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Bill Staines's *Bridges* and the Art of Meta-Folk

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In memoriam Mirjana Lausevic

Abstract
Folksinger-songwriter Bill Staines came of age at the height of the mid-twentieth-century American folk music revival and has spent the years since then writing and playing music that seems impelled by the conviction that this vanished era's core stylistic premises and clear-eyed optimism remain as alive and available as they were at the revival's peak. Through this exploration of his 1984 album Bridges, *I seek to show that Staines accomplishes this fantasy of the revival's continued vitality not, as his commentators frequently suggest, by clinging fast to decades-old stylistic practices but by introducing a dimension of reflexivity into his craft. What comes to matter is not music's political or social meaning but the self-conscious celebration of the idea of music having such a meaning.*

The article's first section explores Staines's self-mythologizing enfolding of his own persona into Woody Guthrie's in the Guthrie ballad that opens the album. The second section examines Bridges' *poetic weaving of music into narratives of social redemption and personal self-actualization. The third section examines* Bridges' *many moments of diegetic song, which effectively collapse the worlds of Staines's poetic subjects into that of his immediate audience. The last section explores how melodic choices in the traditional song that closes the album have the effect of bringing many of the songs that precede it directly into the fold of traditional music.*

Through the decades that have elapsed since the subsidence of the mid-twentieth-century American folk music revival, few folk musicians have produced a more convincing vision than Bill Staines of what it might mean to keep faith with that era. In an oft-quoted 1993 panegyric to his work, singer-songwriter Nanci Griffith encapsulates a sentiment that echoes through Staines's reception, observing that he "carries on where Woody left off."[1] Which is to say, Staines's music is about as authentic as it gets.

Born in 1947 in Lexington, Massachusetts, Staines came of age in Boston's early sixties folk scene, at the height of the folk music revival. He has spent the years since then writing and playing music that seems impelled by the conviction that this vanished era's core stylistic premises, together with its clear-eyed optimism, remain as alive and available as they were at the revival's peak. Staines's songs are routinely celebrated as combinations of melodies so sturdy as to sound preordained with lyrics of seemingly timeless truthfulness in which beauty and psychological insight are spun from the simplest language and the most tried-and-true palette of imagery (nature, travel, working life, and so forth). Several of them—"River," "A Place in the Choir," "Roseville Fair," and others—have found their way into the repertoire of folk classics that, many commentators attest, they sounded like from the start. At the same time, Staines's unpretentious, everyman baritone voice and unobtrusive (if highly competent) acoustic guitar work impart a powerful aura

[1] Nanci Griffith, liner notes, Bill Staines, *Going to the West,* Red House Records RH 56, 1993.

of clean-lined authenticity, if rooted less in fidelity to any particular historical or regional style than in a palpable lack of impurity.[2] Though he has released some two dozen albums since his 1966 debut (*Bag of Rainbows*) and continues to log around two hundred gigs a year across the United States, his music has never stopped sounding as though sprung directly from the midcentury folk revival's heyday, and still somehow possessed of that era's redemptive promise.

The creative resources through which this feeling is conjured, however, are not nearly as transparent as they might appear at first blush. In the discussion that follows, I seek to show that the mechanisms through which Staines accomplishes this fantasy of the revival's continued vitality go far beyond simply singing songs familiar from that era, or faithful knockoffs of them. Staines's work has the effect it has, I suggest, thanks in large part to a dimension of reflexivity which, though not unknown to former generations, takes on an unprecedented centrality and subtlety in his hands. In the "folk music" of no earlier generation do we find so persistent or self-conscious a musico-poetic foregrounding of the undergirding mythologies of the folk genre itself. And Staines's extraordinary impact can be traced, I shall argue, not to his ability to hold constant the artistic practices of an earlier era but to his penchant for reconfiguring those practices in what might be called postmodern terms. Staines can secure us a postlapsarian place in the Edenic garden of this genre, his work seems to say, but self-knowledge must henceforth be part of the package.

