music plays an integral role in Coen films. Instead, what I mean by “incidental” is that the music is mainly used as a tool to tell a story that is not about music, per se; in other words, music is not the subject of the story. In *The Big Lebowski* (1998), music is used to tell the story of the anachronistic Dude and his mis-adventures through L.A.’s Chandler-esque underworld; in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), music helps dramatize the Southern, Depression-era odyssey of Everett, Pete, and Delmar; and in *The Ladykillers* (2004), it contextualizes the heist of Professor Dorr and his gang under the watchful eye of Mrs. Munson. However, in the Coens’ sixteenth feature film, *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013), music is the heart and soul of the story. Set in New York’s Greenwich Village in 1961, just prior to the arrival of Bob Dylan, the film covers a week in the life of Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac), a folk musician struggling to maintain his career and life following the suicide of his musical partner, Mike Timlin. The film centers on music, musicians, and a particular musical moment in American cultural history. *Inside Llewyn Davis* represents a culmination of the Coens’ engagement with popular music in that music is not ancillary to the story; it *is* the story.

Compared to the ambivalent reception of many previous Coen films, *Inside Llewyn Davis* was heralded a success by most critics. Some even went so far as to claim that it was one of the most compelling and flawless Coen projects to date. What chiefly distinguished

Inside Llewyn Davis from other Coen films was its vexed tone. As I have suggested in previous chapters, an unruly tone is a signature element of Coen brothers films. As veteran Coen critic David Edelstein remarks, “The films of Joel and Ethan Coen pose a challenge: How do we reconcile their widely disparate tones?” According to Edelstein, the film’s protagonist, Llewyn Davis, “is a man of deep contrasts. He’s a jerk who uses other people, and the Coens throw misfortunes his way [. . .]. But when he hunches over his guitar and sings standards like ‘Hang Me, Oh Hang Me’ and ‘The Death of Queen Jane,’ the film enters a more exquisite sphere” (“Great Soundtrack Aside”). The Coens render Davis’s character in such a way that it swings wildly between sympathetic and unsympathetic poles, and music appears to be a primary means of cultivating these sentiments in filmgoers. Davis’s behavior towards other characters in the film is often crass and uncaring, yet his musical performances reveal another side, one that is more emotional and open. *Inside Llewyn Davis* embodies, more than any other Coen film before it, the oft-observed (yet rarely elaborated upon) principle that music in Coen films offers a source of sincere emotional engagement amidst ironic detachment. Davis’s musical performances, as Edelstein observes, invite a potent sense of sympathy for the antihero.

Other critics expressed similar remarks. Leigh Singer wrote that the Coens’ film was “so low-key you can easily miss just what a high-wire balancing act it is. Tone is everything . . . there’s no one else whose unique melan-comic world this could be” (“Inside Llewyn Davis”). Even J. Hoberman, one of the Coens’ most vocal critics, admitted that *Inside Llewyn Davis* was “certainly one of their warmest films in 16 years.” Hoberman further observed that “Llewyn Davis may be an arrogant loser and the butt of a cosmic joke, but he’s something more than a cartoon. So is the movie, which is predicated on the Coens’ enthusiasm for its music that [. . .] is surprisingly affecting. Malice is tempered by fondness occasionally verging on admiration” (“Coen Bros. Torture”). Colin Covert of the *Minneapolis Star*

Tribune noted that “their bleak, bittersweet comedy of frustration . . . is surprisingly empathetic towards the embattled title character. To a rare degree, the Coens encourage our emotional identification with Llewyn.” While Davis consistently acts in an arrogant, condescending way towards other characters in the film, and while a healthy share of his own misfortune is self-generated, “you cannot watch the Coens’ rapt, uninterrupted takes of Isaac’s sublime musical interludes and not be moved [. . .]. Onstage the antihero stops being his own worst enemy and creates fleeting beauty.” Covert ultimately concludes that *Inside Llewyn Davis* should “retire the old charge that the Coens are misanthropes, who thrill at belittling humanity” (“Llewyn Davis”). In sum, contrary to previous Coen films, most critics felt that *Inside Llewyn Davis* used music to create characters, tone, and a fictional world that effectively balanced a battery of opposing expressive modes—irony and sincerity, sympathy and hostility, comedy and tragedy—in order to create a “warmer,” more “heartfelt” film.

My purpose in this chapter is to essay the myriad ways music is employed in *Inside Llewyn Davis* to suggest a variety of changing, complex attitudes, particularly towards the protagonist, Llewyn Davis (Oscar Isaac). While this “melan-comic” tonal effect is relatively easy to label, it is not easy to explain how and/or why it works. Despite the inherent difficulty of trying to capture and explain the tone of a film, it is worth an attempt, because creating a certain kind of tone—one that is, paradoxically, as distinct as it is elusive—seems to be an element that lies at the heart of what defines a Coen brothers film. And music seems to be one of the key mechanisms by which the Coens manage their signature “comi-tragic” tone. Indeed, judging from the responses of countless critics and viewers, it seems to be the perplexing tone of Coen films that many consider to be the hallmark of their auteurism. In fact, when he first heard that the Coens were looking to cast an actor to play a musician in their newest film about the Greenwich Village folk scene, Oscar Isaac remarked, “I had to be in it. I’ve seen all of their movies two or three times, some of them way more. Their tone is

ingrained in my head” (McNulty). Isaac does not go on to explain or describe exactly what this tone is, which is understandable given that cinematic tone in general is a slippery, challenging concept to define. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to fully describe in the course of this chapter what, exactly, tone in a film is, and how, precisely, it works—such a subject has been, and continues to be, a vexed concept in film studies. However, I will review a couple of different theories concerning tone, and apply them to *Inside Llewyn Davis* in order to better understand the film and the Coens’ work as a whole, especially in relation to their use of popular music. I will also consider, in the context of film music theory, the particular type of music used in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. It is not a non-diegetic score in the traditional sense, nor is it a conventional diegetic score. The music of *Inside Llewyn Davis* falls within a third category, one that Morris B. Hollbrook describes as “ambi-diegetic,” a form of diegetic music that simultaneously fulfills the functions of diegetic *and* non-diegetic music.

Following the structure of previous chapters, I will survey a number of films and related projects/developments taken on by both the Coens and Burnett between *The Ladykillers* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Such a survey is valuable because it shows these music-minded filmmakers expanding and refining their approach to film music as time progresses. I will also detail and reflect on the production process of creating the music for *Inside Llewyn Davis* before conducting a close textual analysis of the film itself. As with previous Coen productions like *The Ladykillers* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, the music of *Inside Llewyn Davis* played a primary role in the film’s conception, development, and execution. However, the production process for *Inside Llewyn Davis* represents a giant leap forward in the Coens’ status as melomanes in that many of the musical performances were actually recorded live on set, particularly those of the titular protagonist.

In the period between *The Ladykillers* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coens and Burnett made a number of films in which they both continued to develop, in various ways and directions, their approach to film music. After directing two inherited projects (both of which were, despite featuring interesting soundtracks, largely critical and box office disappointments), the Coens returned to making original films. In 2007, the duo released *No Country for Old Men*, an adaptation of a novel of the same title by Cormac McCarthy. Set amid the drug cartel wars of the West Texas borderlands in the 1980s, *No Country* revolves around a drug deal gone awry, resulting in a violent massacre, stolen money, and a bloody cat-and-mouse chase involving three main characters: Llewellyn Moss (Josh Brolin), a Vietnam vet and local welder, Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem), a psychotic hit man, and Ed Tom Bell (Tommy Lee Jones), a small-town sheriff. In terms of music, *No Country* is an outlier in the Coen oeuvre because it nearly dispenses with music altogether, featuring a mere fifteen minutes of score. Composer Carter Burwell poetically described the soundtrack as a “mélange of sustained tones” (“Carter Burwell’s Notes”). Overall, the score was designed to blend seamlessly with the sound effects, a strategy that created a very minimalistic, subtle presence.

After *No Country*, the brothers returned to using music in *Burn After Reading* (2008). A black comedy send-up of the spy thriller, *Burn After Reading* features a mostly percussion-driven score, which was, once again, composed by Carter Burwell. Joel Coen described Burwell’s score as “something big and bombastic, something important sounding but absolutely meaningless” (Franklin). One could not think of a more perfect encapsulation of the Coens’ postmodern approach to textual meaning, by which they perpetually hint at a profound meaning that, in the end, turns out to be all surface and no depth.

Following *Burn After Reading*, the Coens released *A Serious Man* (2009), which signaled a return to the use of pre-existing popular music. The story takes place in the late

1960s in a small, suburban Jewish community (a thinly veiled St. Louis Park, Minnesota—the Coens’ hometown), and concerns the Job-like travails of Larry Gopnick (Michael Stuhlbarg), a physics professor at a local university. The film’s soundtrack is a blend of score music (again, furnished by Burwell) and pre-existing popular recordings dominated by the genre of psychedelic classic rock, featuring artists like Jimi Hendrix, and, more prominently, Jefferson Airplane.

These pop songs provide a number of memorable musical moments in the film. At the outset of the narrative, Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love” provides a musical bridge from the opening folk tale set in an Eastern European shtetl to the primary setting of the story: suburban Minnesota in the late 1960s. The film takes the viewer on a striking audiovisual journey through the inside of young Danny Gopnick’s (Aaron Wolff) ear canal, which, it is shortly revealed, is being filled with music by earphones connected to a portable radio he is listening to in Yiddish class. Later in the film, Jimi Hendrix’s “Machine Gun” accompanies a Rabbi’s shaggy-dog story of a goy’s teeth, which, as with the score of *Burn After Reading*, suggests a sense of dramatic significance that ends, ironically and comically, in banal meaninglessness. Overall, the conspicuous use of psychedelic rock songs creates an ironic juxtaposition between protagonist Larry Gopnick’s conservative, traditional Midwestern Jewish community, and the larger cultural revolution of the period. As with so many Coen films, the music of *A Serious Man* furnishes a mixed tone, one that suggests both ironic and sincere attitudes towards the setting, community, and main character.

After *A Serious Man*, the Coens made *True Grit* (2010), an adaptation of Charles Portis’s 1968 novel of the same title. Set in nineteenth-century Arkansas, the story follows fourteen year old Mattie Ross (Hailee Steinfeld) as she seeks revenge for the murder of her father by a farmhand named Tom Chaney. After Chaney flees into lawless Indian Territory, Ross enlists the aid of U.S. Marshall Rooster Cogburn (Jeff Bridges), a man of “true grit,” to

aid in Chaney's capture. They are joined by a Texas Ranger named LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), who wants to apprehend Chaney for the murder of a Texas senator. Burwell was re-engaged by the Coens to compose *True Grit*'s score, which is dominated by traditional nineteenth-century Protestant hymns. Of these hymns, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" is the most conspicuous within the film, serving as a leitmotif for the deeply pious Mattie. The score for *True Grit* is intriguing not only because it serves as yet another example of the Coens' fascination with traditional American music, but also because, in contrast to the conventional heroic-epic scores of the classic Western, the music for *True Grit* was contrived by Burwell to suggest conflicting attitudes towards Mattie's dark, Ahab-like quest for revenge. After settling on traditional nineteenth-century hymnal music, Burwell searched for "something that was severe [sounding]. It couldn't be soothing or uplifting, and at the same time it couldn't be outwardly depressing," which ultimately led him to settle on "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" (Burlingame). "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" is featured in the film as both orchestral score music and as a pre-existing recording by Iris DeMent. The score also includes a number of other hymns from the same period, including "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," "The Glory-Land Way," "Hold to God's Unchanging Hand," and "Talk About Suffering."

The production process behind these songs is also noteworthy. According to Burwell, the Coens typically invite him into the filmmaking process after the film has been fully shot and edited. This practice follows the conventional Hollywood workflow. For *True Grit*, however, the Coens wanted Burwell to compose and test the music in the process of shooting. "Contrary to our usual way of working," Burwell remarks, "in which they give me complete reels and I give them fairly complete sketches of the score, here we were giving each other very rough incomplete material." ("Carter Burwell's Notes"). Once again, it is not only the music and its role in the film that is significant in the context of Coen filmmaking, it is the

production process itself, which often evolves from film to film and rarely adheres to industry-standard approaches. In this sense, the brothers practice somewhat of an artisanal, bespoke approach to music in their films. While the music of *True Grit* is significant and meaningful, no other movie in the Coens' filmography shows a greater investment in music than their next project, *Inside Llewyn Davis*. For their melan-comic tale about a struggling folk musician in the early days of the Greenwich Village folk scene, the brothers turned once more to T-Bone Burnett to produce the soundtrack.

In the time between *The Ladykillers* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, Burnett contributed to a variety of different film projects typified by a restless exploration of the ways and byways of traditional American music. In 2005, Burnett composed, performed in, and produced the score for German filmmaker Wim Wenders's *Don't Come Knocking* (2005), the story of a washed-up Western movie star named Howard Spence (Sam Shepard), who flees the set of his latest film in order to reunite with Doreen (Jessica Lange), a past lover. Wenders and Burnett had previously collaborated, along with Ry Cooder, on the plaintive, atmospheric score for *Paris, Texas* (1984). Also in 2005, Burnett wrote, performed in, and produced the soundtrack for the Johnny Cash biopic *Walk the Line* (Mangold, 2005). Burnett was instrumental in helping Joaquin Phoenix and Reese Witherspoon musically prepare for their roles as Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash, respectively. In 2009, Burnett earned an Academy Award and a Grammy for his contributions to "The Weary Kind," a song featured in *Crazy Heart* (Cooper), which tells the story of washed-up country music star named Otis "Bad" Blake (Jeff Bridges), who seeks redemption through his relationship with a journalist named Jean (Maggie Gyllenhaal). The *Crazy Heart* soundtrack features a diverse array of well-known performers, including Buck Owens, Waylon Jennings, and Townes Van Zandt. And consistent with Burnett's practice of enlisting musician-actors, several of the songs on the soundtrack are performed by actors in the film, including Jeff Bridges, Colin Farrell, and

Robert Duvall. As this brief enumeration suggests, after *The Ladykillers*, Burnett was a much sought-after soundtrack producer in Hollywood, a status which was surely an extension of his earlier success with *O Brother*. The Coens and Burnett's deep interest in American traditional music would once again converge in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, a movie that denotes for all three figures the most extensive and meaningful engagement with American popular music to date.

Starting points for Coen films often arise from mental images that the brothers find amusing or striking. The inspiration for *Miller's Crossing* (1990), for example, originated as the idea of a black fedora being blown through a forest by a gust of wind, an image that appears in the opening credits of the film. According to the Coens, the inspiration for *Inside Llewyn Davis* was the thought of a folk singer getting beat up in the back alley of a Greenwich Village folk club in 1961. As with *Miller's Crossing*, this image is included in the film, but in this case, it appears twice—at the start and end of the film—and thus serves as recursive narrative bookends. Joel Coen recalled that he and Ethan had “sort of talked about it [the image] a number of years ago and didn't know where it would go. We would come back to it every now and again; I don't know why. It's hard to really impose a logical thought on that but for some reason at a certain point we just started spinning it out a bit further—it grew on that original, weird idea” (Kay). According to Ethan, “The idea seemed funny or intriguing because it seemed a little preposterous. Who would beat up a folk singer and why?” (James). The Coens were also inspired by the cultural context of the setting—the small, insular Greenwich Village folk scene just prior to the arrival of Bob Dylan, who would subsequently transform what was mostly a coterie affair into a full-blown national folk music revival. Setting the film just prior to Dylan's arrival was a deliberate strategy on the part of the Coens, one that aligns with their general tendency to privilege the offbeat over the obvious. As Joel remarked, “We wanted to do something that was set in the scene before

Dylan showed up. We weren't really interested in that scene, where he came onto that scene and sort of changed it. He was such a transformative figure and people know more about that; it seemed less interesting to us" (Rotten Tomatoes). In a gambit very similar to *The Big Lebowski* and *A Serious Man*, both of which deal with the cultural milieu of America in the 1960s, the Coens wanted to mine the less familiar aspects of a well-known period, one that has become rather cliché. Ethan expressed a desire to avoid the "long hair and love beads and stuff" of the 1960s, and the larger-than-life cultural figure of Dylan, and instead, introduce less well-known figures and types of music from the period (Kay).

