COUNTERING CULTURAL STRIP-MINING IN EASTERN KENTUCKY: Music Making as Cultural Reconstruction

This paper is based on fieldwork and research. I am vastly indebted to banjo player and historian George Gibson who allowed me to interview him at length, welcomed me as a guest on his farm, showed me around the area where he is from, shared with me many insights into matters concerning Knott County history and culture, as well as his research regarding banjo history in the Upland South. As part of this, he alerted me to, and in a number of cases sent me copies of, many of the sources cited in this paper. The research for this project was funded by a grant from Western Kentucky University.

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the role of the individual in sustainability initiatives by charting the activities of George Gibson - a banjo player and historian from east Kentucky - as a form of cultural reconstruction. Gibson feels that his native region has been "culturally strip-mined" by revivalists and scholars, and that corporate management of natural resources has exploited local people. Using existing cultural forms, Gibson constructs a counter-narrative to these myriad outside forces.

INTRODUCTION

I first heard about George Gibson, a banjo player from Knott County, Kentucky, during a 'phone conversation with his fellow Kentucky musician, fiddler John Harrod in the autumn of 2011. Harrod mentioned to me that in his opinion Gibson had influenced a number of talented younger players in a way that was having a tangible effect on the old-time music scene in the eastern part of the state. Gibson's influence could be detected, he felt, in terms of repertoire, in the range of tunings used, as well as in the execution of particular playing techniques that were being picked up by younger players.

Intrigued, I carried out a little preliminary research, getting in touch with Gibson as well as a number of musicians whom he had had some contact. Gibson himself seemed bemused at the suggestion that he might have had any such influence but the other musicians with whom I corresponded confirmed Harrod's impression. Brett Ratliff, for example, named his 2008 CD *Cold Icy Mountain* after a song Gibson taught him and cited Gibson as having had a major impact on him. Florida native and North Carolina resident Clifton Hicks said he had come across a recording of Gibson's playing while he was a schoolboy and wanted to emulate the sound but "couldn't figure out what he was doing"[1]. As a result, Hick's mother drove him to lessons at the older man's condominium in St Cloud so her son could

[1] Telephone conversation with author, October 2011.

study directly with the master. That was nearly fifteen years ago but Hicks continues to play songs he learned from Gibson. John Haywood, who lives with his family in a house on Gibson's Kentucky property, told me he and Gibson had worked together extensively informally, as well as formally thanks to a Kentucky Folklife Program's apprenticeship grant.

On the basis of those preliminary enquiries, I decided to explore further Gibson's influence on younger old-time players. However, as often is the way of such research, this paper is not the one I set out to write. In the course of my fieldwork with Gibson, I became interested in other - though related – matters, including his views about the "strip-mining" of the area that he is from.

When I use the term "strip-mining" within this paper, I use it literally to refer to the method of mining that involves removing surface material - such as mountaintops - in order gain easy access to mineral seams. The physical results of strip-mining have notably marked the landscape of southeast Kentucky. I also use the term more generally to allude to other forms of mineral extraction taking place within that region. Finally, I use it within the phrase "cultural strip-mining" which is one that Gibson uses in order to describe instances of the appropriation or misrepresentation of the traditions and people of eastern Kentucky.

In this paper, I will read many of Gibson's pursuits – including his music-making which is strongly focused on material and styles that he has found in and around Knott County; his research into the history of the banjo in the Upland South; and his legal wrangles with a gas company operating in the region – as the efforts of one man to stem these various forms of strip-mining. As a result, while this paper does explore Gibson's musical influence, that influence is set within a broader context: one within which I interpret Gibson's activities as cultural conservation-cum-reconstruction efforts.

ABOUT KNOTT COUNTY AND ITS MUSIC

> I believe that continuing to play banjo was my way of holding on to a past that I glimpsed only briefly. That past is part of a world and time in Knott County that has vanished forever – George Gibson (Gibson 2000a:9).

Knott County lies in the mountains of southeast Kentucky not far from the border with Virginia. The county formed in 1884, and its seat is Hindman (where the first rural settlement school in the Appalachian Mountains was established). Documentation dating from the early 20th century suggests it was an area of some significant musical activity. The English folk song collector Cecil Sharp gathered material in the county, as did Josiah Combs (Combs 1967, Whisnant 1983) and in fact almost 150 songs contained in Combs' *Folk-Songs of the Southern United States* were collected in Knott County[2]. As was the tendency among "song-catchers" of that era, the music recorded by both Combs and Sharp was strongly influenced by their interest in British-rooted music and their resulting collections helped to propagate the notion of the mountains as an isolated region largely unsullied by, albeit at risk from, outside influences. (This notion that has since been contested, not least by George Gibson himself).

Gibson's birthplace was Little Carr Creek which is locally known as Burgey's Creek. Evidence indicates that Burgey's Creek did not let the Knott County side down when it came to the richness of its music-making, so much so that one visitor was moved to write a poem celebrating the fact. The poet in question was the literary agent called William Aspenwall Bradley who visited the Hindman Settlement School during the nineteen-teens and from there made the inspirational excursion to Burgey's Creek (Bradley, 1918). His poem begins:

> Now glory to the Lord o'Hosts, from Whom all glories are,
>
> An' glory to His tuneful saints, that live on Singing Carr,

[2] A number of these were contributed by Dan Gibson - George Gibson's grandfather's first cousin - including a version of *Ellen Smith* (Combs 1967: 188-189).

> Where people say no sinful songs, nor ballets new an' fine,
>
> But spread the Gospel far an' nigh, by singing on the line. (Bradley 1918: 23)

That last line alludes to the fact that in the early twentieth century, a local telephone system along Burgey's Creek served as a means to disseminate music and as such was a "singular substitute for the phonograph" according to Bradley (Bradley 1918: vi). George Gibson's own father would walk a mile or so to the head of Little Doubles Creek in order to play banjo over this system for the entertainment of others in the vicinity (Gibson 2000a: 7)[3].

Away from the telephone, music infiltrated many aspects of local life in Burgey's Creek. The fiddle and the banjo were the primary instruments but the banjo was the more common and was often played as a solo instrument to accompany songs, square dances and domestic "frolics" that were a feature of the region during early part of the 20th century (Gibson 2000a: 7). However, by the time George Gibson was born, much of this traditional music making was fading from the scene.

GEORGE GIBSON: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

> I've had a chequered past – George Gibson[4].

George Gibson was born on 14th May in 1938 in Burgey's Creek which is close to State Highway 1410. The house in which he was born was a log cabin built by the dulcimer player, James Edward Thomas. Gibson's parents owned a general store and a mill. Among the Gibson Family's friends was the author James Still who lived for much of his life in a log cabin close to Burgey's Creek. According to George Gibson, Still suffered from writer's block on his return from fighting in the Second World War and began to spend time at the Gibson store - which was a local gathering place - after a Lexington doctor advised him he should socialise. Still's best known novel is *River of Earth*. Published in 1940, it

[3] This early telephone exchange ceased to function by the late 1920s and several decades passed before a more modern system was installed (Gibson 2000a: 7).
[4] Interview with author 1/27/12.

is tells of the travails of a family in Little Carr Creek who are torn between subsisting off the land and the lure of the coalmines[5].