This study will trace the most conspicuous manifestations of this self-knowledge across a live album drawn from the middle of his career, *Bridges*, recorded on 15–17 July 1983, at the Coffeehouse Extempore in Minneapolis, Minnesota.[3] Through the album's eleven songs, Staines's voice is accompanied only by two acoustic guitars—his own (a right-handed Martin D-18 that he plays left-handed) and that of longtime collaborator Guy Van Duser—and by a generously miked audience. What I seek to show through this small sampling of his work is that Staines's art, however unmediated its ties to the canon and its investment in a spirit of authenticity might appear, in fact manufactures its meanings not according to the logic that governed the folk revival at its height, much less folk music itself (a concept whose torturous centuries-long reception history I have no interest in recapitulating here), but according to the logic of what I shall term "secondary nostalgia."[4] It is true that Staines's work participates fully in that ideal of lyrical realism through which Scott Alarik, for instance, has sought to define some of contemporary folk's highest ambitions "to write about authentic life experiences in more honest, closely observed, and intimate ways than mainstream pop usually does."[5] But I will argue that Staines's work operates also,

[2] His most significant departure from his customary stylistic format was *Alaska Suite* (Mineral River 1007, 1994), a collection of fifteen instrumental pieces for strings and brass.

[3] Bill Staines, *Bridges*, Red House Records RH25, a 1989 re-release of the album first issued on Extempore Records.

[4] For a wide-ranging, distinctly clear-headed account of the historical struggle toward a workable definition of "folk music" and the uses to which its definitions have been put, see Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 127–71 (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990). See also Gene Bluestein, "What Is Folk," in *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 12–27.

[5] Scott Alarik, *Deep Community: Adventures in the Modern Folk Underground* (Cambridge, Mass.: Black Wolf Press, 2003), 3.

perhaps chiefly, at a meta-narrative level captured neither in Alarik's formulation nor in Staines's critical reception in general. What Staines delivers are not so much messages of sociopolitical redemption as subtle, deeply nuanced affirmations of folk music culture's grounding faith in music's sociopolitical redemptive power. Whatever the immediate subjects of his musical "slices of Americana"[6] may be, the subject of most of these songs is actually music itself. And Staines takes calculated, subtle steps to accomplish a profound entangling of the experience of his own music with the tales he tells of music's significance-bearing potential. Carrying folk music through its own ultimately affirmative version of rock's inward collapse toward reflexivity, Staines's songs matter not in the sense that the songs of the folk revival mattered (or sought to), but in their self-conscious foregrounding of folk's habitual ascription of mattering to music, functioning as intentional catalysts, we might say, to what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has termed "collaborative hallucination."[7]

Secondary Nostalgia: Through the Conduit with Joan Baez

In the course of over twenty novels, James Lee Burke—critical darling and habitual *New York Times* best-selling author—has established himself as a master of grittily atmospheric, psychologically probing depictions of small-town America. His 2001 novel, *Bitterroot*, includes this snapshot of a roughly contemporary Joan Baez concert in western Montana: "Her humor and grace, her sustained youthfulness and lack of any bitterness, and the incredible range of her voice were a conduit back into an era thirty years gone. For two hours it was 1969 and the flower children still danced barefoot on the lawn at Golden Gate Park."[8]

The folk music revival whose crest Baez rode to stardom was, of course, nostalgic at root, centered on the promise it held out of a redemptive return to a music organically grown from the soil of the working-class experience, polluted by neither the technology nor the commercialism of the mid-twentieth century.[9] Over a quarter-century later, as Burke shows, this music had become doubly—or, rather, secondarily—nostalgic: nostalgic for itself. At the cusp of the new century, what Burke's fictional audience craves from Baez is a return not so much to the well of authenticity and truth represented by American folk music as to an age sufficiently naïve to believe that such a return was possible, to the heyday of the revival itself. As Kirschenblatt-Gimlett phrases it, "In the sixties in the United States, tradition was still a given. It was not yet invented."[10]

[6] "Travelin' Man Bill Staines Stops in Portland," *Columbian* (Vancouver, Wash.), 15 October 1998, F9.

[7] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage," *Ethnomusicology* 39/3 (Fall 1995): 375.

[8] James Lee Burke, *Bitterroot* (New York: Pocket Star Books, 2001), 250.

[9] As Tamara E. Livingston observes of musical revivals in general, "[R]evivalists position themselves in opposition to aspects of the contemporary cultural mainstream, align themselves with a particular historical lineage, and offer a cultural alternative in which legitimacy is grounded in reference to authenticity and historical fidelity." See Livingston, "Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory," *Ethnomusicology* 43/1 (Winter 1999): 66.