The period, main character, and music of *Inside Llewyn Davis* was shaped significantly by Dave Van Ronk, a key player in the pre-Dylan Village folk scene. The Coens have openly admitted in interviews that Van Ronk's posthumously published memoir, *The Mayor of MacDougal Street*, was a key textual source for period details and for the character of Llewyn Davis. The title of the Coens' film is lifted almost directly from a 1963 Van Ronk album, *Inside Dave Van Ronk*, the cover of which is virtually an exact copy of the cover of Llewyn Davis's solo record, which is briefly shown in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. Both covers show the folk musicians standing on the street and leaning lazily against a doorway that is cracked open just enough to reveal a cat looking out into the street (it seems likely that this cover is the inspiration for the cat in *Inside Llewyn Davis*). The Coens also cited *Hoot!: A 25-Year History of the Greenwich Village Music Scene*, an oral history of the period, as a notable source, as well as John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers, a personal acquaintance of the Coens (James). The gritty, wintry, downcast look of *Inside Llewyn Davis* was directly inspired by the cover of Bob Dylan's 1963 album, *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, which features a photograph of a young Dylan cozying up to his girlfriend, Suze Rotolo, as they walk down New York's Jones Street through half-melted, dirty snow. As Ethan admits, the visual idea of the film is "basically the cover of *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*—that's the

look.” In a separate interview, Ethan also compared the setting of the film to the Dylan album cover, remarking, “It’s not just Greenwich Village in 1961. It’s got to be wintry, slushy grey, overcast Greenwich Village” (James). All these details suggest that while *Inside Llewyn Davis* is technically a work of fiction, like so many other Coen films before it, it is ultimately an incongruous mix of fact and fiction, history and imagination, reality and fantasy. Moreover, while it can be tempting to write off Coen films as elaborate postmodern fantasies, a closer inspection reveals that the historical and cultural background of their films tends to be rigorously researched. *Inside Llewyn Davis* is no exception. The significant difference, however, between this and previous Coen films is that all this historical and cultural research is driven by, rather than merely incidental to, the music.

After finishing the script, the brothers immediately turned to T-Bone Burnett to produce the music, thereby initiating the Coens and Burnett’s fourth collaboration. As Ethan explains, “We knew when we were writing that he’d be the first one we’d send the script to. It’s so much about the music. We sent it to him as soon as the script was done so he could start thinking about what the repertoire might be” (Kay). One of the first things the Coens conveyed to Burnett was that they wanted to eschew the conventional practice of using lip-syncing, playback, or dubbing, in favor of filming live performances on set. According to Burnett, when the Coens initially contacted him, they clearly stated, ““We want to do a movie about the Greenwich Village folk scene in 1961, just before Dylan got there, and we want to do it with real songs, but made-up people, and we want to do it live, with all live performances” (Radish). This innovative idea of capturing live performances on set was not originally conceived as a novelty trick or gimmick; rather, it appears to have been driven purely by the needs of the story. “One of the things that was clear from the script,” recalled Burnett, “was that unless you knew the music, you wouldn’t understand the script at all. The script was indecipherable because the music itself was so much a part of the characterization

and the story telling. So it was clear to me what they were up to—but it was clear to me, too, that it wouldn't be clear to a lot of other people" (Cuffe). As Burnett clarifies, the music of *Inside Llewyn Davis* is fundamental to the meaning of the film, and the live musical performances are essential to maintaining such meaning. Filming these songs live is meant to ensure that Llewyn's musical performances feel authentic and genuine. This is critical because the music is intended as a source of sincere emotional expression, a way to generate sympathy for a character who, offstage, behaves in decidedly unsympathetic ways.

The decision to use live music in the film is significant because most Hollywood filmmakers incorporate musical performances into their films by relying on the more dependable and efficient techniques of playback, lip-syncing, dubbing, and other practices in which the music is recorded in a studio and then added to the film in the post-production phase. Thus, when a viewer sees a musical performance in a conventional Hollywood film, it is not typically a live recording; the performers are acting as if they are creating the music. Burnett explains the rationale for this conventional method:

Almost always the music in films is pre-recorded because it's so difficult to set up a shot and if you set up a complex shot and you do a live recording and then you set up another shot with another live recording, the two live recordings may not be able to be cut together at all because of tempo and tone. So most of the time it's all pre-recorded so that by the time you set up the shots you can do an amazing replication of a live performance that can be totally believable and we've done that quite a bit. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* there were two or three performances that were live and worked very well and we just felt with this one [*Inside Llewyn Davis*], "let's do it live the whole way." (Cuffe)

As Burnett indicates, incorporating live musical performances into a feature film is difficult and risky. The performer must be able to repeatedly play the song in the same exact tone, tempo, and style so that all the different takes can be cleanly matched during the editing process in order to sell the illusion of one single, uninterrupted performance. It is presumably for these reasons that not all of the musical performances in *Inside Llewyn Davis* were filmed live. Some, like the scene in which Jim (Justin Timberlake), Jean (Carey Mulligan), and Troy (Stark Sands) perform “500 Miles,” and the scene in which Jim, Llewyn, and Al Cody (Adam Driver) record the novelty song “Please, Mr. Kennedy,” recorded vocals live, but used playback for the instrument tracks. The only exception to the use of live recordings for vocals is when the Irish quartet sings “The Auld Triangle,” which features different actors lip-syncing to the voices of Justin Timberlake, Marcus Mumford, and Chris Thile. However, all of Llewyn Davis’s (Oscar Isaac) solo performances—arguably the most crucial scenes in the film—were recorded live for both vocals and guitar.

Given all the potential risks and complications (money, talent, editing, and so on) involved in this strategy, why were the Coens so intent on doing it? What are the payoffs? There are many possible answers, but they all tend to circle around a desire for authenticity. Burnett reports that the Coens wanted many of the film’s musical performances to be recorded live “because they wanted the movie to have something of a documentary feel, something of that period about it. I think they wanted the reality of it, just the raw reality of it happening right there because you can never quite get that thing in lip-syncing” (CBSFilms). This desire for authenticity, for “the raw reality of it,” is further illustrated by the fact that the Coens had at one point seriously considered shooting the film in black and white, in the style of D. A. Pennebacker music documentaries, such as *Bob Dylan: Don’t Look Back* (1967). The Coens showed an affinity for this style when they hired Pennebacker to film *Down From the Mountain*, the concert inspired by the music for *O Brother*.

Moreover, as discussed in a previous chapter, the Coens employed a quasi-documentary style in filming select musical performances in *O Brother* and *The Ladykillers*. In fact, whenever the Coens feature a “musical moment” on screen, it tends to be framed in this way, using longer takes, placing more distance between camera and subject, deploying a more “objective” style that suggests these moments are historically significant rather than merely part of a fictional story. This style conveys the sense that the Coens are recording for the sake of posterity as much as they are spinning an entertaining yarn. In this sense, the Coens can be understood as creative historians of American popular music, historians who document their musical subjects in an unconventional, imaginative kind of way by including them as part of fictional feature films.

But featuring live performances of songs was not enough for the Coens; for them, the songs needed to be played, live, in their entirety, because they

wanted to make a movie about a musician specifically, and there is something about a musician’s character that only gets revealed when they do that. You don’t want him to just strum a couple of chords and indicate a song and move on, you want to hear the song. And the songs themselves have their own emotional—and even thematic—content that you only get if you hear the song all the way through. They’re important to the movie in the way that score is.

We also wanted to do it because people don’t usually do it. (James)

As is suggested by the reason the Coens cite for wanting to record live musical performances in full (i.e., “because people don’t usually do it”), their decision was driven by a desire for innovation, a desire to re-invest and re-situate the conventional functions of classical nondiegetic music (or “the score”)—managing tone, developing theme, character, and setting, etc.—into on-screen diegetic music.

As mentioned earlier, there are many sensible reasons why filmmakers shy away from this technique. One of them is casting. Directors must locate performers whose acting abilities equal their musical acumen. This can be a rather tall order, as the Coens quickly discovered. Shortly after starting auditions for *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the duo wondered whether they had created a role that was essentially un-castable, whether they had created a script that could only be filmed in their imagination. The casting process revealed to the brothers that there were more musicians who could act well than there were actors who could play well enough for live, on-screen performances. Thus, the Coens began seeking out musician-actors rather than actor-musicians. This casting approach is not without its own problems, though, because while musicians can usually pull off individual scenes, the Coens realized that, in most cases, such individuals' acting abilities rarely extended deep or far enough to carry an entire film. Possessing the acting prowess to sustain an entire film becomes especially important for a character like Llewyn Davis, who is not only a complex character, but one that appears in nearly every scene of the film (O'Hehir). Given the challenges it poses, at one point, Burnett concluded that the Coens' desire to film live performances was a pie-in-the-sky idea:

the tight-rope walk was that we had to find an actor who could play a difficult part of a character who is not trying to make you love him, and yet you still had to love him and stay with him, the whole movie. And it was about a musician, so we wanted whole performances of songs, in order to get into his real life as a musician, which is where you really learn the most about the character. And then, we had to do it live, documentary-style. So, we saw a lot of people, and I just thought it probably couldn't happen. I thought we were going to have to find somebody and start lip-syncing, and do it the normal

way, which would have been a completely different movie and it would have taken all the fun out of it, really. (Radish)

Eventually, both the Coens and Burnett gave up on casting a musician-actor to play the part of Davis and shifted their focus to actor-musicians. It was not until Oscar Isaac auditioned for the role that the Coens had finally discovered someone with acuties ambidextrous enough to carry their character-driven, part-historical, part-fictional music biopic. Joel remarked that Isaac “was right for the part and a really good actor, but he’s also a brilliant musician and was someone who could learn this style of playing and this repertoire. T Bone knew that. We sent his tape to T Bone and he said, ‘Yeah, this guy’s the real deal’” (Kay). At the time, Isaac was an up-and-coming actor who had been working in Hollywood for over a decade, playing a number of diverse roles in a wide variety of projects. One of his most notable roles was as Prince John in Ridley Scott’s *Robin Hood* (2010). He also played Cary Mulligan’s ex-boyfriend, alongside Ryan Gosling, in *Drive* (Refn, 2011), as well as a minor part as Russian Sotheby’s security guard in Madonna’s *W.E.* (2011). Following the critical success of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, Isaac has appeared in a number of prominent films, including *Ex-Machina* (Garland, 2015), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Lucas, 2015), and most recently, *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016). Born Oscar Hernandez in his mother’s home country of Guatemala, Isaac’s father was a Cuban-born medical doctor who moved his family around the southern United States until eventually settling in Miami. Isaac describes his father as a “frustrated artist,” an amateur musician who loved music, especially rock and roll of the 1960s and 70s by artists like Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix, whose own musical styles were, in many ways, influenced by the Greenwich Village folk scene portrayed in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. As a child, Isaac occasionally picked up and played with his father’s guitar, but it was not until high school that he began playing publicly in punk bands. After graduating high school in 1998, Isaac began his career in theatre while working in his father’s hospital to

support himself. He became the front man in a ska-punk group called the Blinking Underdogs, who enjoyed short-lived fame by opening for Green Day. In 2000, Isaac enrolled in Julliard, where he studied drama and received formal education on how to sing. After Julliard, Isaac continued to work in theater, but also began landing roles in television and film. All the while, though, he continued to write and perform music in small clubs in and around New York (McNulty).

In a remarkable coincidence, as Isaac was preparing to audition for the part of Davis, he encountered Erik Frandsen, who was playing the part of an extra on the set of a small film Isaac was in the process of finishing. Frandsen was an early Greenwich Village folk musician, who often shared the stage with Van Ronk and had been living on McDougal Street, right above the Gaslight Café, since the 1970s. The two struck up a friendship, and Frandsen not only provided an oral history of the Village folk music scene and his experiences with Van Ronk, but also, more crucially, he taught Isaac “Travis-style picking,” a particular kind of acoustic guitar playing style practiced by Van Ronk and countless other folk musicians. In this style, the thumb of the strumming hand plays the bass notes of a song by alternating between different strings while the fingers pluck the higher strings, typically on the off-beat, creating a distinctly syncopated rhythm. The technique is named after the classic country music singer-songwriter Merle Travis, who popularized it in the 1940s and 50s. According to Burnett, however, Travis-style picking was originally “pioneered by a Black musician from Kentucky named Arnold Schultz who taught it to Ike Everley who taught it to Merle Travis, and then it became known as Travis picking in Nashville because he popularized it” (CBSFilms). Eventually, Isaac began opening for Frandsen at open mic nights in and around Greenwich Village (Hiatt). However, playing live at open mic nights and playing live for the camera are different undertakings, requiring drastically different skill levels. In order to learn this style well enough to confidently play Van Ronk songs live on

camera, Isaac recalls listening “to everything he [Van Ronk] recorded,” even watching a “DVD he has where he teaches you how to play some of his songs,” all in an effort to “really rewire my brain to play in that style” (Liffmann). When he first auditioned, though, Isaac was under the impression that playing like Van Ronk was not enough, and that the Coens were looking for an actor who also physically resembled the tall and burly Van Ronk. This turned out to not have been true, but nevertheless, Isaac felt he “was a long shot going in” (Mohan). Despite his initial trepidation, he auditioned for the casting director, and then a couple weeks later for the Coens, and a month later, he was officially cast to play Llewyn Davis.

Even though Isaac was an experienced actor and had now taught himself to play like the esteemed Van Ronk, in order to mitigate the financial and artistic risks of filming live performances, Burnett and Isaac still spent several months developing Davis’s character by playing and recording the music of the period (Mohan). Prior to shooting, Burnett and the Coens gathered the principal cast and soundtrack musicians together at Avatar recording studio in New York for a week of rehearsals and pre-recording in order to determine the exact songs they would play and how they would play them (Radish). These rehearsals were incredibly important to the production process. As Burnett explains:

The idea was to find actors that can sing the part and shoot it all live. So we pre-recorded everything as we did with *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* but only as a map to make sure that we had everything dope before we got anywhere near the stage. You don’t want to go on stage to go to all that trouble and all that money and everything and not have something be happening. So we got together, we rehearsed for some time, we got together, we recorded it all. So once again we could listen to the film from beginning to end. But then also we were able to plan, they were able to plan the way they were going to shoot it and the idea was to shoot it all live. Then the actors knew how they sounded

already and were able to practice along with what they had already done . . . it was like a taped rehearsal for the performance and the performances were all filmed live, without click tracks without any of that, actual coffee house performance, documentary style. (Bonner)

After finishing these rehearsals, the Coens were ready to enter the riskiest part of the project: shooting. As mentioned earlier, most Hollywood filmmakers are averse to incorporating live performances into feature films due to the challenges posed by editing post-production. For on-screen musical performances to be successful and believable, the audience must be presented with a sequence that appears to be one continuous performance of a song, when, in reality, it is actually a collection of multiple takes that have been assembled together.