George Gibson spent his early life in Knott County, going to school there and sometimes helping his parents out in the store. He became interested in old-time banjo music during his early adolescence and learned from such local musicians as he could find. Even so, he found his native environment at that time to be "a dark and dreary place"[6] and once he was old enough, he moved away joining the outflow of people mentioned above. His first port of call was Lexington where he enrolled at the University of Kentucky and majored in math and education. On completion, he returned to the mountains for a couple of years in order teach at a school in Whitesburg, Kentucky but left again to take up another teaching position in Indiana before moving on to Ohio. In the late 60s, he returned briefly to Knott County where he entered into coal-mining partnership with his brother for a year or so, but then he moved away again to take up a management job with an insurance company based in Philadelphia where he lived for thirteen years. There, thanks to a meeting with the instrument dealer Fred Oster[7] who owned a small shop, Gibson became involved in collecting and trading in stringed instruments (he now owns several hundred banjos and guitars). In 1984, he resigned from the insurance company and moved to Florida where he continues to spend much of his time. However, he stays for several months each year at Burgey's Creek where he owns property that includes the house in which he was born.

GROWING UP AMID A CULTURE CRASH

> My friends and I grew up in a culture that was broken. The best of the old world was lost and we inherited the worst of the new – George Gibson[8].

[5] Still's story *The Run for the Elbertas* was inspired by a trip that he and Mal Gibson made together to buy peaches in South Carolina.
[6] Email to author 2/19/12.
[7] Oster continues to work as a dealer and is now also an appraiser on *The Antiques Roadshow* (see http://www.fredoster.com/ and http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/appraisers/oster_frederick.html, both accessed 3/10/12)
[8] Email to author 2/7/12

George Gibson's grandfather (also called George) and father (Mal) both played banjo; Gibson has the vaguest memory of being a very young child and hearing his father play. However by the time Gibson himself was old enough to take an interest in the instrument, Mal Gibson had stopped playing, and he was not alone in setting the banjo aside. In fact, by 1950 which was around the time that George Gibson began to pay attention to the banjo, the cultural scene in Knott County had changed so radically from what it had a been a few decades earlier that the young Gibson could find only a handful of local musicians who continued to perform traditional old-time music and those that did so tended to play only sporadically, in private, and at Gibson's specific request. Thus, whilst the banjo had traditionally served as a means by which to accompany dances, by the time Gibson was learning to play, that function "had pretty much disappeared so what was left was the banjo for song and that was disappearing."[9]

The reasons for the drop off in the performance of local traditional music are probably various, however Gibson himself attributes the decline chiefly to the high rate at which people were leaving east Kentucky in order to explore opportunities and build lives elsewhere. As he told me "there was a flood of people leaving eastern Kentucky. You know, a lot of soldiers went in the army. A lot of people moved north to find jobs, so the culture crashed"[10,11]. The result, for Gibson, was deprivation: "a deprivation of role models, a deprivation of musicians"[12].

The greatest threat to intangible cultural heritage is lack of use (Hufford, 1986) and if a body of music and a manner of playing are not practised, the collective memory that sustains them will whither. Whatever the reasons behind the move away from playing local traditional music, the imminent passing

[9] Interview with author, 1/27/12
[10] Interview with author, 1/27/12
[11] Census figures for the local area bear witness to an outflow of people. In 1920 the population of Knott County stood at 11,655; by 1940 it had almost doubled to 20,007. However, between 1940 and 1950, the growth stagnated and by 1960, the county had seen a 14.6% drop to 17,362 and that decline was more or less matched in the decade leading up to 1970 when a population of 14,698 was recorded. Source: ukcc.uky.edu/census/21119.txt accessed 3/20/12.

[12] Interview with author 2/17/12

of this aural legacy impressed itself on the teenage Gibson with such force that the emotions engendered by the situation remain keenly felt to this day. In a recent email, he wrote that:

> The earlier folk life of the area (…) had disappeared near the time I began playing banjo. I did not play at square dances, for they were gone; I did not play at functions such as bean stringings, corn shucking, molasses making, etc., for they were also gone. My audience was mostly friends near my age. We would drive up a remote hollow with beer or moonshine (or both) and I would play and sing. We grew up in a time when the culture was broken.[13]

In the face of this decline, the young Gibson took active steps to build his own knowledge with such material as he could find and aimed specifically to learn the old songs before they vanished:

> That was more important to me than fancy playing or learning different styles of playing. Those just arose as a matter of course. But my objective was to learn the verses to songs, because for the most part, if an old timer stopped by the country grocery store and knew I had a banjo and played a tune or two, they could sing a verse or two but they didn't remember all the verses, because generally they hadn't played in quite a few years. So I was tracking down verses to these songs early on.[14]

GIBSON'S REFLECTIONS ON THE LEARNING PROCESS

> Learning by emulation was probably prevalent at one time throughout the mountains. It stemmed from a strong cultural bias that prevented young mountaineers from questioning their elders closely about a task or skill – George Gibson (Gibson 2002a).

Gibson told me he has learnt only one song from the radio and one from a recording; everything else he plays is the result of from direct contact with other musicians. He holds strong views about how the way in which one learns to play music affects the manner in which a tradition is maintained which he has elucidated in an article entitled *Learning To Play Banjo: Emulation vs. Imitation* (Gibson 2002a).

[13] Email to author 2/5/12
[14] Interview with author, 1/27/12

According to the article, learning by imitation occurs when a budding musician sits down with a teacher and aims as best s/he can to imitate precisely what the teacher is demonstrating, right down to using the same finger technique. In Gibson's view, learning by imitation can result in a standardization of playing styles**.** Meanwhile Gibson himself learned by *emulation*, meaning that he would listen to such local musicians as he could find and then practise alone and would by a process of trial and error attempt to replicate as best he could the sounds he had heard. Whilst he would, from time to time, ask about tunings or particular licks, on the whole he had to rely on his aural memory. Learning in this way was, as he sees it, part of the culture: "you learned things on your own. You didn't ask people to teach you (...). For example, I was ploughing a team of mules or horses by the time I was 11 or 12 years old, and no one told me how to do that, I was expected to learn by observation"[15].

Gibson's playing style therefore developed not from trying to reproduce a particular finger or hand movement he had witnessed but from trying to recreate the sounds made by his Knott County elders, whom he believes to have learned in a similar manner. Learning by emulation, according to Gibson, leads to a diversity of playing styles. He reflected on this in correspondence with me:

> Every creek and hollow in east Kentucky had banjo songsters at one time (...). The versions of songs could differ substantially from one locality to another. Many different banjo playing styles were used, some very eccentric; however, most shared some similarities. Burgey's Creek had its share of songs that are unique and had people playing banjo in very different styles (…). The style I play is similar to what some other people played in east Kentucky, but it is my own, and probably owes much to my father, for my style is somewhat similar to his. This style emphasizes techniques and tunings that complement singing with the banjo.[16]

GIBSON'S TEACHERS

Gibson's actual introduction to playing the banjo came about thanks largely to the inspiration provided by a talented neighbour of his, James Slone. Slone was six or seven years older than Gibson

[15] Interview with author, 1/27/12
[16] Email to author, 2/5/12

and played in what Gibson describes as an "overhand" style (which is often referred to elsewhere as "clawhammer"). The first song Gibson picked up from him was *Morphine*[17], the lyrics to which begin:

> I took morphine last Saturday night
>
> Lord, I took it in that morphine way.
>
> If the doctor hadn't come, just as he did
>
> Lord I'd be in my grave today. (Gibson 2000a)

Gibson believes the song came to Knott County around the time that railroad was being built in the surrounding counties. Gibson has never found copies of the song in print or heard it performed outside of Knott County except when he – or those he has taught – plays it (Gibson 2000a: 11).