[10] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Theorizing Heritage," 367. This particular assessment of the sixties does not seek to capture those dimensions of self-conscious nostalgia already strongly evident in its folk music scene; Bob Dylan was billed early on as "Son of Jack Elliott," whose own artistic persona

We verge in this assessment toward that configuration of pressures in recent rock to which Lawrence Grossberg, fitting squarely into a broad historiographic tradition, has applied the term "authentic inauthenticity," improbable as the idea's application to the realm of folk might seem. If rock 'n' roll was founded on the promise of an "authenticity" that could somehow transcend the alienating, falsifying veneer of the capitalistic machinery it inhabited from the start, punk ushered in an era that has witnessed a new foregrounding of this strategy's inherent self-contradictions. "Authentic inauthenticity," Grossberg writes, "says that authenticity is itself a construction, an image. . . . You have to construct particular images for yourself and adopt certain identities but, according to the logic of authentic inauthenticity, you must do so reflexively. . . ."[11] In the simplest terms, latter-day rock music can be trusted most at the moment that it acknowledges its own untrustworthiness, commercialism most nearly transcended in the acknowledgment that commercialism cannot be altogether transcended. Truth, simply put, henceforth contains a kernel of irony.[12]

There is nothing ironic in the kind of fantasy Joan Baez is shown peddling in Burke's account. But there does linger over her performance an awareness of its status as fantasy, as a breed of naïveté no longer so much grounded in a social reality as fondly reminiscent of one. What matters in the performance Burke depicts is no longer the possibility of genuine social redemption but the thrill of passage through the "conduit" to a time when redemption might have seemed conceivable. Tamara Livingston, in her systematic exploration of music revivals, has pointed to those in which "the association of a tradition with a period of social well-being in that society's past is a factor. . . . The revived practice comes to represent that feeling of cultural and social well-being, and when performed, it evokes those sentiments in

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was by then saturated with the spirit of homage to his late mentor Woody Guthrie. The crucial point is that this generation's musico-poetic discourse itself remained a realm within which "authenticity" could be purveyed without reference to its own undergirding meta-narratives: Ramblin' Jack Elliott offered folk music, not songs about folk music, and those elemental human truths to which Dylan seemed to have preternatural access were not truths about the way people listened to Dylan.

[11] Lawrence Grossberg, "The Media Economy of Rock Culture: Cinema, Post-modernity and Authenticity," in *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*, ed. Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin, and Lawrence Grossberg (New York: Routledge, 1993), 206.

[12] James Wolcott provided a thoughtful early articulation of the vaguely nostalgic spirit ("conservative" is his term, though perhaps not an altogether precise one) that lurked at the heart of the nascent punk movement in 1975: "What's changed is the nature of the impulse to create rock. No longer is the impulse revolutionary—i.e., the transformation of oneself and society—but conservative: to carry on the rock tradition. . . . [A] rocker now needs a historical sense. . . ." Wolcott, "A Conservative Impulse in the New Rock Underground," *Village Voice*, 18 August 1975, 6; repr. in *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, ed. David Brackett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 311. Rock is not the only genre in which these impulses are at work. Hip-hop, for instance, is just as heavily steeped in discourses of authenticity, and similarly susceptible to reflexivity on the topic. Especially notable, perhaps, are the seemingly bottomless inward spirals of self-scrutiny and self-denial to which Eminem subjects his own art and persona. No sooner has the closing note of his song "Kill You" on *The Marshall Mathers LP*—in which he threatens his female listeners with death by knife, gun, chainsaw, and strangulation, while repeatedly daring us not to take him seriously ("These motherfuckers are thinkin' I'm playin' / Thinkin' I'm sayin' the shit cause I'm thinkin' it just to be sayin' it")—faded away than Eminem lets loose a conciliatory chuckle and ends the song by purring into dead air, "I'm just playin' ladies, you know I love you." Eminem, *The Marshall Mathers LP*, Interscope Records 490629, 2000.

the participants."[13] This impulse is just as fully in operation in Baez's music at the turn of the century as it had been in the sixties, but the past in which this sense of well-being is lodged has been displaced from the remote wellspring of American folk music to the popular peak of its revival.

As I have observed, Bill Staines reached artistic maturity in the midst of this revival at its most optimistic, and has spent the years since attempting—successfully, by most accounts—to sustain that optimism. Around the time of his graduation from high school in 1964, he was hosting folk hootenannies in Cambridge's Club 47; his professional destiny was sealed, he told a *Boston Globe* reporter in 1998, at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival: "At age 18, when I left that concert, I knew exactly what I wanted to do."[14] His first album came out the following year, and Staines has been recording and touring steadily ever since.