Essentially, Isaac had to play one song the exact same way through multiple takes in order to maintain the verisimilitude of the performance in the finished film. If any of the musical properties of each performance (tempo, tone, pitch, and so on) differed even slightly between takes, narrative continuity would be compromised. For this reason, most filmmakers prefer to have actors lip-sync to a pre-recorded track. But the Coens concluded early on that this method would not support their vision of the film. During the filming of Isaac's performances, Burnett positioned himself off-camera with a stopwatch and timed them to ensure that Isaac maintained a consistent tempo between takes, since if it varied, the scene would need to be totally re-shot (Sullivan). Fortunately, Isaac was remarkably consistent. As Burnett recalls:

This is the miraculous part of it. He was able to do it again and again and again. That he trained himself. It's years and years of training. [. . .] I was beside him with a stopwatch timing measures to make sure he didn't speed up or slow down so we could cut between takes. Because even if he got two perfect takes, with different camera shots, if they were different tempos you

still couldn't cut between them. Not only did he have to get the emotional content right, then if he did the songs I would say mostly between, a couple he did three times, mostly five and seven times, so you had to get the emotional content and the pitch and the guitar and all of that right seven times in a row but he had to do it in the same tempo, just with his own internal clock. Which was flawless. (Bonner)

In the end, the Coens' creative risk paid off. Not only is this a remarkable achievement in and of itself, it is also indicative of the lengths to which the brothers will go to achieve a high degree of authenticity for the music of their films. While many of the Coens' films (*Inside Llewyn Davis* included) self-reflexively play with the notion of authenticity, this production history proves that the way they approach music is a serious matter indeed.

To better support the contention that the Coens take music—if little else—seriously, I turn now to music, tone, and characterization in *Inside Llewyn Davis*. As many reviewers have noted, one of the most intriguing elements of this film, in addition to the many other Coen films discussed in this dissertation, is its mixed tone. Tone is one of the most elusive concepts in film studies. As a result, little work has been done in this area. A useful starting point, however, is Douglas Pye's "Movies and Tone." Pye observes that tone "has had a very limited place in film theory and criticism" because "like 'point of view,' to which it is intimately linked, it is a term that does not comfortably fit the hybrid dramatic medium of film" (7). Tone is difficult to explicate because there are so many elements in the multimedia arsenal of film that contribute to it: cinematography, performance, dialogue, mise-en-scene, music, and so on. Pulling all these various formal elements apart in order to locate the tone of a film is a nearly impossible task. In a sense, the tone of a film exists nowhere and everywhere. It is the outcome, in other words, of multiple elements working together to create a cumulative effect and therefore refuses to reside fully within any one single element.

This complexity makes tone a difficult concept to analyze because it resists the razor-sharp focus of academic analysis. As Pye eloquently puts it, “[W]hat we are trying to describe or evoke can feel almost intangible, more like a gravitational field the work generates than an aspect of the work itself” (34). Trying to articulate the tone of a film is as difficult as pinning down the tone of a human conversation—it is an abstract sense of intention and attitude that is the outcome of myriad interpersonal cues: body language, acoustic properties of voice, word choice, social context, and so on. This degree and scope of complexity makes it tempting to declare a film’s tone too subjective, too personal to fruitfully analyze with any reasonable degree of objectivity. Yet, as Pye rightly observes, tone is inter-subjective: “[T]he inherently social nature of languages and movies means that, however difficult we may find it to articulate them, these are not experiences that confine us in our own subjectivity: more often than not our grasp of tone is shared to a significant extent by others” (7). In other words, while different viewers will register and articulate the tone of a film in different ways, there will nevertheless be enough overlap to make reasonably stable and useful statements about it. Ultimately, as Pye further notes, the messiness of tone as a concept should not prevent us from trying to understand it, for “the potential for tonal complexity is at the heart of film as a dramatic and narrative art and we ignore it at the risk of impoverishing our understanding of films” (18). Indeed, the potential for tone to be contested is one of its most stimulating qualities, particularly when considered in the context Coen films, which present especially complex challenges for analyzing tone.

Pye outlines a number of basic ideas about cinematic tone that provide a useful conceptual framework for analysis. Tone, he says, is “not simply about what is being signified in the dramatic material of the film but about the ways in which the film addresses its spectator and implicitly invites us to understand its attitude to its material and the stylistic register it employs” (25). Tone creates a dialogue between film(makers) and viewers in a

way not unlike dialogue as it is traditionally conceived, that is, as a spoken exchange between parties; in both cases, one is required to appraise the tone of the conversation in order to participate in it (26). Registering the tone of a conversation relies on an almost subconscious analysis of multiple cues, including rate of speech, volume, vocal quality, rhythm, nonverbal accompaniments, all of which are invoked and deployed according to intention, interpretation, and context. And thus, “[I]n a parallel way the tone of a film is implied by the various interrelated modes of the film’s address and our response to them” (32). These interrelated modes—the audiovisual tools of the filmic medium—work together to create a number of relational “attitudes” that, according to Pye, shape viewer response: the attitude of the film towards its subject matter, towards the audience, towards its conventions, and towards the film as a film.

The tone of a film, states Pye, is established in its opening sequence, which

orient[s] the spectator to what is to follow, introducing the world of the film and simultaneously entering into implicit dialogue with the expectations the spectator brings to the viewing and the conventions and traditions that underpin them. Central to the process of orientation will be initial indications of how the film will address its audience and how the audience will be invited to respond. (9)

Pye labels the tone set by the opening sequences the *mood*, a term which implicitly recognizes that the tone is not a static concept; rather, just as moods are often described in mercurial terms, as “swinging,” the mood of a film, likewise, swings, shifts, and evolves, protean-like. Thus, the mood of a film is a sub-component of tone that applies to smaller units of narration—scenes and/or sequences. In other words, tone is a term that applies to a whole film, while mood is a term that describes individual parts of it. For Pye, mood sets the viewer’s expectations. By alerting the viewer to the genre to which the film belongs (e.g.

action, comedy, drama), the conventions it is adopting, and its intended audience, the viewer is able to recognize and “place” the film within an existing frame of reference (11). After establishing a particular kind of mood in the opening sequence, the tone of a film is then “gradually implied by the nature of the film’s world, the choice and treatment of narrative events and the various ways these are ‘framed’ by the film’s formal strategies and colored by the mood initially established” (16). The mood, then, establishes a starting point, a platform from which filmmakers and viewers build their understanding of the film’s tone as it progresses and evolves through key scenes, events, and so forth.

The opening sequence of *Inside Llewyn Davis* begins with sound effects—people conversing, doors opening and closing, the thudding of footsteps, the clanking of glasses—typical ambient noises of a restaurant, bar, or, as is shortly revealed, a café. Then enters the casual strumming and subsequent tuning of an acoustic guitar, sounds that typically precede a live performance. The setting is stated in simple white type against a black background: “The Gaslight Café, 1961.” The next shot is an extreme close-up of a vintage microphone. A black background is relieved by a couple of spotlights focused on the peripheral edges of a small stage, as well as by the light that reflects off the edges of the microphone, which shines in a way that draws our visual attention to the center of the frame, setting an expectant and suspenseful mood. Introducing sound effects and delaying the introduction of correlating visuals serves as an effective primer for the entrance of the music in that it piques aural interest and focus, engages the ear before the eye.

The frame is noticeably shaky, giving a hand-held camera-like aesthetic in the tradition of cinema-verite, a style inextricably tied to popular music. A fingerstyle folk song begins to play while the camera maintains the close-up of the microphone, eventually moving right to reveal the diegetic source of the music and provide our first visual introduction to the eponymous musical protagonist of the film, Llewyn Davis. Davis is performing a solo

version of the folk song “Hang Me, Oh Hang Me,” a staple in Dave Van Ronk’s repertoire. The guitar arrangement is situated in a major key, but blends minor chords in a twelve-bar blues structure, which together creates a soulful, cathartic tone. Through rhythmic syncopation, the fingerstyle picking pattern gives the song a certain sense of musical sophistication when compared to the typical chord-strumming that characterizes most folk songs.

Llewyn’s body language—eyes closed, head hung at times, thrown back at others, body gently swaying in rhythm to the song—conveys a deep, introspective focus, suggesting that he is playing more for himself than the audience. The patrons of the café stop talking; multiple shots of individual audience members show them listening to Davis’s performance with rapt attention. A young male audience member is shown to be totally mesmerized by Davis’s performance, as indicated by the subtle nods of his head and the neglect of his cigarette ash, which is so long it is about to fall off. Another shot of a young female member of the audience reveals her face frozen in hypnotic attention to Davis’s performance. In a way, the audience in the café models behavior of the ideal cinema audience—the scene is clearly designed to hypnotize us as much as the patrons of the Gaslight.

The lyrics of the song also contribute significantly to the mood of this scene, as they impart a low-down, world-weary outlook, one that is shrouded in death. The first verse goes “Hang me, oh, hang me, I’ll be dead and gone/ Hang me, oh, hang me, I’ll be dead and gone/ I wouldn’t mind the hanging but the laying in the grave so long/Poor boy, I’ve been all around this world.” The poor, hungry, weary traveler of the song meditates on the finality of death, a psychic pain far worse than the physical pain of hanging. Morally, the song is bleak, and the austerity of the subject matter is matched by the way the café is lit—an inky blackness barely offset by pale shafts of weak winter sunlight and pallid spotlights, which illuminate only a thick, smoky haze.

Throughout the scene, the point of view alternates between close-ups of Davis, which create an intimate, subjective proximity, and medium to long shots from various points of view in the café, which create more literal and metaphoric distance between the viewer and Davis. The shuttling between subjective and objective points of view, near and far, gives the viewer a perspective that is in a sense both inside and outside Llewyn Davis. Many of the medium to long shots show Davis illuminated by the spotlight in a way that is almost angelic, halo-like, signifying that, whatever his off-stage disposition may be—most of the time it is rather contemptible—his performances produce a state of rapture. After he finishes the song, the audience breaks into hearty applause, which is abruptly disturbed by the loud clanking of glasses by the café staff, creating a kind of bathos by juxtaposing the emotionally arresting musical performance with a disruptive and inappropriate sound. This is a classic case of Coen irony whereby an emotionally transcendent moment is suddenly undercut by the intrusion of pedestrian reality, the popping of a sentimental balloon, producing an emotionally undermining, yet humorous, effect.

Overall, the mood of the opening sequence of *Inside Llewyn Davis* is mixed. The lighting is pale and bleak, the setting is seedy, and the lyrics of the song are bleak, yet Davis's performance is presented in a deeply emotional, stirring, transcendent way. The mood of the opening scene is dark, noir-like, but in a way that avoids hopelessness through the deep, emotional richness of the musical performance. After Davis exits the stage, the manager of the café, Pappi (Max Casella), tells him that a "friend" is waiting for him in the back alleyway. Once there, Davis is severely beaten for reasons that are, upon first viewing, enigmatic. By the end of the film, however, when this scene recurs, the viewer knows that the assailant is the husband of a female folk singer who a heavily intoxicated Davis rudely heckled off the stage the previous night.

The opening sequence sets the pattern for the film's treatment of Davis's character as a whole. This pattern involves soliciting admiration and sympathy on his behalf through an engaging musical performance, followed by a scene that features Davis behaving in reprehensible ways, thus negating the earlier sentiments. Davis is consistently rude and offensive towards even those who have in the past generously opened their homes to him on a regular basis. He repays the generosity of his only friend, Jim (Justin Timberlake), by accidentally impregnating his girlfriend, Jean (Carey Mulligan). Llewelyn's uptown acquaintances, Mitch and Lillian Gorfien (Ethan Phillips and Robin Bartlett), repeatedly give him shelter and aid, kindness he repays with meanness. When Davis shows up to return their cat, which he accidentally lost after the last time he crashed on their couch, they invite him to join a dinner party they are in the process of hosting. Mitch begs Davis to play a song for their guests, which he reluctantly performs, but not without failing to mention, "I'm not a trained poodle." He decides to play "Dink's Song," a song Davis wrote with his former partner, Mike Timlin, who committed suicide prior to the start of the film. A few bars into the song, a moved and perhaps slightly overzealous Lillian, Mitch's wife, decides to sing Mike's harmony part, which causes Davis to abruptly end the performance and chastise the Gorfien and their guests: "This is bullshit. I don't do this. I do this for a *living*, you know? I'm a musician. I sing for a living. It's not a parlor game." Mitch tries to defend Lillian, but Davis cuts him off, yelling, "I don't ask you over for dinner and then suggest you give us a lecture on the peoples of Meso-America or whatever your pre-Columbian shit is. This is my *job*. This is how I pay the fucking *rent*." An emotionally shaken Lillian rises and says, sobbing, "This is a loving home!" to which Davis responds, "I'm a fucking professional. And you know what, *fuck* Mike's part." A distraught Lillian rushes from the room in tears. Davis offers a half-hearted apology, and just as he is about to leave, Lillian rushes back into the room holding the cat that he returned in order to point out that it is not their cat at all.

One of the most powerful ways that the Coens generate a sympathetic tonal field around Davis is through his music, which alludes in a subtle, indirect way to the difficult and tragic circumstances of his life. The film has an interesting structure in that there are tragic events and circumstances that are entirely absent from the principal narrative. While only hinted at, they nevertheless go a long way to explain why Davis acts the way he does over the course of this one week in his life. Prior to the events of the story, Davis was part of a folk duo, Timlin & Davis, which enjoyed some measure of success with the hit single “Fare Thee Well.” We see, briefly, a cover of their record, “If We Had Wings,” when Davis pulls it out of the Gorfein’s collection. The title of both the album and the hit single are darkly ironic. While Davis and Timlin are smiling happily on the cover with arms wide open in flight, we eventually learn that Timlin committed suicide by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. The explicit motivation for Timlin’s suicide is never revealed in the film. Davis decides to play “Fare Thee Well” as he writes the Gorfeins a thank you and apology note before departing their apartment. Interestingly, the song starts as diegetic music that realistically issues from the film world—i.e. the Gorfein’s record player—but then assumes a nondiegetic status and is heard only by the audience as Davis leaves the apartment and takes the subway to Jim and Jean’s apartment.

It is worth pausing to consider exactly what kind of film music is playing throughout this sequence. Structurally speaking, the music upsets the traditional diegetic/nondiegetic binary underpinning film music theory. As noted in the previous chapter, such instances often call attention to the use of music as a tool of authorial expression. However, there is a need to theorize a third kind of film music, one that is neither wholly diegetic nor entirely nondiegetic, but rather one that synthesizes the functions of both. This third kind of music is described by Morris B. Holbrook in *Music, Movies, Meanings, and Markets: Cinemajazzamatazz* as “ambi-diegetic music.” As Holbrook argues, film music theorists and

critics have long held that there are, broadly speaking, two basic forms of film music: diegetic and nondiegetic. Holbrook establishes the pervasive existence of this binary by examining a wide variety of critical and theoretical texts on music in film. “By common agreement,” writes Holbrook, “diegetic music—also called source music—is produced within the film as part of the on-screen action or *mise-en-scene*” (intro). Moreover, diegetic music is often seen to be relatively benign in that it does not add much to the film’s meaning but nonetheless contributes to and maintains the realism of the action presented on screen. Nondiegetic or “background” music, on the other hand, “is produced from outside the film and provides an underscore to the events unfolding on the screen” (intro). While nondiegetic music is employed by filmmakers to subtly shape viewers’ perceptions of the film’s characters, narrative, and action, it generally goes unnoticed, and operates primarily outside of the audience’s awareness. There is a longstanding, widespread, implicit critical-theoretical consensus among film music scholars that the primary purpose of diegetic music is to support the realism of the film, whereas nondiegetic music contributes to narrative development and meaning—plot, characters, themes, and so forth. As Holbrook points out, however,

conventional work on film music that compartmentalizes this terrain into dichotomized homologous extremes (diegetic/nondiegetic, source/background, ambient/meaningful, realistic/dramatic, actual/commemorative, objective/subjective) has neglected the gray areas of musical meaning that lie between the poles of these parallel binary oppositions and/or that involve hitherto unexplored combinations of (say) diegetic source music with meaningful associations and identifications related to the dramatic development of plot, character, key themes, and so forth. (13)

It is from this classic homology that Holbrook synthesizes a third kind of film music that he labels “ambi-diegetic,” which is “on-screen music produced inside the film (like diegetic

music) that plays a role in furthering the movie's dramatic development (as is typical of non-diegetic music)" (intro). While issuing realistically from the fictional world of the film, ambi-diegetic also assumes the conventional narrative functions of classical nondiegetic score—that is, to develop the meaning of the film.