Morphine was the first of a number of songs that Gibson picked up from Slone and he also began to seek out other local people to play for him. A man called Mel Amburgey passed on to Gibson several tunes as well as the following advice: "There's more music in the bottom string of the banjo than any other"[18]. Wiley Amburgey, whom Gibson described as a local moonshiner, was another source[19]. He explained to me the manner in which he would persuade Wiley to share songs:

> He sold a half pint [of moonshine] for a dollar. So a couple of times, when I was able to accumulate a dollar, I'd go in and buy a half pint but I wouldn't leave. I'd take a little sip and I'd hand it to Wiley and I'd say "now, Wiley, you want a taste?" And after a taste or two, Wiley would get his banjo out. And at least once or twice when that half pint vanished, Wiley talked real fast. He'd say "huh, huh. Might as well get some liquor" and he'd get a quart out. Now, one tune I definitely learned from him was he played Wildwood Flower on the banjo. That was very popular. That came from the Carter Family originally.[20]

Another source was the local politician William Cornett. Cornett, who went by the nickname Banjo Bill, was from Hindman and served as a member of the Kentucky State Legislature. His banjo playing was a feature of his political campaigning and in fact, on the day that Gibson met him, Cornett

[17] Many soldiers became addicted to morphine which was easily available during the Civil War and references to the opiate are not uncommon within old-time and blues songs.
[18] Interview with author, 2/17/12
[19] As far as Gibson knows Mel and Wiley Amburgey were not closely related but probably shared some ancestors. Amburgey is a common name in Knott County. The name of Burgey's Creek is derived from Amburgey.
[20] Interview with author, 2/9/12

had stopped by the family store whilst on the campaign trail. Gibson asked Cornett to play a song on the basis that if he did so, he would get Gibson's vote. Cornett obliged by giving a rendition of *John Henry*[21].

Gibson also picked up some songs *without* hearing them played on the banjo, courtesy of two neighbours - John Hall and his father Carl. Carl Hall had been a banjo and harmonica player but had ceased to perform by the time Gibson knew him. However, John Hall sang some of the tunes his father had once played so Gibson would learn the lyrics and the melody from him, then try to recreate a banjo accompaniment.

If someone only knew a part of a song, Gibson would try to track down other verses and reconstruct the whole from its fragments. Such was the case with the version of *Old Smoky* that he plays. His mother recited several verses to him and John Hall sang several more. Gibson then arranged the verses in what he deemed to be the proper order and tried it out on his mother. Based on her reaction to his reconstruction, he believes it must have been "very close to the way it was originally played and sung on Burgey's Creek"[22].

Those early efforts to retain the local music can be seen as a cultural conservation initiative, and Gibson's quest to find Knott County music has not wavered with the passing years. In the mid nineteen nineties, a chance meeting through a mutual friend led Gibson to a new source of material in the form of a banjo player named Gran Hudson who was born in 1911. Gibson was on the porch of the friend's cabin strumming on a banjo. Hudson approached him and said "If you can't sing it, don't pick it" for, as Gibson learned, Hudson sang with all the songs he played and never played a dance tune largely because his mother, also a banjo player, liked to play for square dances[23].

[21] Interview with author 2/9/12
[22] Email to author, 2/5/12
[23] Interview with author, 2/17/12

When I asked Gibson if he still learns songs new to him today, he told me that he does not generally learn from new sources. However, his cultural reconstruction of the body of music continues in a singular manner - he draws on his memory to recall fragments of songs he heard as a young man and tries to rebuild them from the excerpts in his head.

BURGEY'S CREEK MUSIC

> When I speak of Burgey's Creek music generally I am usually thinking of that music in the context of the earlier folk life of the area, which had disappeared near the time I began playing banjo – George Gibson[24]

Gibson plays a wide repertoire of old-time tunes and doesn't know exactly how many he knows. However, it is the small body of songs that he labels "Burgey's Creek Music" which most interest him. Burgey's Creek Music consists of material – either songs or oikotypes – that, according to Gibson's research, seems to have been known and played only in Knott County and possibly in a small portion of neighbouring Letcher County. Burgey's Creek music includes *Morphine*, the very first song Gibson learned, as well as the following songs: *The Old German War*, *Southern Texas*, *Bell Coney*, *Cullie*, *Morgan's March*, *Big Jug of Liquor*, and *John Banks and Chigger Bill* as well as variants of *Mule to Ride* and *Cold Icy Mountain*. For Gibson, these songs are important because they "tell something of the history of the area"[25] and what he knows of the context in which they were made, played and passed on to him contributes to their affective import. As with objects, songs can offer a strong link to the past through their association with a particular person or memory.

The Old German War was a song that Gibson heard played by both James Slone and Mel Amburgey and he believes the latter, a veteran of the First World War, may have written it. Gibson

[24] Email to author, 2/5/12
[25] Email to author, 2/5/12

recalls that when he first heard Mel perform it, the older man had tears in his eyes (Gibson 2000a:13). Here is an excerpt from the song's lyrics:

> I saw them Germans coming, Lord I heard them give their yell
> My feelings at that moment, no human tongue can tell.
> Now all my strength it left me, and all my courage too.
>
> Now all of us was wounded, our noble captain slain.
> The sun it was a setting all across that bloody plain.
> And then I thought of mother who asked me for to stay
> And not to go with strangers and sail so far away.
>
> I've been in the midst of battle. I know its harshness well.
> I've been across that great ocean and rode down streets of hell.
> I've lived a life of misery and been where death it roams,
> I'll tell you from experience, boys, you'd better stay at home.
> (Gibson 2000a)

The song is meaningful to Gibson because it connects him to Mel Amburgey and to other veterans of the First World War whom he knew including a friend of his father's called Jonah Moore because of an encounter Gibson had with him. Gibson had been working in the family store when a customer by the name of Sid Bentley stopped by on his way to visit with Moore. Bentley invited the young man to join them and after closing up the store, Gibson dis so. He sat listening to the two men talk. They were drinking heavily. As the evening progressed, Moore:

> Got very agitated and he told me something about, he told me one thing that had happened to him in World War I and I could see that that incident had probably tormented him all his life. During the end of the war, the Germans had thrown children, basically, on the front line – fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old. And this German had thrown up his hands and said 'Comrade. Comrade.' And Jonah shot him[26].

[26] Interview with author 2/9/12

Mel Amburgey was also the source for the two verses of *Cold Icy Mountain* that appear to be unique to Knott County[27]. Gibson told me that Leonard Roberts documented a version of the song which he collected from the Couch Family in Harlan County and Letcher County. However the version Gibson heard Amburgey perform appears to be an oikotype which includes two verses that he has not found elsewhere despite extensive research. The lyrics of those two verses are:

> All I drink is the tears I shed
>
> All I drink is the tears I shed
>
> For I never expect to see you any more.
>
> All I eat is green willow shoots
>
> All I eat is green willow shoots
>
> And I never expect to see you any more.