Critics tend to discern in Staines's songwriting a most unproblematic, unself-conscious maintenance of the folk revival's core emphases on unpretentious lyrical realism and manifest musical continuity with tradition. His most beloved songs seem to embody to the highest degree the sense of comfortable familiarity at the heart of the folk genre, while achieving an emotional impact—"genuinely moving music"[15]—that seems, for many, to transcend its limited stylistic resources. "[H]is lyrics, homespun and naturalistic," wrote one commentator in 1985, "roll off the tongue; and there's no better writer of instantly memorable singalong choruses in this genre of music."[16] "When I think about the words 'instant classic,'" wrote another, "one of the first names that comes to my mind is Bill Staines. . . . [A]fter listening to any of his albums twice it seems you have always lived with his songs and that you will live with them forever."[17] Redhouse Records' promotional blurb for Staines drives such commentary home: "There's something about Bill Staines's songs that makes them instant classics and it's not surprising that so many of them slide so easily into the folk music canon. He writes lovely, infectious melodies, and his story-filled lyrics recall with compassion and depth the landscapes and characters he's known."[18]

Few familiar with Staines's work are likely to find much to argue with in these assessments. But just beneath the apparent "naturalism" of Staines's lyrics and the enchanting aura of almost preternatural musical oneness with the traditional canon—indeed, undergirding them—is a reconfiguration of priorities that I want to suggest set Staines's musical world well apart from that in which he grew up. For Staines's genius lies not in the realm of folk music, precisely, but in the realm of meta-folk, his art grounded not in the impulse toward the unmediated reclamation of the music of the past, but in the self-conscious affirmation of those patterns

[13] Livingston, "Music Revivals," 66.

[14] D. Quincy Whitney, "Songwriter Soars: After 30 Years Staines Still Finds Magic in his Music," *Boston Globe*, 11 January 1998.

[15] Bill Craig, "Folk Singer Weaves Love, Life in Songs," *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 8 February 1999, E5.

[16] Jeff McLaughlin, "Fine Folk: McCutcheon, Staines," *Boston Globe*, 7 May 1985, 72.

[17] Moshe Benarroch, review of Bill Staines, *The First Million Miles,* vol. 2, Folk and Acoustic Music Exchange, http://www.acousticmusic.com/fame/p00900.htm.

[18] See http://www.redhouserecords.com/Staines.html.

of cultural investment that made such a reclamation seem at once possible and potentially redemptive.

This discussion will unfold in four sections, describing a set of interlocking and mutually supportive processes through which Staines crafts his highly distinctive vision of that "secondary nostalgia" we have glimpsed in Burke's vision of Baez. The first section reflects on the album's opening number, a Woody Guthrie classic that provides—both in its very selection and in certain idiosyncrasies of Staines's performance—a cogent entrée into the issues of identity, memory, and musical self-mythology that undergird all that follows. The second section explores the persistence of music as a poetic topic across the remainder of the album, examining Staines's distinctive way of arguing for music's centrality in the formation of community and in the personal construction and negotiation of meaning. The third section examines a smaller body of songs that work their own choruses, as literal musical performances, into their lyrical diegeses, purposefully eliding the musical experiences of Staines's poetic subjects with the real-time experience of his own audience. The last section turns to the album's final number—or, rather, to this number's manifest musical commonalities with several that have come before—pointing to a particular melodic quirk through which Staines seems to accomplish a self-conscious running of his own musical language, river-like, toward the vast ocean of anonymous traditional song.

Mythology and Self-Mythology: Staines Plays Guthrie

Folk has long accommodated moments of reflexivity, of course, and the first words out of Staines's mouth on *Bridges* represent a lesson in folk's occasional effacement of the border between storytelling and self-mythologizing.

The album's first track is an up-tempo rendition of Woody Guthrie's 1939 "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd."[19] Through a few well-chosen—and largely fabricated—vignettes and quotations, Guthrie here mobilizes the Robin Hood archetype that had already proved so useful in popular reimaginings of the careers of Billy the Kid and Jesse James, rendering Floyd a subversive but kindhearted hero of the disenfranchised.[20] One typical episode:

> It was in Oklahoma City, it was on a Christmas Day,
> There was a whole carload of groceries come with a note to say:
> "Well, you say that I'm an outlaw, you say that I'm a thief.
> Here's a Christmas dinner for the families on relief."[21]

[19] The date of March 1939 is provided—together with reflections on Guthrie's body of "ballads about outlaws"—in Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 123.