The notion of ambi-diegetic music is helpful in understanding the music of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, for the on-screen music—particularly Davis's performances—are not just part of an effort to maintain a sense of realism and authenticity; they are heavily encrypted with dramatic meaning. What is powerful about Davis's musical performances is that they obliquely allude to events and circumstances swirling around the primary story (or inside Llewyn Davis) rather than referring to them directly. As Richard Dyer asserts in *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film*, "One of the most common functions of song in Western cinema is indeed linked to character," and in the context of song and character, "[I]n shows or films in which the main character is a professional performer . . . high points are commonly moments when what is being performed in public is also presented as an expression of the performer's inner self." Additionally, Dyer notes that the relationship between the song and the performer's inner self can often be—as in the case of *Inside Llewyn Davis*—"oblique or glancing" rather than direct or obvious (11). Dyer's remarks are helpful in the context of *Inside Llewyn Davis* because while the moments in which Davis performs are often full of dramatic significance for his character and inner self, this relationship is, while not exactly ambiguous, at least left open to interpretation as it suggests multiple connections that resist easy conclusions.

"Fare Thee Well," for example, suggests multiple meanings. The lyrics, particularly the first line ("If I had wings like Noah's Dove/I'd fly the river to the one I love"), present a dose of dark comic irony given that one half of the duo that recorded the song recently committed suicide by "flying" off a bridge and into a river. The title of the duo's album, "If

We Had Wings,” literally reinforces this gallows humor joke. It is common practice for filmmakers to employ pop songs as a means to comment on a particular situation in a film. This strategy of using popular music to inject a scene with emotion, or imbue it with allusion, is, in fact, a preferred method for creating humor, as the filmmakers rely on a song’s lyrics or extra-musical intertextualizations (Smith 408). The humor of musical puns, such as the one featured in *Inside Llewyn Davis*’s “Fare Thee Well,” rests on their bisociative qualities: they call up two different frames of reference that, in effect, create comic incongruities. The two frames of reference must be fundamentally inappropriate to each other to create the bisociative, and thus humorous, effect. In this case, “Fare Thee Well’s” ironic pun about a suicide and the context of mournful grieving represent the two antithetical frames of reference. As Smith points out, this is not the first time the Coens have used songs to make comic allusions. In *The Big Lebowski*, Credence Clearwater Revival’s “Lookin’ out My Back Door” plays following the Dude’s medical exam, which included a prostate check—in other words, an inspection of his “back door,” so to speak (Smith 422). The comic pun in *Inside Llewyn Davis* differs in that while the pun in *The Big Lebowski* was in line with a mainstream brand of relatively harmless humor, the pun featured in *Inside Llewyn Davis* is more in accordance with the Coens’ controversial black comic sensibilities. Comic allusions and puns like those in songs in film are inherently intrusive, signaling the presence of authorial commentary, which implies a certain attitude towards characters. In the present case of *Davis*, this attitude is a rather cruel one. On other levels, however, the song lyrics invite other meanings, which are more general and abstract. The chorus, which repeats the lines “Fare thee well, my honey/Fare thee well,” could suggest that Llewyn is trying, as best he can, to finally say goodbye to his dead musical partner. The musical arrangement of the song therefore conveys a mixed tone, one that is comic and tragic, sad and hopeful. Overall, then, the music relates to *Davis* in complex ways, featuring a dark joke, but also foregrounding his

sadness and grief. The ambi-diegetic music in this scene makes important contributions to the dramatic development of the story, but in ways that are indirect and oblique, avoiding the obvious and literal in favor of the figurative and associative.

Another scene in which ambi-diegetic music is used to suggest what is inside Llewyn Davis is when he performs for Bud Grossman (F. Murray Abraham) at the Gate of Horn in Chicago. After a rather harrowing, surreal journey on the road with the bitter and burned-out heroin junkie Roland Turner (John Goodman) and the laconic Beat poet Johnny Five (Garrett Hedlund), Davis arrives in Chicago to audition for Bud Grossman in the hopes of securing a record deal to revive his career. Their initial introduction does not go well; Grossman is apathetic and he never received a copy of Davis's record, which was supposedly sent by his manager, Mel Novakoff (Jerry Grayson). Grossman asks Davis to perform on the spot: "Play me something inside Llewyn Davis." Llewyn chooses "The Death of Queen Jane," a traditional English folk song that tells the story of a pregnant queen undergoing a difficult labor. The queen begs her nurses to "open my right side and find my baby." The nurses respond, "That's a thing that can never be," so they decide to "call on King Henry and hear what he may say." As with the nurses, the queen begs King Henry to extract the baby, but he refuses, stating "If I lose the flower of England, I shall lose the branch too." The final verse presents the people of the kingdom celebrating the birth of the baby while "poor Queen Jane beloved, she lay cold as a stone." Like other performances of folk songs in *Inside Llewyn Davis*, this one is dense with meaning, but in a poetic, associative kind of way, generating power and drama from a sense of the enigmatic, that which is only half-revealed, half-hinted at.

Earlier in the film, when Davis arranges an abortion for Jean, the doctor informs him there will be no charge this time since the previous woman Davis impregnated, Diane, decided not to terminate the pregnancy, and instead, asked for a referral to a doctor in her

hometown of Akron, Ohio, who could take the baby to term. Davis is shocked, having never been informed of Diane's decision to keep the baby. "The Death of Queen Jane" is a deeply meaningful song in this context. This tragic tone is fully registered when, on the drive back to New York, Davis passes an exit sign for Akron late at night, in the middle of a snowstorm. This moment is presented as a path not taken, and the tone of it is made incongruous by the upbeat, poppy "Old MacDonald," sung by Nolan Strong and the Diablos, which issues from the car stereo. In any case, the fact that Davis chooses to play a song that deals with death and birth is significant and meaningful because he is grieving for the death of the potential relationships he could have had with his child(ren).

A clearer suggestion of the song's relevance to Davis's character lies in the choice of the song itself. Considering that the rehearsal for Grossman could have done big things for Davis's career, he clearly should have chosen a song with more commercial appeal. However, his decision to play an archaic English ballad says a lot about his ethos as a folk musician; that is, he is more interested in purity and authenticity than commercial and popular appeal. These two kinds of songs are consistently contrasted throughout the film. Songs like "Please, Mr. Kennedy" and "Old MacDonald" represent the type of hit pop songs dominating the airwaves at the time, while songs like "The Death of Queen Jane" and "Hang Me, Oh Hang Me" symbolize a more authentic, "pure" style of folk music embraced by many Greenwich Village folk performers of the pre-Dylan period. When Davis performs solo, he tends to select older, traditional folk songs, ones that he did not write himself but that are nevertheless re-arranged and delivered as a form of self-expression. Grossman asks Davis to play something from "inside Llewyn Davis," and so he does. At the end of the performance, the deadpan Grossman's states, "I don't see a lot of money here." The closest Grossman comes to praising Davis is when he says, "You're okay. You're not green." Davis clearly does not have what the likes of Jim and Jean or Troy Nelson have. Nelson is, according to

Grossman, a “good kid” who can “connect with people.” Davis’s musical project, by contrast, is more about connecting with his inner self, with what’s “inside.” Grossman asks Davis if he would be interested in joining a Peter, Paul, and Mary-like trio he is putting together. Davis declines; his “purist” approach to folk music would never allow it. This scene represents the climax and anti-climax of the film, both of which are necessary to sustain the tragic form of the film. Davis earns our admiration and respect for his integrity, but he loses it when he puts his integrity above all else.

Part of the film’s tragic perspective lies in the gap between Davis’s flawless, soulful, mesmerizing performances and the indifferent responses of Grossman and other select listeners. The particular way Davis’s performance is captured in the scene where he plays for Grossman invites sympathy and identification. The performance begins with a medium-length shot placed behind Grossman, looking at his back and at Davis while he begins to play. This distance between the camera and Davis initially reinforces the tension of the scene, as Davis is asked to perform—a performance upon which his career is riding—on the spot for an audience of one in a cavernous, dark dance hall. There is some natural light leaking in from outside, but it is harsh, weak, thin. The overall mood is drab, desolate, wintry. As Davis begins to play, the camera inches in slowly, almost imperceptibly so, a maneuver that is typically called a “push-in” in film analysis. Davis is framed by Grossman on the right, and a table with upturned chairs on the left, as the camera gently pushes in, creating a sense that, as Davis plays his music, he, and the viewer, gradually become more and more immersed in the performance. In this focalization, Davis’s surroundings slowly, but inevitably, fade into the background and the periphery.

The initial shot is stretched out with no cuts until, finally, the perspective switches to an over-the-shoulder shot of Grossman, whose facial expression and general demeanor is ambiguous. Either he is completely hypnotized by the song or feels nothing at all. The shot

of Grossman uses the same technique applied to Davis in the previous shot—a medium-length shot that crawls forward. The next shot rests on a close-up of Davis as he cuts the guitar accompaniment and dramatically delivers the final verse of the song. The manipulation of the camera in this scene is designed to bring the viewer closer to the music and, by extension, Llewyn Davis, inviting sympathy and identification, ramping up the emotions of the scene and valorizing the performance. Grossman’s anti-climactic, deadpan response—“I don’t see a lot of money here”—not only comically deflates the emotional buildup, it also generates the tragic thesis of the film, which is that Davis’s music, however poignant and accomplished, goes largely unappreciated by those around him, who seem more interested in music with commercial appeal. By drawing on the trope of the great artist who is marginalized in his own time, this ignorance is intended to paradoxically make him a sympathetic figure worthy of respect. The degree to which each and every viewer admires Davis’s music will vary, for taste is inherently subjective. Regardless, my point here is that the film can be read as encouraging a reverential perspective towards Davis and the kind of music he represents.

Another instance in which Davis chooses to play an archaic folk song is when he plays for his father, Hugh Davis (Stan Carp), who lives in a seaside retirement home. Once more, a song from this particular genre is used to express his inner emotions and thoughts in oblique ways, and to reinforce the tragic-comic perspective of the film. The scene follows a pattern similar to the one in which Davis performs for Bud Grossman, except that Hugh Davis, due to his infirmed state, is even more catatonic in his demeanor. Llewyn decides to play “Shoals of Herring,” a coming-of-age, seafaring ballad about a young boy who signs up to sail on a lugger to “hunt the bonny shoals of herring.” While the song sounds traditional in both style and content, in reality, it was written by Ewan MacColl for a BBC radio program that aired as recently as 1960. Regardless, the archaic feel of the song accords with many of

the other songs Davis chooses to play throughout the film, which are intended to be seen as “pure”—that is, traditional—choices. Like many folk songs, “Shoals of Herring” features a large number of verses, but Davis only sings certain ones, and his choices serve to symbolically index his subjectivity at this moment in the story. In the scene just prior to this one, Davis decides to re-join the merchant marine—his father’s trade—signaling a kind of artistic defeat. After experiencing so many bitter disappointments, it appears Davis is finally giving up on his music in order to pursue a more practical vocation. In this way, the song is a lament for the death of Davis’s greatest passion in life, his music, which is signaled by his decision to—literally and figuratively—ship out.

The first verse of “Shoals of Herring” establishes the basic situation of the song: a young cabin boy sets sail on a fishing lugger to “hunt the bonny shoals of herring.” The second verse develops the coming-of-age theme: “Now you’re up on deck, you’re a fisherman/You can swear and show a manly bearing/Take your turn and watch with the other fellows/While you’re hunting the bonny shoals of herring.” The next verse speaks of the young boy developing self-reliance and independence as he earns his keep and pays his own way. The final verse Davis sings activates the trope of the dangers of the sea and meditates on the universal human desire to dream, the trials of life, and suffering, of “sweating or cold, growing up/Growing old or dying/As we dream of the shoals of herring.” As with “The Death of Queen Jane,” the significance of “Shoals of Herring” lies in its ability to evoke multiple levels of meaning. The song is meaningful to Davis because it is one of his father’s favorites. Earlier in the film we learn from Llewyn’s sister, Joy (Jeanine Serralles), that Llewyn recorded the song for his mom and dad when he was just eight years old. The coming-of-age trope suggests Llewyn once revered his father in the same way that the young cabin boy reveres the fishermen on the lugger. The song’s themes of growing up, growing old, and dying literally applies to the current situation, for Llewyn has grown up while his

father is growing old and dying. What is being evoked here is a recognition of our mutual humanity as highlighted through the universal condition of suffering. This scene reveals that, throughout the film, Llewyn is not only mourning the death of his partner, Mike, but also the death of his mother, and the slow, gradual passing of his childhood hero, his Dad..

It should be kept in mind that the film only covers one week in Llewyn's life. Thus, while we do not know whether his decision to give up being a folk musician is final, there is nevertheless a strong sense of finality about it conveyed in this scene. Generally speaking, nearly all of the songs Davis plays throughout the film can be seen as various expressions of mourning and loss—for Mike, for his music career, for his son, for his parents. While Davis behaves like a self-centered ass to most of the people he meets, it is this tragic sense of loss in his life, which is always hovering in the background and rarely treated openly, that generates sympathy for him. Without this emotional counterweight to balance out the overall presentation of his character, the Coens would risk completely alienating the audience from Davis.

The Coens employ a similar technique in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001). The film's protagonist, Ed Crane, is a decidedly unlikable figure; however, his character is somewhat redeemed by his interior monologues, which reveal that he is, indeed, "there." Moreover, it is highly significant that these monologues are more often than not accompanied by elegiac piano sonatas, which, much like the performances of traditional ballads in the case of *Inside Llewyn Davis*, lend a strong sense of the tragic to his persona. While these two films are different in many respects, what they share in common is protagonists who lack the ability to genuinely express themselves in words; for both, the music does it for them.

At the retirement home with his father, as in the scene with Grossman, Llewyn delivers a raw, heartfelt performance that is received apathetically by his listener. While Grossman seemed unmoved, Hugh Davis goes one step further—he is totally mute, and his

facial expression is frozen in a state of grim resignation. As Llewyn plays and sings, his father is completely unresponsive to the music. At one point, he turns and gazes out the window, possibly signaling a feeling of nostalgia for his time at sea, which is exactly the kind of longing the sea ballad is designed to trigger. Rather than having the camera slowly push in like a hypnotic gaze, the scene is structured through multiple shot/reverse shots that move closer to each character with each cut. A close-up of Hugh Davis shows him closing his eyes, which could indicate that his son's moving performance is stirring deep feelings. As Llewyn plays the final chord of the song, his father opens his mouth, as if to finally speak, but only sighs resignedly. In a more conventional music biopic, this would be the moment where father and son, in a moment of unification or reconciliation, establish a genuine emotional connection purely through music. However, we are watching a Coen brothers film, which means that viewers should be on guard whenever a scene seems to be building towards a moment of genuine emotional expression. This is nearly always an emotional bait-and-switch. In this particular scene, what appeared to be a stirring of deep feelings in Hugh Davis turns out to be the stirring of something else entirely—that of an involuntary bowel movement. While this dark joke would seem to undermine any genuine emotional expression or feeling that preceded it, the ambiguity of the scene as a whole allows for a reading that can have it both ways, for how can we say for certain that Hugh Davis was entirely unmoved by his son's performance?