A man called Horace Dixon was the source for *Morgan's March*, named for General John Hunt Morgan whose Civil War raids are the subject of much folklore in Kentucky and in a manner similar to *The Old German War*, the song's meaning comes from not only the music itself, but also from the conduit the song provides to the memories associated with it. Dixon was a Knott County trader and a two-finger banjo player who used steel picks, and he learned *Morgan's March* from his grandfather, Samp Combs. The story, as related by Dixon, was that during the Civil War, as Morgan[28] approached with his men, Combs hid his horses from the troops. However, he forgot to hide fiddle and it was stolen. According to Gibson, Dixon went on "My grandpap went down to the campfire that night to steal that fiddle back, and he said he couldn't because General John Hunt Morgan, said he was standing out by the

[27] http://www.thebanjoproject.org/resources.html. Accessed

campfire fiddling that tune [i.e *Morgan's March*]. That's all my grandpap ever got out of that fiddle"[29]. Gibson has not been able to ascertain if General Morgan were indeed a fiddler but the story has stuck to the song regardless.

Gran Hudson was the source for *Southern Texas, John Banks and Chigger Bill* and the variant of *Mule to Ride*[30]While Gibson assumes the origins of *Southern Texas* lie in the eponymous state, he thinks "it was probably picked up there and brought back by one of the Kentuckians who moved west during a depression that affected the mountain people just after 1900"[31]. Gibson says his own version of *Southern Texas* "is in the same tuning that Gran Hudson used, but it is definitely not exactly as he played it. It's as I play it, but I got the essence of the song"[32] thus indicating that he continues to learn by emulation rather than imitation.

John Banks and Chigger Bill was a song that Hudson himself created based on two real life Knott County characters, both of whom were known to Gibson. The song describes an incident when John Banks' arrived home to find his wife hosting a party that was in full flow. Banks expressed his displeasure by shooting one of the guests - Chigger Bill – with his .45[33].

Another real life local character inspired the song *Cullie* which Gibson believes he learned from the singing of Carl Hall. Cullie Williams was an African American man who lived on Breeding's Creek, not far from Burgey's Creek[34]. *Cullie* tells of how Williams killed his wife and was taken to prison without bail. The song must have been composed shortly after the event as although Williams, waived trial and accepted life imprisonment, he was pardoned on good behaviour only a few years later.

[29] Interview with author, 2/9/12
[30] The Burgey's Creek version of *Mule to Ride* is a variant of a song which is more commonly associated with Virginia and which has been recorded by Ralph Stanley. The version Gibson plays contains many different verses.
[31] Interview with author, 2/9/12
[32] Interview with author, 2/9/12
[33] Interview with author, 2/9/12
[34] Williams provided two versions of *Whoa Mule* that were collected in *Folk-Songs of the Southern United States* (Combs 1967:223-224). The eponymous ballad about him also features in the book and was collected from a Dora Blair of Pippa Passes in Knott County during the 1930s (Combs 1967:225-226).

Gibson's own father features in *Bell Coney*. The song was written by a friend of the family called Malcolm Vance and it relates an incident in which Mal Gibson – who, aside from being a store owner, also served as the local sheriff - cut up a moonshining still. This song provides another incidence of Gibson reconstructing from fragments in a manner similar to the way in which he put together *Old Smoky*. Vance's half sister married one of Gibson's uncles and she told Gibson of the song to which she knew the lyrics but not the melody. Many years later, Gibson met a musician in Florida who had once been a neighbour of Mel Amburgey. He had heard Amburgey singing the song whilst out on his front porch, and he demonstrated to Gibson how it had sounded using his guitar. From that, Gibson transposed it to the banjo and played it the way he thought it should sound.

Finally, Gibson describes *Big Jug of Liquor* as a very unusual tune that both his father and Wiley Amburgey played. The refrain goes: "Big jug of liquor in the barn loft. Give me your money and take it off".

Thus, the body of songs that make up the so-called Burgey's Creek Music consists of those pieces that hold the greatest import for Gibson because of the way they are bound up with the memories of the people and the place that he comes from. They are songs that Gibson managed to capture or reconstruct before the break in transmission became complete, and thereby he held onto the thread by which something of the culture might be woven once more.

GEORGE GIBSON'S MUSICAL TRAJECTORY

> Existing as I do, between the old culture and the new, understanding something about both but belonging to neither, has made me uncomfortable performing in the role of a traditional musician - George Gibson[35]

When Gibson swapped Knott County for Lexington and life as an undergraduate, he took a couple of banjos with him. Over the years, he would return to Knott County for annual or biannual visits and

[35] Email to author, 2/24/12

when the opportunity arose, he would learn from such local musicians as he could find (for example, Horace Dixon and Gran Hudson). Elsewhere, he continued to play the music he had learnt in Knott County mostly in a state of musical isolation. While at university, he would occasionally play *for* some of his fellow students but not *with* them. He did not play at parties and the old-time revival movement that had such an impact on the youth music scene from the 50s and 60s onwards (Rosenberg, 1993) held little appeal for him. He was never interested in participating in old-time jams (he finds the concept of following fiddle tunes – on which most jams are based - unenticing). During the years he spent in Philadelphia, he would occasionally play together with the musician husband of a colleague but on the whole, he played alone and for his own enjoyment.

The result of this relative musical reclusiveness is that the material that George plays today appears to have been relatively unaffected by outside influences – something which Rich Kirby observed to me during a visit I made to east Kentucky in March 2012. Kirby is a multi-string-instrumentalist who leads the old-time band Rich and the Po' Folks[36]. When we met, Kirby ruminated that George must have been "sort of off some place else when bluegrass happened and so he never got the Earl Scruggs virus, and all that stuff that he grew up with, he just kind of held it in his own little private time capsule and then all of a sudden realised how valuable it was and how unique it was"[37].

While that realisation was less sudden than Kirby suggests, a series of events in the 1990s did lead to Gibson gaining renown as an old-time banjo player. This process began in Florida where he met a few people involved in the local traditional music scene and was asked to be the 1994 Guest of Honor at the Florida Old Time Music Championships. Here, performing in public for the first time was a musician who had learned from his elders in the Kentucky mountains of Knott County and who

[36] The band members also include John Haywood and Brett Ratliff and the band repertoire includes pieces learned from Gibson. More information about the band can be found at http://richandthepofolk.com/about/ (accessed 3/10/12). Rich Kirby is also a radio producer at the media organisation Appalshop which is based in Whitesburg, Kentucky.
[37] Conversation with author, 3/3/12.

appeared to play in a range of little known old-time styles, so among old-time-music-friendly public, interest was inevitably stoked.

Since that time, Gibson has continued to perform sporadically but maintains an uneasy relationship with his persona as tradition-bearer and is uncomfortable in the role of a traditional musician. He told me, for example, that in his experience most musicians/tradition bearers invited to participate in festivals or the like are not, for example, expected to question or comment on how they are presented. "Often" he wrote "they are accompanied by a revival musician who is an intermediary that interprets the music of the traditional musician for the revival audience (…). The arrival of a traditional musician that is somewhat educated and questions long held beliefs about mountain music and its history is not something that is expected - or particularly welcomed."[38] Small wonder then that Gibson, being both an educated and provocative thinker can find the mantel of tradition-bearer awkward to assume. Moreover, he has little interest in becoming a "star on the folk music circuit"[39]. He attributes this ambivalence to his not enjoying playing for people "who have no cultural connection with the music"[40]. He makes a couple of exceptions in order to play regularly at two annual music events - Hillbilly Days at Pikeville, Kentucky and Home Craft Days at Big Stone Gap in Virginia – but he participates in those cases because he thinks the audiences include older people who have a cultural memory of material he can offer.