[20] The ballad of the criminal was a well-established genre by the time of the first systematic efforts to record the folk music of the United States. Carl Sandburg's foundational *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927) includes a section of "Bandit Biographies," albeit the slimmest of the book's twenty-three sections at a scant three numbers. John A. and Alan Lomax's *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York: Macmillan, 1934) includes twenty such numbers, divided between the categories—separate but equal, presumably—of "Negro Bad Men" and "White Desperadoes."

[21] All lyrics quoted from this song are as transcribed from Guthrie's March 1940 recording for the Library of Congress, reissued as *Woody Guthrie: Library of Congress Recordings,* Rounder Records 1043, 1988. "Pretty Boy Floyd" written by Woody Guthrie.

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His road to a life outside the law begins, in Guthrie's telling, in Floyd's salutary defense of his wife's virtue, as he picks a fight with a belligerent deputy who uses vulgar words within Mrs. Floyd's hearing.[22] By the last verse, it has become obvious that the real villains of this rural landscape are not the outlaws but the bankers they rob, and that gunslinging is not nearly so damaging to the social fabric as mortgage foreclosure: "But as through your life you ramble, yes, as through your life you roam, / You won't never see an outlaw drive a family from their home."[23] It was around populist anthems of precisely this kind that folk's claims to genuine political relevance began to crystallize in the minds of many mid-century American enthusiasts for the genre.[24]

To describe the song in this way, though, is to bring into view a second protagonist in the tale: the teller himself. And the fundamentally bifocal character of the song's celebration of subversive heroism is acknowledged reflexively in Guthrie's opening words, which lift the curtain tellingly on two spectacles at once: "Come'n gather 'round me, children, and a story I will tell / Of Pretty Boy Floyd, the outlaw, Oklahoma knew him well." As formulaic as the "gather 'round" opening may be within the conventions of the genre, its resonances here are powerful and multivalent. For two parallel relationships are set forth here: one between the speaker ("I") and the people he seeks to gather, the other between Floyd and Oklahoma.[25] Implicit in this juxtaposition is an analogy between the two, an analogy clearly central to the song's cultural value at the time of its creation. His supporters did not turn to Guthrie for journalistic transparency in the rendering of songs of this kind. Guthrie, like Floyd, was fast developing a patina of legend, and his, too, was a powerful symbolic presence in the community he addressed, a spokesperson for a generation of farm owners and laborers whose denunciation of the capitalist powers-that-be was rapidly gaining in clarity and volume. In this sense, "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd" is finally about not one but two populist heroes: Floyd and Guthrie.

[22] The notion that Floyd's life of crime began with the chivalrous defense of a wronged woman is evocative of Guthrie's free reworking of the ballad "Jesse James" (one version of the original appears in Sandburg, *American Songbag*, 420–21). Guthrie's version begins with the murder of James's mother at the hand of a railway company operative, and James's quest to avenge it. That contemporary scholarship has failed to unearth any evidence to corroborate the exchange Guthrie narrates between the Floyds and the deputy is almost a foregone conclusion. See, for example, Jeffery S. King, *The Life and Death of Pretty Boy Floyd* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998), esp. 17; and Michael Wallis, *The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

[23] Though Staines's substitution of the word "people" for "children" in his performance on *Bridges* seems benign enough—and probably better tuned to contemporary sensibilities—there is no question that a multivalent resonance was lost. If, on the one hand, we take Guthrie's "children" to refer to literal, biological children, the term obviously works to inscribe a strong sense that the ballad is destined for the status of traditional, orally transmitted song. But the term may also connote a call to the disenfranchised for a gathering of those who are powerless, who have yet to reach full self-actualization. Staines's revision resonates with another famous moment in the unfolding of American folk in its convergence—coincidental or otherwise—with the opening line of Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

[24] The mid-century appropriation of folk music for left-leaning political purposes is explored in R. Serge Denisoff, *Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

[25] Guthrie was, of course, an Oklahoman himself, born in the town of Okemah.

Figure 1. Thomas Hart Benton, *Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*. Reprinted with permission of the Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas. Museum Purchase: Elizabeth M. Watkins Fund.