In any case, by having him deliver poignant and skilled musical performances to apparently apathetic listeners, both of these scenes help generate sympathy for Davis. In a sense, Davis's performances have two audiences—the audience *in* the film and the audience *of* the film. That certain listeners within the film fail to recognize the mesmerizing power of Davis's music paradoxically makes it more compelling to the audience watching the film. In other words, the rejection of Davis's music by the fictional audience encourages the

admiration of the actual audience. This is essentially a form of dramatic irony in which the real audience of the film understands or knows something about Davis's music that the fictional audiences in the film do not.

There are a number of other key ways unrelated to music that the Coens use to prevent Davis from becoming an unsympathetic character altogether. One is by including characters that are just as rude, mean, or annoying as Davis, sometimes even more so. While Jean's censure of Davis for getting her pregnant is justified, her tirade against him in Washington Park is excessive, particularly considering that, as Davis mentions, it takes two to tango, implying that Jean shares at least some of the responsibility. Jean's over-the-top, caustic behavior in this scene makes Davis look a bit less harsh by comparison. The same logic applies to the bitterly corrosive jazz player, Roland Turner (John Goodman), who relentlessly censures Davis on his road trip from New York to the Gate of Horn in Chicago simply for being a folk musician (among other things). Davis earns sympathy by virtue of his being placed alongside characters who are as unsympathetic as he is. Davis's severe treatment of Lilian Gorfien at the dinner party is unjust; yet at the same time, Mitch, Lillian, and their uptown New York dinner guests are presented as pretentious, boorish, and square bourgeoisies. In the end, hardly any character escapes unscathed in the darkly comic Coen universe, and in this way, the relationship between the audience and anti-hero protagonists like Davis, however flawed, is ameliorated through the characters they associate with.

Another key way the Coens mediate unsympathetic characters is by piling on the misfortune. Lots of bad things happen to Davis throughout the film, often for arbitrary reasons. Davis loses the Gorfieins' cat, for example, by accident; it makes a quick escape out the front door as he leaves the apartment. He tries to stick out his foot to block it, but fails to do so because he is saddled with his guitar and bag. He quickly sets everything down to chase the cat, but the door closes behind him and locks in the process. And of course, he has no key

(there is something here of Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin in these moments, and in fact, Isaac stated in interviews that he studied Keaton films in preparation for the role of Davis). Thus, Davis is forced to carry the cat with him on the subway en route to Jim and Jean's apartment, where he spends the night. The following morning, the cat manages to scramble out an open window and down a fire escape. While having coffee with Jean at a café, Davis spots the cat and returns it to the Gorgeins that evening; however, a horrified Lillian points out to Davis that it is not their cat—"Llewyn, where's its scrotum?!" Davis then leaves with the misidentified cat and takes it with him on his road trip to the Gate of Horn in Chicago. However, he eventually abandons the cat in the car when Johnny Five (Garrett Hedlund), the driver, is arrested. The cat reappears later in the film as Davis is driving back to New York late at night through a snowstorm and accidentally runs over an animal that he thinks might have been the cat. Near the end of the film, Davis discovers that the Gorgein's cat, whose name is Ulysses, returned home of his own accord.

In terms of how it affects the interpretation of his character, the cat seems to have a special relationship to Davis. Tim Wainwright argues that the Coens "use the device of the shiftily totemic cat, with all of its symbolic meaning, to amplify Llewyn's quest for identity." The cat humanizes Davis, proving that he has the capacity to care for something or someone other than himself or his music. The cat becomes a symbol of redemption for Davis at times: he might be able to make up for all the harm he has done to others if he could only safely return the cat home. Seemingly a trivial motif, the cat actually goes a long way towards generating sympathy for Davis, effectively counterbalancing his more socially undesirable personality traits.

The cat serves as a kind of structuring device in a film that lacks a linear plot. The cat directs Davis, motivating his movements from place to place, and thus providing a coherent thread throughout the narrative. Lillian divulges near the end of the film that the cat's name

is Ulysses, suggesting the story can be interpreted allegorically as a Homeric odyssey. Moreover, while walking past an uptown cinema near the end of the film, Davis pauses to reflect on a movie poster for *The Incredible Journey*, a 1963 live-action Disney film that follows the adventure of two dogs and a cat on their journey home through the Canadian wilderness. Both references imply that Davis has been on a mythical journey, a quest to and from home, or there and back again, as Tolkien writes in *The Hobbit*.

Davis's final performance of the film returns to the beginning of the plot, which reveals that all we have seen has been a flashback. The circularity of the plot recapitulates the Sisyphusean trajectory of Davis's life and music career. He seems doomed to forever roll the boulder back up the hill only to watch it roll back down again, to take his guitar out of his case and perform yet another heart-wrenching folk song for a mostly indifferent audience. Davis's final performance of the film is, appropriately, a farewell song, "If I Had Wings." In light of all that Davis has been through since the song was first heard near the beginning of the film, when it plays again in this scene, it assumes a more cathartic significance. Davis is expressing a final farewell to the tragic circumstances of his past in order to move forward. Yet, as always, the Coens' ironic sensibilities only allow a genuine, positive emotion to exist momentarily, for after Davis finishes the song, leaves the stage, and converses with Pappi, an unidentified musician ascends the stage in the background and begins playing another farewell song. This time it is "Fare Thee Well," a song made famous by Bob Dylan. Everything about the unnamed musician's appearance—the hairstyle, the iconic harmonica with neck holder— suggests that the figure is Dylan, whose arrival to the Greenwich Village scene in 1961 signals the end of the folk music era as symbolized by Llewyn Davis. "Fare Thee Well," then, can be read as a kind of farewell to Llewyn Davis and to the traditional, purist, Greenwich Village folk music scene that he represents. The film ends with Davis

getting beat up in the alley by the husband of the folk singer he heckled in a drunken stupor the night before. “Au revoir”—another farewell—are Davis’s final words of the film.

While the end of the film seems to be an exercise in what *O Brother*’s Everett calls a case of “hopeless negativism,” there are a number of positive points to consider. For one, the cat, Ulysses, does find its way back to the Gorgeins, and a reconciliation occurs between Davis and Mitch and Lillian. Davis is also inadvertently saved from a life like his father’s—a lifetime of hard manual labor with the merchant marine. When Davis meets with Jean, he seems to arrive at some degree of self-knowledge; he says, “I’m so fucking tired. I thought I just needed a night’s sleep but it’s more than that.” Indeed, as his performances suggest throughout the film, there is a lot of grief inside Llewyn Davis. He manages to deliver a genuine “thank you” to Jean for arranging another gig at the Gaslight for him, and even adds, “I love you,” which elicits what the screenplay describes as a “genuine laugh” from Jean. Llewyn also discovers from the café manager Pappi that Jean has slept with a number of different people, increasing the odds that the baby might not actually be his. So, on the one hand, the theme of loss continues: Davis loses his right to be called—with certainty—the baby’s father. On the other hand, in a way that is similar to the end of *The Big Lebowski*, the presence of a little Llewyn Davis in the world suggests some measure of regeneration, a hope for the future. Ultimately, the end of the film cannot be read in wholly positive or negative terms—like any worthwhile journey, it is a complex mixture of both.

Inside Llewyn Davis is a key film in the Coen oeuvre because it represents the brothers’ most extensive engagement with the history of American popular music to date. While many previous Coen films relied heavily on pre-existing popular music in both form and content, *Inside Llewyn Davis* represents a culminating text where music literally takes center stage. The process of producing the music reveals the great lengths to which both the Coens and Burnett will go, the large creative risks they will take, to marry music with film in

innovative, meaningful ways. The ambi-diegetic music of *Inside Llewyn Davis* is employed to create a complex, mixed tone that suggests a variety of different attitudes and perspectives towards the protagonist, Llewyn Davis. The songs that Davis plays in the film help to reveal the complex dynamics of his internal self, dynamics that expressed any other way simply would not be as compelling as they are when alluded to and given raw emotion through musical performance. For all the pain, suffering, humiliation, and misfortune revealed to be *Inside Llewyn Davis*, what becomes clear by the end of the film is that Davis's musical performances are victories in and of themselves, wins that denote the triumph of cathartic, musical self-expression over the soul-crushing vagaries of life. What *Inside Llewyn Davis* shows is the power of music to communicate what other filmic elements cannot: what is inside. Finally, the film effectively captures what Scott Foundas of *Variety* described as the "abundant joy" of the music itself. This sense of abundant joy should retire, once and for all, the longstanding charge that Coen films are all surface and no substance, all irony and no sincerity, all brain and no heart.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

“We’re only interested in one thing, Bart. Can you tell a story? Can you make us laugh? Can you make us cry? Can you make us want to break out in joyous song? Is that more than one thing?” –*Barton Fink* (1991)

My dissertation has sought to examine popular music in the films of Joel and Ethan Coen, in an effort to explore how and why it works as a textual feature, and what makes it significant. From their cinematic debut with *Blood Simple* in 1984 to *Inside Llewyn Davis* in 2013, the Coens have consistently relied on the power of popular song to spin their offbeat, tonally complex stories in stylistically engaging ways.

My analysis began with *The Big Lebowski* (1998), a film that signified a critical shift in the brothers’ approach to music soundtracks. Prior to *Lebowski*, score composer Carter Burwell had principally managed the music for Coen films; but with *Lebowski*, the use of pre-recorded popular music for the purposes of characterization necessitated a deeply knowledgeable curator in the form of T-Bone Burnett. This understanding of *curator*, or the action of curation, avoids the more superficial, commercial meanings of the term, instead favoring a deeper, more complex interpretation.

The brothers’ next film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), demonstrated an intensification of the duo’s stylistic preoccupation with music in that here music assumes a central role in the film’s narrative. The music of *O Brother* also plays a critical role in the creation of the Coens’ signature complicated tone, which denotes an unruly mix of the comic and the dramatic, the sincere and the ironic. This mixed, often incongruous, tone is achieved, among other means, by employing various forms of traditional American music. *O Brother*’s soundtrack also further developed the notion of the curatorial approach first adopted by the Coens in *Lebowski*.

In keeping with the curatorial approach to film music established with *Lebowski* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, in *The Ladykillers* (2004), the brothers once again deployed music to suggest complex moods, establish setting, aid in characterization, and serve as a source of authorial commentary. In this instance, though, the brothers achieve these cinematic ends by combining traditional gospel and contemporary hip-hop. Moreover, the documentary-like way in which some of the musical performances are captured suggests that Coen films also serve a historical function, one that works to preserve, as well as re-transmit, America's musical heritage.

With *Inside Llewyn Davis*, the Coens and Burnett took their engagement with American music one step further by creating a story that focuses directly on music and musicians. For the Coens and Burnett, music plays a primary role in a film's conception, development, and execution. The care, thoughtfulness, and innovation that the Coens and Burnett invest in film music are revealed through this study's examination of the production background of this and other films. The production of music for *Inside Llewyn Davis* in particular represents an important evolution in the Coens' careers as connoisseurs of music, as in this film, many of the musical performances were recorded live on set, an attempt to preserve a high degree of authenticity and realism. These live performances fulfill the functions of music in previous Coen films: they establish setting, construct characters, and set the tone, all of which are framed through a complex, multi-layered mood that encourages a confusing mix of sympathetic and unsympathetic responses toward Llewyn Davis.

On the whole, at the risk of imposing a teleological viewpoint, one can outline a reasonably clear trajectory for the evolution and growth of the use of popular songs in Coen films. In *Blood Simple*, the Coens' first film, we can see the brothers beginning to toy with and sense the possibilities that popular music has to offer. With *The Big Lebowski*, their engagement with music significantly increases, particularly through characterization, as

music is used to impress upon the audience the characters' attachment to the counter-culture of yesteryear. In *O Brother*, pre-existing forms of traditional American music assume center stage, and with this, the film's soundtrack re-configures the notion of what a compilation soundtrack can be (i.e., that it can be just as original and creative as a traditional score). *The Ladykillers* shows the Coens and Burnett continuing to develop and refine the curatorial approach first developed in *O Brother*, an attempt to revive, preserve, and re-transmit traditional or "old-timey" forms of American music. This trajectory shows a pattern of increasing degrees of innovation that become ever more complex and authentic, until finally arriving at *Inside Llewyn Davis*, which features the recording of live performances on set, a technique that signifies the culmination of the Coens' artistic engagement with music. Indeed, *Inside Llewyn Davis* represents the apogee of their experimentation with American music in terms of subject matter (the film deals with the American folk music scene), production process (musical performances recorded live on set), and significance (the film exhibits the mixed tone that has come to be the Coens' trademark).

I do not want to leave this dissertation without at least mentioning the Coens' latest release, *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), which offers yet another interesting engagement with music, this time in the context of Hollywood's studio-era. The story is set in Hollywood's Golden Age and follows the travails of Eddie Mannix (Josh Brolin). As Capitol Pictures' main studio "fixer," Mannix takes on one crisis after another, including the kidnapping of Baird Whitlock (George Clooney), an A-list star of a big-budget picture in the midst of production. The soundtrack features an original score by Carter Burwell, and while the score music of Coen films has not been the primary focus of my study, the film is nevertheless significant because it explores the brothers' long-standing fascination with the relationship between movies and music. The film features several memorable "musical moments," including a skilled pastiche of the classical dancing-sailor genre, in which Burt Gurney (Channing

Tatum) sings “No Dames” and performs an intricate dance routine with a group of seamen. Additionally, there are countless other musically interesting scenes that show various 1950s genre films in the middle of production. On the whole, while the soundtrack is not as innovative or as integral as some of their previous projects, *Hail, Caesar!* nevertheless taps popular music as a rich narrative and stylistic resource.

One of my central arguments has been that the music of Coen brothers films, especially pre-existing, popular music, is a crucial element of their filmmaking, a definitive, formal aspect of their “Coen-esque” brand of auteurism. While writing this dissertation, an interesting phenomenon has emerged: Noah Hawley’s *Fargo* (2014), an anthology TV series inspired by the duo’s 1996 critically award-winning film, has recently aired. One of the most remarked-upon features of the series has been its soundtrack, which embodies in a concrete way my argument that music is fundamental to the distinctiveness of Coen brothers films. As an adaptation of not just the film *Fargo* (1996), but of the Coen universe as a whole, the series attempts to capture precisely what makes Coen films unique and memorable, and one of these elements is most certainly their music. Moreover, the production background of the series soundtrack also recalls many of the innovative practices of the Coens and T-Bone Burnett discussed in this dissertation. By way of conclusion, then, I would like to use the music of the TV series *Fargo* to help synthesize a number of important arguments running through this dissertation.

Inspired by the original 1996 Coen film of the same title, *Fargo* is an anthology television series created and written by Noah Hawley. It premiered on the FX cable network in April of 2014. There are currently two seasons, and a third is planning to be released in 2017. Although the series is set within the same fictional world as the original film, each season presents a different story situated in a different era with a different cast of characters connected through a number of storylines. The first season, set in 2006 in Bemidji,

Minnesota, revolves around an insurance salesman named Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman), whose chance encounter with a trouble-making hit man named Lorne Malvo (Billy Bob Thornton) results in violent string of events that destabilizes the entire community. Investigating these crimes are Molly Solverson (Allison Tolman), a local deputy, and Gus Grimly (Colin Hanks), a Duluth police officer.

Season two moves back in time nearly three decades to 1979, and is set in the small town of Luverne, Minnesota. The story is set in motion when Rye Gerhardt (Kieran Culkin), the youngest member of a Fargo, North Dakota-based crime family, murders a judge and several others in a Waffle Hut. Rye is then accidentally run over by local beautician Peggy Blumquist (Kirsten Dunst), whose husband, Ed (Jesse Plemons), a butcher, tries to cover it up. The Waffle Hut massacre prompts the involvement of local state trooper Lou Solverson (Patrick Wilson) and his father-in-law, Sheriff Hank Larsson (Ted Danson).