In addition, Gibson had made a number of media appearances including on the show *WoodSongs Old-Time Radio Hour* and on WMMT, the radio station of Appalshop. He has also taught or conducted workshops at several old-time music summer camps including once at Fiddle Tunes at Port Townsend in Washington State, twice at the Augusta Old-time Heritage Festival in West Virginia, and regularly at the Cowan Creek Mountain Music School in Letcher County, Kentucky (the neighbouring county to Knott

[38] Email to author, 2/24/12
[39] Email to author, 2/19/12.
[40] Email to author, 2/19/12.

County). Cowan Creek is a music camp that is particularly geared towards the people of east Kentucky. However, he does not particularly enjoy the teaching process and in the future plans to restrict his participation in such events to giving workshops.

STRIP-MINING AND RESOURCE EXTRACTION IN KNOTT COUNTY

> In east Kentucky (…) there are still two enormous problems: environmental degradation and rampant drug use. I believe the two are connected: The health of an environment has an impact on the psychic health of those who live in that environment – George Gibson[41].

Gibson's care for the music of Knott County is matched by his concern for its physical environment, and when he talks about eastern Kentucky's "environmental degradation", he is referring to the local impact of the region's two major industries[42] – coal mining and natural gas extraction. In the case of the former, its most clearly visible form strip-mining. Strip-mining began in the 1920s and 30s with small "truck mines", but more recently the common form has been "the huge stripping operations" which have "destroyed timber, water recourses and whole mountaintops" (Howell 2002:9).

Evidence of this activity was all too obvious during the visit I made to Gibson at his Kentucky farm in March 2012. As we drove around, he pointed out to me various sites of mountain top removal, which I had previously read about but never before observed in person. To see mountains shorn of their peaks was shocking enough in itself, but the effects on local ecosystems can also be devastating (Hufford, 2002).

Another sight which struck me as we continued our tour was that of local people filling up water bottles at natural springs. Gibson told me this is because their domestic water supplies have been ruined by the fracking, or hydraulic fracturing going on in the area. Fracking is a method of extracting natural

[41] Email to author, 2/7/12
[42] Website: www.city-data.com/county/Knott_County-KY.html (accessed 3/10/12)

gas from below the earth's surface. It involves drilling a deep well, then dropping down a complex cocktail of chemicals in order to explode the rock formation below thereby allowing the gas to flow better. However, both the chemicals, and the gas itself, can leak into the water supply if the drilling and the subsequent explosion of the rock formation damage the water well casings[43]. While industry heads deny widespread damage to water wells, their claims are disputed. For example, in the 2010 Academy Award nominated documentary *Gasland*, filmmaker Josh Fox showed various examples of people living in areas where fracking was taking place being able to set fire to their domestic water supply.

For Gibson, fracking and mountain top removal have both been disastrous for the local environment. Together, he says, they have contributed to the ruination of what he estimates to be around 80% of Knott County's many water wells, a figure he bases on information given in a local newspaper, conversations with representatives of the Bureau of Abandoned Mines and Knott County's two well drillers**.** There are two gas wells on his own farm – one of which was put in years before he owned the place and to which an uncle gave permission. Gibson himself signed off on the second well in the hopes that its proximity to a small family cemetery would lead to the gas company maintaining the road that leads to both in perpetuity, though he has misgivings about this now.

In fact, natural gas extraction began in Knott County in the 1940s. At that time, the crude oil that was extracted as part of the process was not collected as it is today, but rather dumped into the nearby streams. By the mid 50s, Gibson said that the muskrat population died off as a result[44]

CULTURAL STRIP-MINING IN EAST KENTUCKY

[43] The 2005 Energy Bill exempted oil and natural gas industries from conforming to the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, which had ensured that clean drinking water be uncontaminated by either natural or manmade pollutants, and other environmental regulations. This meant that the cocktail of chemicals did not need to be declared which meant they were also not subject to investigation by such organisations as the Environmental Protection Agency.

[44] George Gibson noticed this as a young man: whereas his brother had made a reasonable income from trapping muskrats and selling them for their pelts during the late 40s, by the time Gibson tried his own hand at the trade, there were no longer enough muskrats to be caught to turn a profit. Gibson only made the link between the dying off of the muskrats and the dumping of oil during the 90s when Gran Hudson told him the same thing had happened on his property after some gas wells were installed and he attributed it to the dumping of oil.

> East Kentucky's been devastated by all sorts of mining activities and it's little noticed because of all the stereotypes - George Gibson[45]

At the end of *Gasland,* the banjo-strumming Fox - who was prompted to make the documentary because of the threat that fracking would be carried out on the land where he lives in Pennsylvania - stresses that were the activity to go ahead in his neighbourhood, the water supply for New York City and other north east regions could be affected. His documentary helped to provoke a lot of media attention on the fracking process and its ramifications. Gibson sees this rise in interest as being related to the location of the threat: "Suddenly, it's national news. It's national news because they're drilling in Pennsylvania. They're not drilling among those hillbillies in east Kentucky".

According to Appalachian Studies scholars, resource extraction industries have long been the cause of "resource exploitation and degradation" within the region, beginning with lawyers and local land agents resorting to various forms of obfuscation and even outright deceit to wrest land and mineral rights from the mountain people in the wake of the Civil War (Howell 2002:5). For Gibson, this exploitation has been facilitated by preconceptions about the southern Appalachian Mountain region and those who inhabit it. He told me that "people who are stereotyped, individually and collectively, become marginalized and are more easily victimized by circumstances that would not be tolerated in the society at large"[46]. This stereotyping is one characteristic of what George Gibson refers to as "cultural strip-mining".

Katie Algeo has written about how the stereotypical image of Appalachia became constructed in the minds of most people in the US largely based on a popular images of the place that emerged through the writings of short story authors and novelists, missionaries and social workers, as well as academics. As a result Appalachia was seen as "a place apart, a different and sometimes dangerous place, a place whose people possessed only he mere rudiments of civilization (Algeo 2003: 28). Essential

[45] Interview with author, 1/27/12
[46] Email to author 2/16/12

characteristics included "isolation, stasis and 'otherness'" (31). Another feature of the stereotyping are suggestions that what is found in one part of the mountains is seen to represent the whole thereby reducing the complexity of the people and their culture. (Algeo 2003: 34). Gibson gave me an example of this when he pointed to the influence of the banjo player Tommy Jarrell in North Carolina. Many of those who congregated around Jarrell believed that his style of stroking down with the middle finger, instead of the first, was the manner of all mountain banjoists. However, Gibson says that he "never saw anyone in Knott County use their middle finger when stroking down while playing overhand"[47].

George Gibson uses the term "cultural strip-mining" to encompass these stereotypes and the ramifications they may lead to. As already mentioned, he feels the cultural strip-mining is linked to the ease with which the devastating results of actual strip-mining and other resource extraction industries can go about their business in east Kentucky. He has also discerned several forms of cultural strip-mining that pertain specifically to old-time music. Of these, the two key ones that bother Gibson are:

1) "Revival stripminers" i.e. people who have "mined" traditional mountain musicians for their repertoires and playing styles without due credit to or respect for their sources. Gibson finds it particularly irksome when these musicians offer authoritative descriptions of mountain history and music without having any grounding in either Appalachian history or folklore: "This is very common" Gibson told me. "Unfortunately, many people incorrectly assume that if a person plays music, then that person must be knowledgeable about the music's history"[48].