Precisely this dynamic in the experience of the folk ballad—the division of the genre's cultural value between the tales it transmits and the musical custodians themselves—is captured in Thomas Hart Benton's 1934 painting, *Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley* (Figure 1), in which our attention is divided between the story of the song itself (upper left) and the story of the song's performance (lower right).[26]

If we were to capture visually what occurs in Bill Staines's 1983 rendition of Guthrie's song, however, the picture would be even more crowded, the eye even less sure where to turn first. For Staines's performance raises the curtain on a third spectacle, and takes the act of mythmaking up one further level of remove. If what matters most in the 1939 original is Guthrie's appropriation of the semimythical Pretty Boy Floyd, what matters most to Staines's 1983 audience is Staines's appropriation, not of Floyd's image, but of Woody Guthrie's.

[26] The harmonica player depicted in this painting is modeled, as it happens, on then-struggling artist Jackson Pollock; see Ray M. Lawless, "Thomas Hart Benton's *Jealous Lover* and its Musical Background," *The Register of the Museum of Art* (University of Kansas, Lawrence) 2/6 (June 1961): 36. My thoughts on this painting arose in the course of conversations with Annett Richter, whose current research on Thomas Hart Benton—unpublished at the time of this writing—represents what appears to be the first sustained attention the artist has received from a musicologist. I am grateful for her insights.

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We may discern a symptom of this shift in priorities in the gentle reworking of the song's verse structure in Staines's performance.[27] To begin with, two couplets of Guthrie's twelve (the seventh and eighth, shown below) are gone:

> But there's a many a starving farmer the same old story told,
> How this outlaw paid their mortgage, and he saved their little home.
> Others tell you 'bout a stranger that come to beg a meal,
> Underneath his napkin left a thousand dollar bill.

If this deletion hastens the unfolding of Guthrie's picaresque, episodic tale, the rendition Staines offers also presses toward a more shapely, goal-directed whole by offering a recapitulation of the opening couplet (the "gather 'round" verse quoted above) at the end of the song.

Though these alterations thus have important structural effects, they also have the effect of deflecting the song's meaning away from sociopolitical realities: no mention of farmers or mortgages remains in Staines's version, which encapsulates Floyd's putative social benevolence in the single episode quoted above about the Christmas dinner. The deletion of the two central couplets turns this from a tale about the urgent, real-life problem of farmers' debt (the crux of the story for Guthrie) into a more generalized fable of the kindhearted outlaw—though it is Guthrie's verse about the mortgage that houses what might be seen as the kernel of his moral exculpation of Floyd: through the circuitous logic of the quick-change artist, the farmers get their mortgages paid off, the bankers get their money back, and we struggle to recall who the real victim is. At the same time, Staines's reprise of the opening verse at the end obviously redoubles the effect—indeed, makes an overarching trope—of the song's most reflexive gesture, the moment that deflected attention from the song's subject toward the song's performer.

Although the album that follows taps deeply into the mythologies of the truth-peddling wanderer for which Guthrie served as archetype, *Bridges* forgoes almost entirely any hint of investment in Guthrie's (much less Floyd's) politics, or, indeed, in any politics whatever. By comparison to this opening number, the ten songs that follow are resolutely issueless; *Bridges* does not set out to cast suspicion on anyone, to resist authority in any form, or to galvanize support for any cause, apart from the broadest sorts of appeals to general harmony.

Staines's refusal of political investment has in fact proven one of the most fetching aspects of his work for many critics. As Bill Craig put it in a 1999 article:

> While some of his colleagues use the coffeehouse stage as a forum for self-absorbed political and personal statements, Staines's brand of folk poetically but humbly celebrates the heroes of small-town America, the virtues of true love and the rewards of simple living. . . .
>
> Like other folk singers, Staines works meaning-of-life messages into his act. But unlike almost all others, Staines' philosophy is marked by non-ideological common sense.[28]

[27] For an in-depth look at a similar process of verse deletion as a form of political negotiation in connection with Guthrie's best-known song, see Mark Allan Jackson, "Is This Song Your Song Anymore? Revisioning Woody Guthrie's 'This Land Is Your Land,'" *American Music* 20/3 (Fall 2002): 249–76.

[28] Craig, "Folk Singer Weaves Love."