Hawley's *Fargo* shares a complicated relationship with the Coens' *Fargo*. Clearly wanting to avoid the creation of a sequel, re-make, or any other kind of conventional adaptation, the TV series engages in a re-mix of various elements from the original. In season one, *Fargo* the film's Jerry Lundegaard (William H. Macy), a shifty car salesman, becomes Lester Nygaard (Martin Freeman), an unsuccessful, milquetoast, life insurance salesman in the series. And the film's pregnant Brainerd police chief Marge Gunderson (Francis McDormand) becomes Bemidji deputy Molly Solverson (Allison Tollman) in the series *Fargo*. Despite their similarities, these characters do not share a one-to-one correspondence. At the beginning of the season one, for instance, Molly is single, without child, and only a deputy.

Interestingly, some elements of the TV series are drawn from Coen films other than *Fargo*. The figure of Lorne Malvo, for instance, is inspired more by Anton Chigurh (Javier Bardem) from *No Country for Old Men* (2007) than either Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) or

Gaeear Grimsrud (Peter Stormare), the two main villains of the Coens' *Fargo*. This strategy of "same but different," or, to use the musical metaphor most reviewers seem to prefer, "riffing on the original," also extends to the music soundtrack, which references the music of a variety of Coen films in unusual, innovative ways.

The score for Hawley's *Fargo* was composed by Jeff Russo, founding member of the rock band Tonic. The series' main theme, "Bemidji, Minnesota," is inspired by the main theme of the original film, Carter Burwell's "Fargo, North Dakota," both of which are descended from a Scandinavian folk tune called "The Lost Sheep." More relevant to the focus of this dissertation, however, is the series' use of pre-existing popular songs. Both seasons of Hawley's *Fargo* include numerous musical references to a variety of Coen films. Early in the first episode of season one, titled "The Crocodile's Dilemma," Patsy Cline's "Sweet Dreams" plays as Bemidji police chief Vern Therman (Shawn Doyle) arrives home to have dinner with his pregnant wife. The same song plays in the Coens' debut film, *Blood Simple*, when the camera glides up and over a drunk who is passed out on the bar. While the song is the same, the contexts are clearly different, which means that the valence of each song is also different. In *Blood Simple*, "Sweet Dreams," as a classic country ballad, is logically appropriate to the setting of a Texas roadside bar. What is more is that the song's theme of unrequited love and broken hearts reinforces the film's larger themes of adultery and betrayal. The dynamics between the playful, self-reflexive camera movement, the sight gag of the passed out drunk, and the sad and lonesome sound of the song all contribute to the Coens' distinctive mixed tone. However, in the TV episode, on the level of story, the song functions more as routine diegetic music (it begins as non-diegetic but morphs into diegetic, emanating from a small stereo inside Vern's house), and inverts the meaning of the original context since Vern and his wife, Ida (Julie Ann Emery), are happily married. The song seems to be planted mostly for the benefit of Coen aficionados, suggesting that *Fargo* the TV series

is engaging in a kind of musical referential game, in which the playing board is nothing less than the musical universe of Coen films.

Although in this case the same song is used in both films, many subsequent musical references in Hawley's *Fargo* are less straightforward and more innovative. In the opening of episode five, "The Six Ungraspables," shots of a cornfield are accompanied by a vintage recording of "Wildwood Flower" by the Carter Family. Both the image and music strongly connote *O Brother*, but they do so in an indirect, alluding way. The classic bluegrass song "Wildwood Flower" never appears in *O Brother*, but the old-timey genre and the Carter Family do. In this case, the allusion is more abstract, offering viewers a bit more of a challenge.

In a similar attempt to pay homage to the Coens and their music, in episode six, "The Heap," a whistling melody plays as robots in a factory assemble washing machines, one of which is on its way to Lester Nygaard. Shortly after, the audience hears an ethereal-sounding, steel-drum version of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as Lester cleanses his house of his dead wife's belongings. Both the whistling and the playing of "Ode to Joy" (especially on an unconventional instrument) are strongly reminiscent of the *Raising Arizona* (1987) soundtrack, which combines whistling, yodeling, and the same Beethoven song played on a banjo in a bluegrass style. Again, the contexts are different, and thus so are the roles and meanings of the music, but connections between the two can nevertheless be made. My main point is by offering music to aficionados as a kind of Easter egg hunt for musical allusions to Coen films, the TV series implicitly uses popular songs as a form of metonymy, a part that stands for the whole; in other words, songs are used to gesture towards the Coens' body of work as a whole. This only works if Coen soundtracks are distinct and memorable in the first place.

Season two features a more extensive and innovative engagement with music from Coen films than season one. The production background of the soundtrack for the second season of *Fargo* is interesting because it is aligned in many ways with the curatorial approach of the Coens and Burnett. Like many Coen films, the music for Hawley's *Fargo* was discussed early in the season's development. Prior to shooting, music supervisor Maggie Phillips met with Hawley to discuss ideas for the music based on extensive research (Gabler). Phillips was involved in every stage of the filmmaking process, from pre- to post-production. The final selection of songs and how they were applied to individual scenes was also a largely collaborative process, involving Phillips, series score composer Jeff Russo, and Hawley (Gabler). Many of these procedures echo those practiced by the Coens. In nearly all of the Coen films discussed in this dissertation, the music precedes the film and serves as an important source of inspiration throughout its production, a process that tends to be typified by extensive collaboration between the filmmakers and music personnel.

The second season of *Fargo* features music not just from the original film, but from songs plucked from a variety of other Coen films. Rather than presenting the versions of songs that originally appeared in the Coen films, as was done in season one, the creators commissioned a variety of contemporary artists to record creative cover versions in a style consistent with the era in which the season was set, the 1970s. Sometimes, an artist's style was used as the basis for choosing a song for that artist to cover, and other times, the style of song would suggest a particular artist. According to Phillips, "The idea was not, let's do a '70s version of 'Man of Constant Sorrow,' it was let's have Blitzen Trapper do a '70s version of 'Man of Constant Sorrow'" (Lewis). The care and thoughtfulness with which the music for *Fargo* the series was created suggests the presence of a true curator, one who chooses, but not only chooses, one whose choices are creative, meaningful, and generative. Clearly, Phillips's role extended well beyond that of the typical music supervisor for film or TV. The

depth of her involvement has a precedent in T-Bone Burnett and his work on Coen films, the nature of which is really better captured in the title of “curator-producer” than it is in “music supervisor” or “archivist.” Moreover, the way Phillips used pre-existing music as a basis for the recording of new material in a different style is very much in the spirit of the Coens and Burnett in films like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, *The Ladykillers*, and *Inside Llewyn Davis*. The creators of *Fargo* the TV series are essentially using methods inspired by approaches originally pioneered by the Coens, Burnett, and Burwell. This borrowing of methods underlines the degree of influence exerted by these figures and their work on film soundtracks.

One of the rationales for commissioning the recording of covers of songs from Coen films was to avoid engaging in slavish imitation, something the series as a whole took great pains to avoid. In a sense, the musical notion of producing a highly creative cover of an original embodies the approach of the series as a whole, which sought to avoid sticking too close to the original film while still retaining its spirit. As Phillips emphasizes, “I wasn’t trying to do in the soundtrack what the Coen brothers do in a soundtrack. By doing the covers, it was more about just a nod to this tremendous body of work” (Lewis). At the end of season two, episode one, “Waiting for Dutch,” the audience hears a cover version of “Didn’t Leave Nobody but the Baby,” a song from *O Brother* that is based on a traditional American music soundtrack co-written by musician Gillian Welch and soundtrack producer T-Bone Burnett. Interestingly, the cover version in the TV series features the voices of Noah Hawley and Jeff Russo (Gabler), who, after considering various artists, decided to record the cover themselves. This innovative, do-it-yourself method is highly reminiscent of Burnett’s artisanal, hands-on, creative curation of Coen soundtracks, a process that often directly involved the Coens themselves, as well.

In season two, episode four, “Fear and Trembling,” the closing song is a cover of “Down in the Willow Garden,” a unique collaboration between The Chieftains, a traditional Irish band, and Bon Iver, a contemporary folk indie singer-songwriter. The song is significant to the Coen oeuvre because it is sung by Ed (Holly Hunter) to baby Nathan Arizona in *Raising Arizona*. In this way, the song offers yet another cleverly disguised “Easter egg” for diehard Coen fans to unearth. Also, while much of the pop music on the season two soundtrack is driven by the period in which it is set (the 1970s), “Down in the Willow Garden” is a traditional folk song recorded in a contemporary style by contemporary artists—another technique that points to Coen projects like *O Brother* and *Inside Llewyn Davis*, both of which feature traditional songs recorded by present-day artists in modern styles exclusively for the film.

In fact, Hawley’s *Fargo* features a number of cover songs from Coen films that were—in true Coen fashion—commissioned exclusively for the series. A pertinent example appears in season two, episode six, “Rhinoceros,” which features a cover version of “Man of Constant Sorrow”—the theme song for *O Brother*—recorded by Blitzen Trapper in a 70s style. This particular track inspired creator Noah Hawley to commission contemporary artists to record covers of Coen songs. According to Maggie Phillips, season two’s music supervisor,

It was a great idea, so I made it happen, and Blitzen Trapper came back with a fantastic version of the song. It went so well that we decided to do more Coen brothers covers. I sat down and made a list from the Coen brothers’ huge body of work, and Noah did the same, so it became a brainstorming session about what songs could work and what bands could work. [. . .] It was fun and added some energy to the whole process because we were limited by the 1979 cutoff, and the covers opened us up to working with new artists. (Alston)

This kind of innovation and thoughtful care with regards to music is perfectly aligned with the bespoke, curatorial approach employed by the Coens and Burnett over the years.

Another cover of a song from a Coen film recorded especially for the series is an acoustic version of Jose Feliciano's "Let's Find Each Other Tonight," performed by Jeff Tweedy of the alternative rock band Wilco. The song appears in season two, episode five, "The Gift of the Magi," as Peggy (Kirsten Dunst) is preparing to run away from Luverne. The song refers back to the original *Fargo*, to the scene where Carl attends a live performance by Jose Feliciano (in which he plays "Let's Find Each Other Tonight") with a call girl. Season two, episode seven, "Did you Do This? No, You Did It!," features a cover of "Just Dropped In [To See What Condition My Condition Was In]" by White Denim, also recorded in a retro 70s style. The song is a nod to *The Big Lebowski*, in which the same song plays—this time, by Kenny Rogers & The First Edition—during the Dude's "Gutterballs" dream sequence. The same episode also features a poignant cover of "Danny Boy," a traditional Irish folk song highlighted in *Miller's Crossing* (1990) in the scene where a group of assassins attempt to kill Leo. Interestingly, the recording that appears in *Miller's Crossing* was also commissioned especially for the film, a fact that offers yet another intriguing parallel between the music of the TV series and Coen films.

Several other episodes in season two feature covers of songs from Coen films, including Shakey Graves's cover of "O, Death" from *O Brother*, and Britt Daniel's cover of Credence Clearwater Revival's "Run Through The Jungle," which played in *The Big Lebowski*. The fact that many of these covers are recorded in a "neo" or "retro" style is in keeping with the Coens' penchant for engaging in various forms of postmodern pastiche, or what is the playful imitation of existing styles.

Critics praised the soundtrack for season two of *Fargo*. Silas House remarked that music supervisor Maggie Phillips "has done for this season of the show what T-Bone Burnett

did for the Coen brothers film ‘O Brother, Where Art Thou,’ adding nuances to scenes and characters through musical selection” (“The Sounds of ‘Fargo’”). Kayla Cobb agreed, adding that “few musical compilations designed for television are as beautiful, intricate, and inspired as the soundtrack of *Fargo*’s second season” (“Spectacular Music”) Elaborating on the remarks of both House and Cobb, Joanna Robinson observed that “there’s something much more intriguing about a T.V. show or film that dances with the source text, rather than apes it. An unfaithful adaptation can echo and resonate with the source material, while still allowing the viewers the privilege of being surprised” (“Noah Hawley”). Finally, Jay Cridlin observed that “The more you dive into *Fargo*’s musical choices, the more care you realize went into each one. Many songs are not just lyrically appropriate, but just off-kilter enough to fit any Coenesque worldview.” Cridlin concluded that the season two soundtrack represents “a painstaking and deliberate homage to the Coens” (“‘Fargo’ Season Two”). This painstaking, deliberate homage denotes nothing less than a joyful celebration of music from Coen films, which, as the TV series indicates, has reached a status that has nearly transcended the films themselves to become something that can be appreciated on its own terms. With all these songs, the point remains roughly the same: these musical nods implicitly acknowledge the immense power that music in Coen films has exerted on viewers.

The purpose of this dissertation has been to consider the role and significance of popular music in Coen brothers films. To date, their movies have been analyzed from a variety of scholarly approaches, including postmodernism, American independent film, genre theory, and cultural studies, among others. However, an extended, in-depth study of popular music in Coen films has yet to appear, making for an important gap in the scholarship that I hope this dissertation has helped to address, or at least helped to start a productive conversation about. While it is often claimed that the Coens have nothing serious to say, that their films rarely rise above a kind of playful, self-indulgent formalism, I have argued in this

dissertation that a close, systematic examination of the popular music of Coen films reveals a high degree of density and complexity of textual function and meaning. The music serves basic narrative purposes like character and setting, yet simultaneously operates on more sophisticated levels by activating intertextual networks of association. These networks of association both reinforce and complicate the socio-political-historical-cultural discourse of the Coens' films, and develop a tonal complexity that blurs the line between ironic and sincere forms of characterization. As auteurs, the Coens practice a distinct cinematic style. Unusual camera work, vivid cinematography, precise editing, ornate dialogue, elaborate mise-en-scene, complex genre play, exaggerated characters, graphic violence, black comedy—these features constitute the DNA of the Coens' authorial signature. The purpose of this dissertation has been to argue that the use of popular music should be added to this list of stylistic features, that one of the definitive qualities of what it means to say that something is “Coen-esque” is an innovative, compelling use of popular music.