2) Persons from outside the region who assume that mountaineers have a lack of knowledge about their history, music or other aspects of mountain life that they themselves can speak or write about with authority. Loyal Jones put it succinctly: "The self-proclaimed "experts" on Appalachia, and there have been many, are usually frauds" (1995: xi)

[47] Email to author 2/16/12
[48] Email to author, 2/16/12.

Gibson is extremely sensitive to instances of cultural strip-mining and shared many examples – not in anger or indignation so much as wearied frustration. One such was his memory of attending a dulcimer workshop hosted by a Florida dulcimer player. The host was asked by an audience member why the Appalachian Mountain makers painted instruments made of walnut, given that the wood is so expensive. Gibson related that:

> After a long pause, the host said it was most likely because these makers didn't know the value of the wood they were using. This is a good example of cultural strip mining at its worst. The old dulcimer makers knew much more about wood than the host or any member of his audience[49].

Another example he pointed to was the film *Songcatcher*, released in 2000, in which he pointed to the "violent and ignorant mountaineer" as being a major theme of the movie[50].

STEMMING THE STRIP-MINING, CULTURAL OR OTHERWISE

> I can do little to change strip mining, mountain top removal or gas well drilling, but I believe I can have some impact on cultural strip mining – George Gibson[51]

When I visited Gibson at his Burgey's Creek residence in early March 2012, he showed me around his farm which consists of around eighty acres of land. On it stands the house where George was born as well as several log cabins – he had these log cabins moved to his property from elsewhere in order to preserve them for they were otherwise at risk of destruction. He pointed out a small orchard that he had recently planted and told me that when the settlers first moved into the region, planting an orchard was typically one of the first things they'd do. He also showed me where he has tried to build up a creek bank using natural materials such as branches as the land had been eroded by water.

[49] Email to author, 2/19/12
[50] Email to author, 3/15/12.
[51] Email to author, 1/24/12

Over the last twenty years, folklorists and cultural conservationists have become increasingly aware that distinctions made between the cultural and the natural environment are often false. The two co-exist as part of the same ecosystem (Feltault 1994; Howell 2002; Hufford 1986, 1984, 2002). While Gibson does not aspire to be a cultural conservationist, nonetheless that is what he has effectively been for most of his life – from his actions as a teenager capturing the music disappearing around him through the music-related interests he pursues over sixty years later, from his efforts to maintain his land in a way that honours his ancestors, to his run-ins with representatives of mineral extraction industries.

An example of the latter occurred during a run in with the Columbia National Resources company (CNR). CNR had already approached Gibson seeking his permission to put in a third well on his land which he declined to give. He went on to take an active part in a local campaign to prevent that company putting in a pipeline which necessitated their gaining right of way over various properties including the one belonging to Gibson. Gibson told me that various neighbours protested and in preparation for the ensuing court case, CNR called in a real estate broker valued that right of way on Gibson's land at $200. The valuation was approved in federal court and the land condemned, meaning that CNR was given the right to access to the land at the stated value. However, Gibson was not prepared to let the matter drop. He checked out the credentials of the real estate broker employed by CNR, found he had no licence to practise in Kentucky and wrote the clerk of the federal court with this information, copying the letter to number of other figures including the Governor of Kentucky. He never heard back but a year later, the condemnation was reversed and the pipeline was not built.

In that instance, Gibson's efforts may be seen as cultural conservation in the form of environmental protection. Elsewhere, his activities can be read as cultural conservation of two key areas of intangible cultural heritage: the preservation and transmission of his Burgey's Creek musical heritage and his efforts to counter previously widely disseminated views regarding the history of the arrival of banjo in the Southern Appalachian mountains.

REVISING BANJO HISTORY

> I attended the first Banjo Collectors' conference in 1998 in Cape May, New Jersey, and learned to my astonishment that the accepted view of banjo history was that mountaineers learned banjo from professional minstrel banjoists during and after the Civil War. I was astonished because; first, I have a feel for the music and I didn't see how this could be correct; and secondly, the people promoting this view were all from the North, and therefore were likely susceptible to mountain stereotypes - I have found that academics and better educated people are more likely to be swayed by mountain stereotypes that are ordinary folk – George Gibson[52]

In Mary Hufford's survey of the cultural and environmental ecosystem of the New Jersey Pine Barrens, she makes the distinction between local "knowledge of" and outsider "knowledge about" (1986). Local people use their knowledge of local flora and fauna to make their own local decisions regarding the management of natural resources decisions and while Hufford does not imply that "knowledge of" is right and the "knowledge about" is wrong but she does advocate that resource management would benefit were "knowledge of" and "knowledge about" to be combined (Hufford 1986: 33). Others writing about cultural conservation issues have given instances where resource management based solely on "knowledge about" has had detrimental effects (Howell 1994; Marks 1994)

Gibson grew up absorbing the local "knowledge of" the history of the banjo in the mountains - that is, that it arrived in the region well before the Civil War - and he has devoted much time spent researching and writing to establish this view as standard. While he is not the first to put forward this viewpoint – William Talmadge articulated much the same idea in a piece written several decades ago (Talmadge 1983)[53] - Gibson's initiatives have been particularly energetic.

[52] Email to author, 2/12/12
[53] See Carlin 2007, Conway 1995 and Epstein 2003 for some examples of other scholars' exploration of banjo history.

Gibson's "knowledge of" banjo history came about in a number of ways. Firstly there was his familiarity with the local population which indicated that there has been an African-Americans population in the mountains from the time it was settled and whilst this population may not be sizeable, it only takes the fruitful connection of one active tradition bearing musician with another for a comingling of musical influences to occur **(**Von Sydow 1927**)**. In addition, logic has played its part in Gibson's reasoning: why, he asked me, would the banjo left out of the amalgamation of Anglo- and African-American music happening elsewhere prior to minstrelsy and alluded to in, for example, an article by Robert Winans and Elias Kaufman towards which he directed me (1994:1[54]). For Gibson, this notion would relate to the perception that the mountains were completely cut off from outside influences which is, as outlined above, a stereotypical view of the region.

Gibson suspects that part of the reason behind the creation of a minstrel origin for the mountain folk banjo may be efforts made by in the late 1880s by banjo maker S. S. Stewart and others to divorce the banjo from its African origins in order to sell it to high society (Linn 1994). However, a key motive for Gibson's extensive research and efforts to publish in the area of banjo history is to the counter the assumption that he sees as implicit in the theory that minstrels brought banjo music to the mountains: that "it was necessary for professional musicians, mostly from the north, to teach mountaineers to play banjo" (Gibson, 2000b:7).