Craig's final formulation constitutes an infelicity of comforting naïveté; like much of what passes for "common sense," the breeds of heroism, love, and simplicity Staines celebrates are steeped in ideologies of their own. At the same time, Staines is scarcely as unique as Craig seems to suggest in seeking to uncouple folk music from the agendas of overt political progressivism (we are doing little more, of course, than revisiting the chasm Bob Dylan famously threw open at the folk revival's peak). Many of the more die-hard folkies at the performances captured on *Bridges* almost certainly had at home the April/May/June issue of *Sing Out!: The Folk Song Magazine*, the publication that, since its 1954 inception, has been feeding folk supporters around the country a steady diet of interviews, articles, "teach-in" columns, and, most important, songs. In that issue, folksinger Bruce "Utah" Phillips articulates succinctly the notion that it is through his own apolitical approach that the best interests of the ordinary working folk, to whom he retains his ties, are best served: "I know there are those political people, many of them good friends, who say 'Why don't you do more of our politics!' Well, look. People don't set aside money from their wages to go to a club or concert so that they can get beaten over the head with ideology."[29] As Staines himself told the *Washington Post*'s Brenda Caggiano in 1988, "I always try to keep my music positive. Rather than singing a protest song, I sing a positive song about the alternative."[30]

What is Staines's "alternative," and what, if not politics, are his songs about? A list of nominal topics, surveying the contents of this album, would include a range of folk's most deep-rooted tropes: working folks, trains, rivers, valleys, and the bittersweet pleasures of life on the road. But lurking throughout—at center stage only fleetingly, but rarely offstage altogether—is music. The numbers speak for themselves: though music is not a topic in the "standards" that open and close the album (Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd" and the traditional "I Bid You Goodnight," respectively), seven of the nine songs that intervene make explicit reference to music-making in some form. It is to these that we now turn.

Words about Music

Guthrie's song—to take a final backward glance at the album's opening number—invoked Floyd to affirm his audience's own capacity to wield power over the systems that oppress them; Staines invokes Guthrie to affirm his audience's belief that music is capable of mattering in this way, of filling this need. The album that follows touches on a range of human situations, but its most persistent lesson is that music must be understood to matter, to fill needs, whether as a site of salvific epiphany, for instance, or as an anchoring point in the demarcation of life's passages, or as a framework within which to conceptualize social harmony writ large. It is in this sense that Staines's breed of folk is finally a meta-discourse, its ultimate value lodged not in the work it stands to do in the world, but the work it stands to do in ratifying a particular understanding of music's role in the human experience. The question is not "Is it authentic and meaningful?" We must ask, rather, "How does Staines's

[29] Bruce Phillips, "Appleseeds," *Sing Out!: The Folk Music Magazine* (April/May/June 1983): 27.
[30] Brenda Caggiano, "Staines, on the Subject," *Washington Post*, 22 May 1988, F3.

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art work to affirm his listeners' faith in the possibility of musical authenticity and meaning?"

The project I seek to locate at this album's heart finds perhaps its most robust adumbration in the album's title song (track 7). Its entire lyrics run thus:

> There are bridges, bridges in the sky, they are shining in the sun.
> They are stone and steel and wood and wire, they can change two things to one.
> They are languages and letters, they are poetry and awe.
> They are love and understanding, and they're better than a wall. [last two lines repeated]
>
> There are canyons, there are canyons, they are yawning in the night.
> They are rank and bitter anger, they are all devoid of light.
> They are fear and blind suspicion, they are apathy and pride.
> They are dark and so foreboding, and they're, oh, so very wide. [last two lines repeated]
>
> Let us build a bridge of music, let us cross it with a song.
> Let us span another canyon, let us right another wrong.
> Oh, and if someone should ask us where we're off and bound today,
> We will tell them "Building bridges," and be off and on our way. [last two lines repeated]

For all their open-handed obviousness, the signifiers are deployed here with considerable care. Having set forth, in the first two verses, the images of the "bridge" and the "canyon" in turn, and freighting them heavily with highly generalized symbolic value, the first line of the final verse mobilizes two terms yet unmentioned—"us" and "music"—while at the same time turning from an account of the present to a plan for the future. As emotionally alluring as the sense of community engendered in this final verse may be (who wouldn't want to be out spanning canyons and righting wrongs?), membership in that community is apparently defined through a single parameter: one's investment in music. Music itself, meanwhile, enjoys an even more dazzling aura of suprarational incandescence—*lumen de lumine*—than those "bridges" enumerated in the first verse, counterposed as it is against the symbolism of darkness touched on in some form in every line of the second verse.