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Appendix A

A Song Matrix of *The Big Lebowski*

Running Time (approximate) and Scene (according to I-Tunes version)	Song Title	Artist Info	Source Status
0:23-2:19 “Tumbling Tumbleweed” The Stranger’s voice over narration in the opening sequence. Tumbleweed rolls through the desert and through the streets of L.A.	“Tumbling Tumbleweeds”	Written by Bob Nolan. Performed by Sons of the Pioneers.	Non-Diegetic.
2:20-3:26 “Tumbling Tumbleweed” The Dude buys a carton of half and half at Ralph’s Supermarket.	“Tumbling Tumbleweeds” (muzak version)	Written by Bob Nolan. Composer and performer of this muzak version of the song is unknown.	Diegetic: supermarket stereo system.
3:27-3:46 “Tumbling Tumbleweed” The Dude returns to his condo.	“Tumbling Tumbleweeds”	Written by Bob Nolan. Performed by Sons of the Pioneers.	<p>Ambi-diegetic: the way the Dude seems to move in time to the song as he merrily wends his way back to his condo could suggest he is mentally replaying the song in his head.</p> <p>Thus, this scene blurs the line between diegetic and nondiegetic music.</p>

<p>5:37-8:36</p> <p>“Opening Credits” and “The Rug”</p> <p>Montage sequence shows various bowlers bowling.</p> <p>The Dude, Walter, and Donny discuss the theft of the rug and bowl.</p>	<p>“The Man in Me”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Bob Dylan.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>
<p>15:03-16:27</p> <p>“The Other Lebowski”</p> <p>Bunny lounges by the pool and sexually propositions the Dude while Uli is passed out in the pool.</p>	<p>“Mucha Muchacha”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Juan Garcia Esquivel.</p>	<p>Diegetic: portable stereo.</p>
<p>16:28-18:49</p> <p>“Over the Line”</p> <p>Walter brings his ex-wife’s dog to the bowling alley; Walter accuses Smokey of illegally stepping over the line and pulls a gun when Smokey disagrees.</p>	<p>“I Hate You”</p>	<p>Written by Gary Burger, Dave Day, Roger Johnston, Eddie Shaw and Larry Clark.</p> <p>Performed by The Monks.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>

<p>20:02-22:00</p> <p>“A Kidnapped Bunny”</p> <p>The Dude listens to messages on his answering machine while mixing a White Russian. The Dude’s landlord invites him to a modern dance performance and asks for the rent. The Dude does tai chi on his new rug.</p>	<p>“Her Eyes Are a Blue Million Miles”</p>	<p>Written by Don Vliet.</p> <p>Performed by Captain Beefheart.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s home stereo.</p>
<p>22:01-</p> <p>“A Kidnapped Bunny”</p> <p>The Dude is summoned to the “big” Lebowski’s home where he is informed that Bunny has been kidnapped for ransom. The Dude is hired to exchange the ransom money for Bunny.</p>	<p>“Requiem in D Minor”</p>	<p>Written by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.</p> <p>Performed by the Slovak Philharmonic Orchestra.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the “big” Lebowski’s home stereo.</p>
<p>25:01-29:28</p> <p>“Jesus”</p> <p>Jesus rolls a strike and performs a victory dance. Walter informs the Dude and Donny that Jesus is a convicted sex offender or “pederast.”</p>	<p>“Hotel California”</p>	<p>Written by Don Henley, Glenn Fry, and Don Felder.</p> <p>Performed by The Gipsy Kings.</p>	<p>Ambi-diegetic: starts as non-diegetic (soundtrack) but morphs into diegetic (bowling alley jukebox).</p>

<p>29:47-31:00</p> <p>“The Ringer”</p> <p>The Dude is confronted by Maude and her henchmen and is knocked unconscious; the Dude has a dream that features himself and Maude flying over LA at night; the Dude is awakened by the beeper given to him by Brandt.</p>	<p>“The Man in Me”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Bob Dylan.</p>	<p>Diegetic: as a dream sequence, the presumed source is the Dude’s mind.</p>
<p>31:34-32:10</p> <p>“The Ringer”</p> <p>Brandt gives the Dude a briefcase full of money, a mobile phone, and conveys instructions for exchanging the ransom money for Bunny.</p>	<p>“Gluck das mir verblieb” *from the Opera “Die tote Stadt”)</p>	<p>Written and conducted by Erich Wolfgang Korngold.</p> <p>Performed by Ilona Steingruber, Anton Dermota and the Austrian State Radio Orchestra.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the “big” Lebowski’s home stereo.</p>
<p>34:40-36:37</p> <p>“The Ringer”</p> <p>The Dude and Walter attempt to exchange the money for Bunny.</p>	<p>“Run Through The Jungle”</p>	<p>Written by John Fogerty.</p> <p>Performed by Creedence Clearwater Revival.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s car stereo.</p>

<p>37:42-41:00</p> <p>“Stolen Car”</p> <p>The Dude, Walter, and Donny go bowling and argue about the botched ransom exchange and discover that the Dude’s car has disappeared from the bowling alley parking lot.</p>	<p>“Behave Yourself”</p>	<p>Written by Booker T. Jones, Steve Cropper, Al Jackson, Jr., and Lewie Steinberg.</p> <p>Performed by Booker T. & The M.G.’s.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>
<p>42:38-44:00</p> <p>“Maude”</p> <p>The Dude formally meets Maude and discusses Bunny’s kidnapping.</p>	<p>“Walking Song”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Meredith Monk.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Maude’s home stereo.</p>
<p>48:11-49:04</p> <p>“Bunny’s Toe”</p> <p>The Dude rides back home in a limo.</p>	<p>“Standing on the Corner”</p>	<p>Written by Frank Loesser.</p> <p>Performed by Dean Martin.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the limo car stereo.</p>
<p>57:38-</p> <p>“A Visit from the Stranger”</p> <p>The Dude, Donny, and Walter discuss the Dude’s difficult situation at the bowling alley.</p>	<p>“My Mood Swings”</p>	<p>Written by Elvis Costello and Cait O’Riordan.</p> <p>Performed by Elvis Costello.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>
<p>59:31-1:01:26</p> <p>“A Visit from the Stranger”</p> <p>The Stranger visits the Dude.</p>	<p>“Tumbling Tumbleweeds”</p>	<p>Written by Bob Nolan.</p> <p>Performed by Sons of the Pioneers.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>

<p>1:01:42-1:03:44</p> <p>“The Dude’s Check-Up”</p> <p>The Dude is summoned by Maude and they discuss the kidnapping and the Dude’s planned visit to the doctor.</p>	<p>“We Venerate Thy Cross”</p>	<p>Performed by the Rustavi Choir.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Maude’s home stereo.</p>
<p>1:04:48-1:05:07</p> <p>“The Dude’s Check Up”</p> <p>The Dude gets a check-up from a doctor.</p>	<p>“My Mood Swings”</p>	<p>Written by Elvis Costello and Cait O’Riordan.</p> <p>Performed by Elvis Costello.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s Walkman.</p>
<p>1:05:14-1:07:00</p> <p>“The Dude’s Check Up”</p> <p>The Dude drives home after his check-up, loses control of his car, and crashes into a dumpster.</p>	<p>“Lookin’ Out My Back Door”</p>	<p>Written by John Fogerty.</p> <p>Performed by Creedence Clearwater Revival.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s car stereo.</p>
<p>1:07:02-1:09:05</p> <p>“A Stellar Performance”</p> <p>The Dude, Walter, and Donny attend the Dude’s landlord’s modern dance performance.</p>	<p>“Pictures at an Exhibition”</p>	<p>Written by Modest Mussorgsky.</p> <p>Performed by The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (conducted by Sir Colin Davis).</p>	<p>Diegetic: the theater stereo system.</p>

<p>1:13:26-1:14:36</p> <p>“A Stellar Performance” and “Smut Business”</p> <p>The Dude, Walter, and Donny drive home in the Dude’s smashed up car; the Dude nails a piece of wood in the floor that will help prop a chair in order to prevent anyone from barging in his front door.</p>	<p>“Oye Como Va”</p>	<p>Written by Tito Puente.</p> <p>Performed by Santana.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s car stereo; the Dude’s home stereo.</p>
<p>1:14:57-1:15:51</p> <p>“Smut Business”</p> <p>The Dude is summoned by Jackie Treehorn.</p>	<p>“Ataypura”</p>	<p>Written by Moises Vivanco.</p> <p>Performed by Yma Sumac.</p>	<p>Ambiguous: the source of the music could be located from within the world of the film (i.e. somewhere on or near the beach party) which would be in keeping with the source of most of the music in the film—but it is not clearly revealed on screen. Thus, it could be considered non-diegetic music.</p>
<p>1:15:51-1:18:29</p> <p>“Smut Business”</p> <p>The Dude converses with Jackie Treehorn and is drugged.</p>	<p>“Lujon”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Henry Mancini.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Jackie Treehorn’s home stereo.</p>

<p>1:18:32-1:20:23</p> <p>“Smut Business”</p> <p>The Dude converses with Jackie Treehorn and is drugged.</p>	<p>“Piacere Sequence”</p>	<p>Written and performed by Teo Usuelli.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Jackie Treehorn’s home stereo.</p>
<p>1:20:36-1:23:17</p> <p>“The Gutterballs”</p> <p>The Dude is drugged and experiences a hallucinatory dream.</p>	<p>“Just Dropped In (To See What Condition My Condition Was In)”</p>	<p>Written by Mickey Newbury.</p> <p>Performed by Kenny Rogers & The First Edition</p>	<p>Diegetic: no physical source of the song is directly revealed on screen, but presumably the source is the Dude’s imagination since this is a dream sequence.</p>
<p>1:26:04-1:26:47</p> <p>“Chances of Conception”</p> <p>The Dude rides home from the Malibu police station in a taxi cab.</p>	<p>“Peaceful Easy Feeling”</p>	<p>Written by Jack Tempchin.</p> <p>Performed by The Eagles.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the cab’s car stereo.</p>
<p>1:26:52-1:27:20</p> <p>“Chances of Conception”</p> <p>After the cab driver ejects the Dude from his taxi to the side of the road, Bunny flies by in a red convertible.</p>	<p>“Viva Las Vegas”</p>	<p>Written by Doc Pous and Mort Shuman.</p> <p>Performed by Richard Johnson.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Bunny’s car stereo.</p>
<p>1:28:03-1:31:54</p> <p>“Chances of Conception”</p> <p>The Dude and Maude engage in a post-coitus chat.</p>	<p>“I Got It Bad And That Ain’t Good”</p>	<p>Written by Duke Ellington and Paul Francis Webster.</p> <p>Performed by Nina Simone.</p>	<p>Diegetic: the Dude’s home stereo.</p>

<p>1:36:54-1:37:19</p> <p>“Chances of Conception”</p> <p>As the Dude and Walter arrive at the “big” Lebowski’s mansion, they discover Bunny’s red convertible crashed into a water fountain.</p>	<p>“Viva Las Vegas”</p>	<p>Written by Doc Pous and Mort Shuman.</p> <p>Performed by Richard Johnson.</p>	<p>Diegetic: Bunny’s car stereo.</p>
<p>1:49:12-1:53:48</p> <p>“Ashes to Ashes” and “End Credits”</p> <p>After scattering Donny’s ashes, the Dude and Walter go bowling.</p>	<p>“Dead Flowers”</p>	<p>Written by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards.</p> <p>Performed by Townes van Zandt.</p>	<p>Diegetic: bowling alley jukebox.</p>
<p>1:53:49-</p> <p>“End Credits”</p>	<p>“Viva Las Vegas”</p>	<p>Written by Doc Pous and Mort Shuman.</p> <p>Performed by Shawn Colvin.</p>	

Appendix B

A Song Matrix of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Running Time/Scene	Song Title	Artist Info	Source
0:58-2:23 Opening Chain-Gang Sequence	“Po’ Lazarus”	Traditional. Arranged by Alan Lomax. Performed by James Carter and the Prisoners.	Diagetic Chain-gang prisoners.
2:25-4:47 “Opening Title” The three convicts escape the chain gang.	“Big Rock Candy Mountain”	Written and performed by Harry McClintock.	Non-Diagetic
7:19-9:30 “A Blind’s Prophecy” Everett, Delmar, and Pete receive a prophecy from a blind old man pumping a flatcar.	“Hard Time Killing Floor Blues” (Instrumental Version)	Written by Skip James. Performed by Collin Linden.	Non-Diagetic
11:10-12:27 “Betrayed by a Hogwallop” Everett, Pete, Delmar, and Cousin Wash sit in the living room and listen to the radio.	“You Are My Sunshine”	Written by Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell. Performed by Alan O’Bryant.	Diagetic A living room radio.
17:02-20:15 “Redemption” Everett, Pete, and Delmar sit on a hillside around a twig-fire and roast a gopher.	“Down to the River to Pray”	Traditional. Performed by Allison Krauss.	Diagetic The worshippers.

<p>24:35-26:20</p> <p>“Crossroads Minstrel”</p> <p>The three convicts and Tommy Johnson record a song at WEZY studio.</p>	<p>“I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow”</p>	<p>Traditional. Arranged by Carter Stanley. Performed by Dan Tyminski</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Soggy Bottom Boys.</p>
<p>27:38-30:33</p> <p>“Dreams and Plans”</p> <p>Three convicts and Tommy Johnson sit around a campfire at night and discuss dreams and plans for the future after they recover the buried treasure.</p>	<p>“Hard Time Killing Floor Blues”</p>	<p>Performed by Chris Thomas King.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>Tommy Johnson</p>
<p>36:07-36:54</p> <p>Three convicts and George Nelson sit around a campfire at night.</p>	<p>“I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow” (Solo Guitar Version)</p>	<p>Performed by Normal Blake</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>Pete.</p>
<p>37:40-38:22</p> <p>“Blind Bard”</p> <p>A farmer plowing a field watches stoically as Homer Stokes campaign truck with a band playing music in the back drives past.</p>	<p>“Keep on the Sunny Side”</p>	<p>Written by A.P. Carter. Performed by The Whites.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Sunnysiders.</p>

<p>38:43-42:33</p> <p>“Wandering Homeward”</p> <p>Mr. French visiting blind DJ at WEZY to locate the Soggy Bottom Boys and plays over the montage sequence that shows the three convicts journeying through the countryside.</p>	<p>“I’ll Fly Away”</p>	<p>Written by Albert E. Brumley. Performed by The Kossoy Sisters with Erik Darling.</p>	<p>Starts as Diagetic (a record playing at the radio station and broadcasting) then shifts to non-diagetic throughout the montage.</p>
<p>42:39-45:41</p> <p>“Song of the Sirens”</p> <p>Three convicts are seduced by three women washing clothes in the river.</p>	<p>“Didn’t Leave Nobody But The Baby”</p>	<p>Arranged by Alan Lomax, Mrs. Sidney Carter, Gillian Welch and T Bone Burnett. Additional lyrics by Gillian Welch and T Bone Burnett. Performed by Emmylou Harris, Allison Krauss, and Gillian Welch.</p> <p>Perf. by Alison Krauss, Emmylou Harris, and Gillian Welch</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The sirens.</p>
<p>57:10-57:43</p> <p>“Losing Pete”</p> <p>Parchman farm inmates in a chain gang sing another work song</p>	<p>“Tom Devil”</p>	<p>Arranged by Alan Lomax. Performed by Ed Lewis And The Prisoners.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>Chain-gang prisoners.</p>
<p>57:44-58:29</p> <p>“Homecoming”</p> <p>Homer Stokes campaign rally.</p>	<p>“Keep on the Sunny Side”</p>	<p>Performed by The Whites.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Sunnysiders.</p>

<p>59:51-1:00:31</p> <p>“Homecoming”</p> <p>Everett hops off the truck and enters the Homer Stokes campaign rally.</p>	<p>“In The Highways”</p>	<p>Written by Maybelle Carter. Performed by Sarah, Hannah, and Leah Peasall.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Wharvey Gals.</p>
<p>1:00:37-1:03:39</p> <p>“Bona Fide Suitor”</p> <p>Everett discusses the situation with his daughters and goes into Woolworth’s and argues with Penny.</p>	<p>“I Am Weary (Let Me Rest)”</p>	<p>Written by Pete Roberts. Performed by The Cox Family.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Sunnysiders.</p>
<p>1:10:26-1:11:40</p> <p>“Do not Seek the Treasure”</p> <p>Pete tells Everett and Delmar that he confessed the location of the buried treasure to the Sheriff.</p>	<p>“I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow” (Solo Fiddle Version)</p>	<p>Arranged by Ed Haley. Performed by John Hartford.</p>	<p>Non-Diagetic</p>
<p>1:14:11-1:15:43</p> <p>“Defeating the Cyclops”</p> <p>The KKK members prepare to lynch Tommy Johnson.</p>	<p>“O, Death”</p>	<p>Traditional. Performed by Ralph Stanley.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The KKK Grand Wizard.</p>
<p>1:19:02-1:21:28</p> <p>“Disguised and Pardoned”</p> <p>The three convicts arrive at the Stokes campaign rally and sneak onto stage by adorning fake beards and posing as a hired band.</p>	<p>“Keep on the Sunny Side”</p>	<p>Orign?</p> <p>Perf. by The Whites</p>	<p>Diagietc</p> <p>The Sunnysiders.</p>