Changing this perception has been as important, if not more, to Gibson than his other music-related activities. For example, in 2011 when musician John Haywood became Gibson's apprentice under the auspices of a scheme conducted by the Kentucky Folklife Program, Gibson's notes from the

[54] The text referred to is as follows: "In the more familiar folk tradition of five-string banjo playing, folk musicians (mostly rural southern) have continued to maintain the early minstrel style of playing, now called clawhammer or frailing, long after its decline on the stage and in parlor traditions of the 1880s. In England, on the other hand, blackface minstrelsy, though popular, spawned no lasting folk tradition of banjo playing. The most likely explanation for this is that while the American folk tradition was already an amalgam of Anglo-American and African-American music, into which the banjo fit well musically, mid-nineteenth century British folk music was not such an amalgam."

first lesson show no record of their playing together but learning about banjo history was certainly stressed as the following extract makes clear:

> LESSON ONE: 09-01-2010
>
> Gave John the following documents to read:
>
> 1) African Banjo Roots, by Ulf Jagfors, Nov. 2001;
>
> 2) Gourd Banjos: From Africa to the Appalachians, by George R. Gibson, Oct. 2002;
>
> 3) Black Banjo, Fiddle and Dance in Kentucky, and the Amalgamation of African- and Anglo-American Music, by George R. Gibson, March 2010; and
>
> 4) The Folk, the Stage, and the five-String Banjo in the Nineteenth Century, by Robert B. Winans. Published in the Journal of American Folklore, Vol. 89, October-December 1976, NO. 354.
>
> Discussed the optional reading material outlined under the lesson plan. Included discussion of Dena J. Epstein's seminal work: Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War. Recommended that John buy the books by Dr. Josiah Combs and Leonard Roberts. These works are essential for studying Kentucky folk music.
>
> LESSON TWO: 09-12-2010
>
> Answered questions regarding documents provided to John. Reviewed current research into the African origins of the banjo; recommended the following web site for further reading: www.myspace.com/banjoroots . Academics and revival musicians from outside the mountains have promoted the theory that professional minstrels, or soldier returning from the Civil War, brought the banjo into the mountains after 1865. Discussed the origins of this theory and the many reasons why it is incorrect.

Only after that is there any reference to their actually playing music.

Elsewhere Gibson told me that he has:

> used the knowledge that I am probably the last person that can represent the banjo songsters of Burgey's Creek and Knott County - and probably the only person that can legitimately question the popular version of banjo

> history - to justify my performances. I will have less reason to perform, however, if my article is published by the Illinois Press[55].

The Illinois Press article is one that is set to be published as part of an anthology edited by Robert Winans**.** Winans was one of the scholars who put forward the theory linking the mountain folk banjo and the minstrel tradition (1976) though he told Gibson that he has since revised some of his opinions, but did not make clear in what way. Gibson's contribution to this prospective volume will be the culmination of many years of research (Gibson 2000ab; 2001 abcd, 2002ab, 2011). To date, his articles have appeared largely in popular publications or on his own website (which is not called banjohistory.com for nothing)[56] However, he realised that he "needed to be published in an academic journal or book to gain legitimacy for my aim of changing the perception of banjo history"[57], hence the importance to him of the inclusion of his article in the Illinois Press book. From the draft he sent me, this excerpt sums up the piece:-

> The banjo tradition in white folk culture is popularly believed to have developed after the banjo was featured in minstrel shows beginning in the 1840s. Those who support this argument do so by citing the well documented history of the banjo in minstrelsy, and not by examining the history or folklife of common whites, who had intimate contact with African-Americans (…). Evidence presented here will show that Appalachian Kentucky had a substantial African-American population; that the banjo was a rural instrument widespread in Kentucky before the Civil War, from the western flatlands to the Kentucky Mountains; and that the banjo was a part of white folk culture prior to 1840s minstrelsy.

DISSEMINATION OF THE MUSIC

[55] Email to author, 2/24/12
[56] www.banjohistory.com
[57] Email to author 1/24/12

> I can't imagine that I've actually influenced that many people in banjo playing. That's not something I set out to do, actually – George Gibson[58].

Earlier I referred to Von Sydow's concept of active tradition bearers in relation to African American musical traditions in the mountains. While Gibson may not have aspired to be a active tradition bearer, the views of musicians and people familiar with the old-time music scene in east Kentucky and elsewhere that I contacted when researching this paper echoed those of John Harrod mentioned at the start of this paper: that Gibson has had and continues to have a significant musical influence. He has made one CD (Gibson, 2000a) and contributed to a compilation of banjo music (Banjar Days, 1999), he performs selectively, he had made media appearances and he gives workshops. He has taught at the annual Cowan Creek Music School in Letcher County[59], Kentucky since it started in 2001 well as at several other music camps. In addition he has direct contact and interaction with a wide range musicians and I know from my own personal experience that he is gracious and patient with those who seek him out in order to learn. He has twice taken on apprentices, under the auspices of a scheme run by the Kentucky Folklife Program – the first was David Hurt, then John Haywood. Many of the players with whom he has had musical exchanges are themselves active on the old-time music scene and have therefore have become active tradition bearers of Gibson's music.

John Haywood is one such. Born in 1977 and originally from Prestonsburg in Floyd County, he became interested in the old-time music of his native region only after he had moved away to study art in Louisville. He and Gibson met when the older musician performed at the Seedtime on the Cumberland – an annual old-time festival held each year in Whitesburg, Kentucky - where Haywood had a booth set up to sell his art. Haywood was already familiar with Gibson's *Last Possum Up The*

[58] Interview with author, 1/27/12
[59] Letcher County lie south of and adjacent to Knott County.

Tree CD (Gibson 2000a) but this was his first opportunity to see how the sounds that he heard were made. The experience left an impression on Haywood:

> He comes in and like the first thing I remember was watching his right hand and it looked like, it just looked amazing to me, you know, just seeing it, like in real life. All this, that I'd heard about and I'd just listened to but could never truly witness. I can just picture it in my head what his hand looked like that day and I remember thinking to myself, you know, what rhythm! It was just, it just looked so effortless. You know, he wasn't doing a lot and yet he was getting all this sound out of the banjo and it just chucker-chucker-chucker-chucker-chucker instead of boom-chuck-a-boom-chuck-a-boom. It kept rolling. He later came to my art booth that day and taught me how to play *Darling Cora*. He showed me how to tune the two C strings together and the low one, like this triple C tuning. He sat down and showed me *Darling Cora* and then he bought some of my art work [laughing]. So we, and we would sit and talk about banjos and all this stuff and we just became good friends after that.

Brett Ratliff is another active old-time banjoist whom Gibson has influenced. Ratliff named his CD *Cold Icy Mountain* after a tune taught to him by Gibson (Ratliff 2007). In the liner notes, the text reads:

> This collection has the power of a mine explosion, the power of a mine explosion, the power of young lust, the power of war, the power of a mountain politician who bought votes with magnificent banjo tunes, and in different spots, the incredible power of George Gibson, the grand old daddy possum who leads us, his young, across the road and back into a time when people sent their terbaccer to Lynchburg.

Haywood and Ratliff who are both active on the old-time music scene in east Kentucky have disseminated Gibson's influence. Both men both play in a band Rich and the Po' Folks headed by Rich Kirby. Kirby told me that he was "constantly amazed"[60] at the material he was learning from his fellow band members that they had picked up in turn from Gibson. When I asked him to be more specific about what exactly he was learning, he said:

> Tunings. Versions of songs more than anything else. And a kind of a combination of the tune, the tuning, this is something that George has talked about and it's, I think it's really important, how the music, the

[60] Interview with author, 3/3/12

> words, the instrument, the way the instrument is tuned, the way the instrument is played, especially, well, I started to say especially the right hand but then George's left hand is remarkable as well. All those things together making a whole and you can't really quite approach any of those things, you know, if you try to break those things about, you sort of lose the quote meaning of the whole piece, including the social context.