<p>1:19:46-1:24:20</p> <p>“Disguised and Pardoned”</p> <p>Everett tries to persuade Penny to leave Vernon and rejoin him while Pete, Delmar, and Tommy perform on stage.</p>	<p>“In The Jailhouse Now”</p>	<p>Written by Jimmie Rodgers. Performed by Tim Blake Nelson and Pat Enright.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Soggy Bottom Boys.</p>
<p>1:24:24-1:29:12</p> <p>“Disguised and Pardoned”</p> <p>Homer Stokes’s is forcibly ejected from the campaign rally for interrupting the musical performance.</p>	<p>“I Am A Man of Constant Sorrow”</p>	<p>Origin?</p> <p>Perf. by the Soggy Bottom Boys and featuring Dan Tyminski?</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The Soggy Bottom Boys.</p>
<p>1:32:28-1:33:57</p> <p>“Back on Top”</p> <p>George “Baby Face” Nelson walks in chains while being surrounded by an angry mob.</p>	<p>“Indian War Whoop”</p>	<p>Written by Hoyt Ming. Performed by John Hartford.</p>	<p>Diagetic</p> <p>The village idiots.</p>
<p>1:35:25-1:38:08</p> <p>“Eluding Fate”</p> <p>The three convicts and Tommy are about to be hanged by Sherriff Cooley but the flood arrives and saves them.</p>	<p>“Lonesome Valley”</p>	<p>Traditional. Performed by The Fairfield Four</p>	<p>Diagetic (becomes non-diagetic while the camera is underwater)</p> <p>The Gravediggers.</p>

1:40:55-1:42:40 “Adventuring Days are Over” Everett fails to recover the right ring	“Angel Band”	Arranged by Ralph Stanley. Performed by Sarah, Hannah, and Leah Peasall and Robert Hamlett,	Diagetic The Wharvey Gals and Blind Seer.
End Credits	“Angel Band”	Performed by The Stanley Brothers.	Non-Diagetic

Appendix C

A Song Matrix of *The Ladykillers*

Running Time/Scene	Song Title	Artist Info	Source
0:11-2:04 Opening Credits Mrs. Munson walks to city hall. Shots of gothic bridge statue and raven as well as the garbage scow being pulled to the trash island.	“Come, Let Us Go Back To God”	Written by Thomas Dorsey. Performed by The Soul Stirrers.	Non-Diegetic
4:43-5:24 Mrs. Munson walks back home from city hall.	“Come, Let Us Go Back To God”	Written by Thomas Dorsey. Performed by The Soul Stirrers.	Non-Diegetic

<p>13:01-14:38</p> <p>Weemack and Gawain walk through the casino.</p>	<p>“Trouble Of This World (Coming Home)”</p>	<p>Written by William Hughes, Melvin Adams, Kenneth Anthony, Brian Scott, Ernest Franklin, Henry Burnett. Performed by Nappy Roots. Chorus performed by Rose Stone, Freddie Stone, Lisa Stone. Contains a sample of “Trouble Of This World”—Traditional. Arranged by Henry Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Performed by Rose Stone with The Venice Four and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir.</p> <p>Samples “Trouble of This World.” Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford And The Landfordaires.</p>	<p>Diegetic</p> <p>Playing from a portable stereo on top of Gawain’s the cleaning cart.</p> <p>A lemotiv for Gawain.</p>
<p>18:02-19:19</p> <p>Attempted robbery of the General’s donut shop.</p>	<p>“Another Day, Another Dollar”</p>	<p>Written by Brian Scott, Vito Tisdale, William Hughes, Taylor Massey, Freddie Macintosh, Henry Burnett. Performed by Nappy Roots. Beat contains a sample from “A Christian’s Plea,” originally recorded by Claude Jeter And The Swan Silvertones.</p>	<p>Diegetic</p> <p>Playing from the robbers’ car parked outside the donut shop.</p>

19:20-20:55 Mrs. Munson attends a church service.	“Let Your Light Shine On Me”	Traditional. Arranged by Blind Willie Johnson. Produced by T Bone Burnett and Bill Maxwell. Performed by The Venice Four with Rose Stone and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir	Diegetic The church choir.
24:08-28:24 G.H. goes over the plan with his gang.	“Minuet, Opus 13. No. 5”	Composed by Luigi Boccherini. Performed by Orchestra di Camera di Roma. Conducted by Flageilo.	Diegetic A portable stereo.
28:25-30:39 Accompanies the montage sequence that shows the gang tunneling. 1.) Plays while the gang tunnels. 2.) Plays as they carry out the dirt out of the house and into the car. 3.) Plays while the gang drives on the bridge and throws the dirt off the bridge onto the trash scow. 2.) Returns to the tunneling. 1 and 2—play together as Mrs. Munson knocks on the door and Lump rushes out of the tunnel.	1.) “Baroque Troubles” 2.) “Trouble of This World” 3.) “Trouble In, Trouble Out”	1.) Written by Carter Burwell (faux-baroque style score piece) 2.) Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford & The Landordaires. 3.) Written by William Hughes, Brian Scot, Melvin Adams, Ronald Wilson, Keefus Cancia, Henry Burnett. Produced by T Bone Burnett and Keefus Cancia. Performed by Nappy Roots. Samples “Trouble Of This World.” Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford And The Landfordaires.	Diegetic 1.) portable stereo in the basement. 2.) Playing from Mrs. Munson’s record player upstairs. 3.) Plays in the hearse as they drive to the bridge and dump the dirt.

34:05-34:27 Gawain makes rude sexual remarks about the girl's butt while walking through the casino.	"Sinners"	Written by P. Coleman, T.Jones, P. Douthit, Henry Burnett. Produced by 9 th Wonder for the Planet, Inc. and T-Bone Burnett. Performed by Little Brother. Contains a sample of "A Christian's Plea." Traditional. Performed by Claude Jeter and The Swan Silvertones.	Diegetic Gawain's boombox on the cleaning cart.
39:13-41:09 G.H. and Mrs. Munson discuss poetry and the bible.	"Any Day Now"	Written by Faidest Wagoner and Jean Butler. Performed by The Soul Stirrers.	Diegetic Source: Mrs. Munson's record player.
41:09-42:47 G.H. recites Poe poem to Mrs. Munson.	"Helen, Thy Beauty is To Me"	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic
42:48-45:00	"Jesus, I'll Never Forget"	Written by Roy Crain. Performed by The Soul Stirrers.	Diegetic Mrs. Munson's record player.
46:02-47:41 The gang continues their work on the tunnel. Gawain and Garth get into an argument.	"Concerto Grosso in D Major, Op. 6, No. 4"	Composed by Arcangelo Corelli. Performed by Capella Istropolitana; conducted by Jaroslav Krcek.	Diegetic Gawain's boombox.

<p>52:37-53:40</p> <p>After Garth accidentally ignites the dynamite and blows off his finger, the General chases Pickles; shot of gothic statue; gang goes over robbery plan.</p>	<p>“Heist Interrupted”</p> <p>Fau-baroque; same melody as “Trouble of This World”</p>	<p>Carter Burwell</p>	<p>Non-Diegetic</p>
<p>56:01-58:03</p> <p>Montage that crosscuts between Mrs. Munson in church and the gang executing their plan to rob the riverboat casino.</p>	<p>“Trouble Of This World”</p>	<p>Traditional. Arranged by Henry Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Clancia. Live Performance by Rose Stone with The Venice Four and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir.</p>	<p>Diegetic</p> <p>Source: church choir.</p>

58:05-58:45 Gang robs vault; Garth has an IBS episode.	“Trouble Of This World (Coming Home)”	Written by William Hughes, Melvin Adams, Kenneth Anthony, Brian Scott, Ernest Franklin, Henry Burnett. Performed by Nappy Roots. Chorus performed by Rose Stone, Freddie Stone, Lisa Stone. Contains a sample of “Trouble Of This World”— Traditional. Arranged by Henry Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Produced by T- Bone Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Performed by Rose Stone with The Venice Four and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir. Samples “Trouble of This World.” Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford And The Landfordaires.	Diegetic Source: Gawain’s boombox.
58:52-59:45 Garth exits bathroom	“Heist Interrupted” Fau-baroque; same melody as “Trouble of This World”	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic

59:46- 1:00:03	“Trouble of This World (Coming Home)”	Written by William Hughes, Melvin Adams, Kenneth Anthony, Brian Scott, Ernest Franklin, Henry Burnett. Performed by Nappy Roots. Chorus performed by Rose Stone, Freddie Stone, Lisa Stone. Contains a sample of “Trouble Of This World”—Traditional. Arranged by Henry Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Produced by T-Bone Burnett, Bill Maxwell, and Keefus Ciancia. Performed by Rose Stone with The Venice Four and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir. Samples “Trouble of This World.” Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford And The Landfordaires.	Diegetic Source: Gawain’s boombox.
1:00:29-1:01:47 G.H. gives a speech.	“We Few”	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic
1:01:52-1:02:46 Garth realizes that the explosive charge has failed to engage.	“It Should Have Gone Off”	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic

1:07:41-1:08:32 H.G. recites a poem.	“Helen, Thy Beauty Is”	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic
1:19:24-1:19:59 Gawain attempts to shoot Mrs. Munson.	“Troubled, Lord I’m Troubled”	Traditional. Performed by Bill Landford And The Landfordaires	Diegetic Mrs. Munson’s record player.
1:23:38-1:24:52 Mrs. Munson washes dishes while G.H. explains their decision to return the loot and attend church.	“Come, Let Us Go Back to God”	Written by Thomas Dorsey. Produced by T-Bone Burnett and Bill Maxwell. Performed by Donnie McClurkin. (with Burnett on guitar).	Diegetic Mrs. Munson’s record player.
1:24:53-1:25:27 The gang gets rid of Gawain’s corpse by throwing it over the bridge and into the trash barge as it passes underneath.	“Come, Let Us Go Back to God” Score version—continued from the previous scene.	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic
1:26:05-1:26:46	“The Death of Pancake” (based on “Troubles of This World” but in a faux-baroque style.	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic
1:26:47-1:27:27 The General and Lump dispose of Pancake’s corpse.	“Come, Let Us Go Back to God”	Written by Thomas Dorsey. Performed by The Soul Stirrers.	Non-Diegetic
1:27:45-1:29:48 The General attempts to kill Mrs. Munson but ends up getting killed by accident.	“Weeping Mary”	Traditional. Performed by Rosewell Sacred Harp Quartet.	Non-Diegetic
1:32:32-1:34:07 The death of G.H.—recites another poem (?) before the raven tips the statue head.	“To His Own Native Shore”	Carter Burwell	Non-Diegetic

1:37:00-1:38:11 Mrs. Munson walks home from city hall.	“Let Your Light Shine On Me.”	Traditional. Arranged and performed by Blind Willie Johnson.	Non-Diegetic
1:38:11- End credits.	“Let The Light From The Lighthouse Shine on Me”	Traditional. Arranged by Bill Maxwell and Henry Burnett. Produced by T- Bone Burnett and Bill Maxwell. Performed by The Venice Four with Rose Stone and The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir.	Diegetic Church choir.
End credits	“Yes”	Traditional. Arranged by Jerry Peters, Bill Maxwell, Henry Burnett. Produced by T-Bone Burnett and Bill Maxwell. Performed by The Abbot Kinney Lighthouse Choir featuring Kristie Murden.	Diegetic Church choir.

Appendix D

A Song Matrix of *Inside Llewyn Davis*

Running Time And Scene (I-Tunes)	Song Title	Artist	Source
0:34-3:37 Scene #1 Llewyn performs at the Gaslight café.	“Hang Me, Oh Hang Me”	Traditional. Arranged by Oscar Isaac and T-Bone Burnett. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn on stage.
6:57-10:39 Scene #2 Ulysses the cat escapes from the Gorfein’s apartment.	“Fare Thee Well (Dink’s Song)”	Traditional. Arranged and performed by Marcus Mumford, Oscar Isaac, and T-Bone Burnett.	Diegetic. The Gorfein’s record player.
14:26-16:14 Scene #3 At the Gaslight café, Llewyn asks Jim to loan him money to pay for an abortion while Troy performs on stage.	“The Last Thing On My Mind”	Written by Tom Paxton. Performed by Stark Stands.	Diegetic Performed by Troy Nelson on stage.
16:42-19:16 Scene #3 Jim, Jean, and Troy perform on stage at the Gaslight cafe.	“Five Hundred Miles”	Written by Hedy West. Performed by Justin Timberlake, Carry Mulligan, and Stark Sands.	Diegetic. Performed by Jim, Jean, and Troy on stage.
30:53-32:44 Scene #5 Llewyn, Jim, and Al Cody record a novelty song for Columbia.	“Please Mr. Kennedy”	Written by Ed Rush, George Cromarty, T-Bone Burnett, Justin Timberlake, Joel Coen and Ethan Coen. Performed by Justin Timberlake, Oscar Isaac, and Adam Driver.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn, Jim, and Al Cody in the recording studio.

45:30-46:56 Scene #7 Llewyn crashes a dinner party at the Gorfein's.	"Fare Thee Well (Dink's Song)"	Traditional. Arranged by Oscar Isaac and T-Bone Burnett. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn at the dinner table.
52:18-53:17 Scene #8 Llewyn hitches a ride to the Gate of Horn in Chicago with Johnny Five and Roland Turner in order to audition for Bud Grossman.	"Green, Green Rocky Road"	Written by Len Chandler and Robert Kaufman. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn in the car.
1:06:33-1:06:53 Scene #11	"Cocaine Blues"	Written by Gary Davis. Arranged by Dave Van Ronk. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Perfomed by Llewyn in the Gate of Horn as he warms up for his audition with Bud Grossman.
1:09:26-1:11:51 Scene #11 Llewyn auditions for Bud Grossman at the Gate of Horn in Chicago.	"The Death of Queen Jane"	Traditional. Arranged by T-Bone Burnett and Oscar Issac. Performed by Oscar Issac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn at the Gate of Horn.
1:13:40- Scene #12 Llewyn hitches a ride back to New York.	"Old MacDonald"	Arragned by Jesse Belvin. Performed by Nolan Strong and The Diablos	Diegetic. Car stereo.
1:14:56-1:16:50 Scene #12 Llewyn runs over a cat.	Symphony No. 4	Composed by Gustav Mahler. Performed by Daniel Harding, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, and Dorothea Roschmann.	Diegetic Car stereo.

1:19:56-1:22:29 Scene #13 Llewyn visits his father in a seaside retirement hospital.	“The Shoals of Herring”	Written by Ewan MacColl. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn.
1:27:17-1:29:37 Scene #15 Llewyn and Pappi converse at the Gaslight.	“The Auld Triangle”	Written by Brendan Behan. Performed by Chris Thile, Chris Eldridge, Gabe Witcher, Marcus Mumford, and Justin Timberlake.	Diegetic. Performed on the stage of the Gaslight.
1:30:11-1:30:52 Scene #15 Llewyn and Pappi converse at the Gaslight.	“Storms Are on the Ocean.”	Written by A.P. Carter. Performed by Nancy Blake.	Diegetic. Performed on the stage of the Gaslight.
1:33:13-1:34:27 Scene #16 Llewyn performs at the Gaslight café.	“Hang Me, Oh Hang Me”	Traditional. Arranged by Oscar Isaac and T-Bone Burnett. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn on stage.
1:34:51-1:37:03 Scene #16 Llewyn performs at the Gaslight café.	“Fare Thee Well (Dink’s Song)”	Traditional. Arranged by Oscar Isaac and T-Bone Burnett. Performed by Oscar Isaac.	Diegetic. Performed by Llewyn on stage.
1:37:29-1:40:37 Scene #16 Llewyn gets beat up in the alley behind the Gaslight café.	“Farewell”	Written and performed by Bob Dylan.	Diegetic. Performed on the stage of the Gaslight.