I also spoke with Kevin Howard, a banjoist born in Richmond, Kentucky in 1983, to whom Gibson has acted as something of a mentor. I asked Howard to tell me a little more about how the process of transmission of the music worked. Did Gibson show him explicitly how to play something, or did he just play it and leave Howard to figure it out based on what he had heard (i.e. in the emulative manner by which Gibson himself had learned). Howard replied:

> I think that depends on, you know, if you ask him. Like usually, when he's taught me songs, he's shown me a song and I won't really sweat the details, I just pick up on the words and the melody and do my own thing with it but yeah, there's been like times he's done licks and I've been "can you do that again?" and he'll do it again.

John Haywood's experience seems similar:

> He would sit down in my art booths and stuff and he would play stuff for me and tell me the names of this song and play it, and a day later I'd try to recall it at the house or try to figure out what he was doing. One thing he did explain to me was the left handed pluck that is very characteristic, because you can hear that stuff and you can kind of come up with your own way of getting that extra note in there, you know, but when he showed me that he was doing it with his left hand, then it opened up a whole new world to me. (…) I was putting, I was trying to get that extra note with my right hand instead of my left hand so that was one thing he did point out to me, but for the most part, I learned the most from sitting out here on the front porch with him. He'd sit on one side of the door, he'd sit on the other, and he'd sit here and play a tune, tell me what it was, and I'd go home later and try to remember it. He wasn't really going in depth.

However, Haywood pointed out that when he became Gibson's apprentice, he studied more formally exactly how the master played since that was the part of the point of the Kentucky Folklife Program's scheme:

> It was the only time that he sat down and was like "no. This is what I do". Because the purpose was for me to learn how he did it. And I still, I can't, I could never play like him still. I mean, I feel I can get, I feel like if somebody listened to me play, they could tell I learned a lot from George, but I could never do exactly what he does.

Gibson therefore does not take a dogmatic approach to passing on the musical tradition that he bears. When he teaches or does a workshop, and indeed in my own encounter with him, he stresses that one should develop a personal style and only use such techniques as come naturally. Gibson himself puts it this way: "What I've done is try to shine a light on the way the music was played and to tell people that if they can't play exactly as their teacher, don't worry about it"[61].

MUSIC AS PROTEST IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIAN

Within Southern Appalachia, music has long been a means of protesting economic exploitation and more general of resisting cultural strip-mining. In his seminal work on coal-mining music, *Only A Miner*, Archie Green describes many instances in which musicians who used their art thus. For example, including how during the Depression years, when the mining industry was hard hit, the songs of musician and union activist Aunt Molly Jackson preserved "the terror and pathos of blood on the coal and of brother fighting brother in feud-like strikes" (1972:78). Jackson herself, Green points out, was "acutely conscious" that her music might be used to better the rights and conditions of miners (79). A few years after *Only a Miner* was published came Guy and Candie Carawan's examination of the songs emerging from Appalachia in the wake of the 1960 decision made by the Tennessee Valley Authority to obtain coal via strip-mining (1975). One of the singers to feature in the book was Hazel Dickens. Born and bred in a West Virginia coal mining town, and she similarly combined music with activism, appearing frequently at union rallies and benefits for mineworkers and many of her songs were inspired by the plight of miners, including *Black Lung* (her brother died of the disease which is caused by inhaling coal dust).

[61] Interview with author, 1/27/12

Black Lung was one of eleven mining themed songs that featured on *Coal*, the 2008 album by the country and bluegrass musician Kathy Mattea which she recorded in the wake of the Sago Mine Disaster which killed 12 miners in West Virginia in 2006[62]. Mattea is vocal in her condemnation not just of the economic exploitation of miners, but also of environmental degradation caused by the industry. In an interview for the NPR radio show *Living On Earth*, Mattea described strip-mining as being rampant and as:

> raping the countryside (…). We're losing habitat. We're losing species. The sludge ponds are contaminating the water and then when they blast off the mountain tops and push all of that dirt that is not coal into the valleys it contaminates the water for the people who live in the area.[63]

Mattea is far from being alone among contemporary artists who use their music to activist ends again mountain top removal which has become the dominant form of mining in the area since the early 1990s. A compilation put out by "Kentuckians for the Commonwealth" entitled *Songs for the Mountains* featured twelve original songs by Kentucky musicians including Jean Ritchie, the Reel World String Band and Anne Shelby[64] (2006). In its liner notes, Shelby writes:

> The music on this CD grew out of rich Kentucky ground. We've a long tradition here of making our own songs when we need them: when miners fought for the right to organize in the 1930s, and later when Kentuckians demanded controls on surface mining and an end to the Broad Form Deed. We need them again, and the songs are coming, some of them collected here.

Overtly or otherwise, the theme of strip-mining (literal, economic and cultural) are implied in this long tradition of protest music and while Gibson's own musical activities might seem ostensibly to be of a different order, what he is doing is also a protest - through his reconstruction and dissemination of

[62] http://mattea.com/kathyAbout.html accessed 6/21/2012
[63] NPR: *Living on Earth*, edition broadcast on 25 July 2007 accessed via http://www.loe.org/shows/segments.html?programID=07-P13-00021&segmentID=4 6/21/2012
[64] Kentuckians for the Commonwealth also produced a literary anthology, featuring writings by 35 Kentucky authors, entitled *Missing Mountains: We Went to the Mountaintop but it Wasn't There,* Eds.: Kristin Johannsen, Bobbie Ann Mason and Mary Ann Taylor-Hall. 2005. Wind Publications

Burgey's Creek music, he sustains the culture of the people oppressed by outsiders and through his version of banjo history, he seeks to redress the history of Appalachian music as written by outsiders

CONCLUSION

> I would describe my efforts as less about cultural conservation than about trying to educate people about what was lost. The small resurgence of the of old time music culture in east Kentucky will be different from the music culture that existed before World War II; however, I hope the people who are involved will have a better understanding of the older music than the great majority of those who participate in the general folk music revival – George Gibson[65]

When Gibson called his only solo recording *Last Possum Up The Tree*, the title alluded to the fact that he saw himself as the last person playing old style Burgey's Creek music that he learned just as it was fading away. Yet his influence suggests otherwise. Perhaps he is, as the liner notes to Brett Ratliff's CD mentioned, "grand old daddy possum" who is leading his younger musical counterparts back in time.

Yet it is not his intention to lead anyone back in time, rather his hope is – as indicated by the quote that heads this section – that people "will have a better understanding of the older music than the great majority of those who participate in the general folk music revival". In order to understand the older music, it is also important to understand the context within which it was played, of which Gibson himself saw only the final glimpses.

While a young man, he caught and held onto a few fragments of the culture he saw as crashing around him. Meanwhile, only limited opportunities were available to him with regard to the possibility his building a career in his Appalachian home and those opportunities were mostly tied to the mineral-extracting industries, the ramifications of which he increasingly perceived as highly destructive to his local environment. Gibson instigated efforts that may be interpreted as cultural conservation - and here, I

[65] Email to author, 2/7/12

include the environment as a cultural resource - in order to forestall "strip-mining" by those from outside the region who made, and continue to make, use of eastern Kentucky's resources, be they musical and mineral.

In sum, I suggest here that although Gibson may not consider his efforts cultural conservation, that is what they have been. Through the music that he plays, through his efforts to around his farm that nod to the past (the red roof of his cabin, the old stones of his soon-to-be-chimney, the rebuilding of the creek banks and the planting of the orchard), to his forays into the legal world to stem the activities of a gas company, Gibson has constructed a multi-formed counter-narrative which in a singular fashion combats the myriad outside forces that encroach on his concept of the history, culture and precious landscape of Burgey's Creek.

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