Such foregrounding of music-making is far from unprecedented in the folk canon. Indeed, "Bridges" is so structurally evocative of Pete Seeger and Lee Hays's "If I Had a Hammer" that the spirit of the earlier tune lingers powerfully here even in the absence of the faintest actual quotation. (In Seeger and Hays's song, the first verse's "hammer" turns, in the second, to "bell," in the third to "song": "I'd sing out love between my brothers and my sisters / All over this land.").[31] It is in the near ubiquity of the theme of music, however, and the subtlety with which it is handled, that a difference in degree in Staines's work becomes a distinct difference in kind.[32]

[31] Though there has been debate about who actually wrote these words, the laurels should probably fall to Hays. In a recent interview with Paul Zollo, Seeger recalls the genesis of "If I Had a Hammer": "In January of 1949, Lee sent me four verses. He said, 'See if you can make up a tune.' And I sat down at the piano and plunked it out." See "The Power of Song: Pete Seeger, " in *Songwriters on Songwriting*, ed. Paul Zollo (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1991), 4.

[32] It goes without saying that the history of song is peppered with music about music: the Psalms provide dozens of examples, others of which would include—among hundreds—Purcell's "Music for

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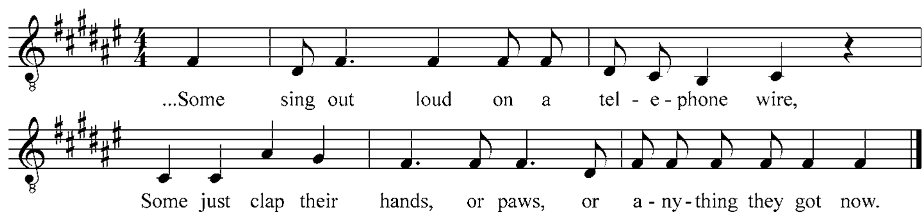

Example 1. Chorus (conclusion), "A Place in the Choir," from *Bridges* written by Bill Staines. © 1978, renewed MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI) ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.

Music's power to define community—or, in this case, to inspire a sense of universal communality—comprises the governing trope of "A Place in the Choir" (track 4), a song that had already attained the status of a standard by this point (a cheer goes up at his introduction: "This is my animal song. . . .").[33] The verses present a zoological inventory, encompassing the sounds that each animal in turn—bullfrog, hippopotamus, cow, dog, cat, hummingbird, cricket, donkey, pony, coyote, owl, jay, duck, opossum, porcupine, ox, fox, grizzly bear, alligator, hawk, raccoon, and dove—can contribute to one global act of music-making. Its chorus unites them:

> All God's critters got a place in the choir,
> Some sing low, some sing higher,
> Some sing out loud on a telephone wire,
> Some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they got now.

Characteristic of Staines's gift for accomplishing much with the most limited musical and poetic means is the conclusion of this refrain. In the last poetic line, Staines has run out of musical abilities before he has run out of animals, forced to find a role for those who lack not only the ability to sing but even the anatomy to clap properly. The poetry bends to include them; the line far exceeds its metrical allotment of syllables, and after three singsong rhymes, this final line is obliged to rhyme with nothing. The music's hypermetric logic proves just as willing to give way as the strong expectation of an eight-bar chorus (the first three lines each get two) is abandoned at the end; the melody is exhausted, and logically concluded, by the end of the eighth measure (with the word "hands"), but a ninth is tossed in to be sure everyone is accounted for (Example 1).[34]

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a While," Schubert's "An die Musik," Irving Berlin's "That Mysterious Rag," Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm," Chuck Berry's "Rock and Roll Music," Boston's "More Than a Feeling," Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke," Paul McCartney's "Here Today," and a substantial fraction of the entire rap corpus.

[33] The song had appeared on Staines's *Whistle of the Jay,* Folk Legacy FSI-070, 1979. There is some ambiguity about the song's title: BMI records show that it has twice been recorded (by Linda Schrade and John McCutcheon) under the title "All God's Critters," http://repertoire.bmi.com.

[34] All transcriptions of lyrics, tunes, and chords in this article are my own. Staines's and Van Duser's free use of capos and alternative tuning result in songs that appear, in these examples, to be performed in much more forbidding keys than are actually being executed by fingers on the fretboard. Examples throughout are transcribed at concert pitch, and I have foregone the process of detailing how these keys were—or might have been—accomplished on the guitar. It is worth noting, too, that the chorus of "River" is extended in a way very similar to this example, ending with a deceptive cadence (to IV) whose resolution has the effect of extending a closing four-measure phrase—"Let's

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"River" (track 11), another tune popular enough to get a rousing rendition of the chorus the first time through from the audience, traces the arc of a lifetime, from the first-person protagonist's birth "in the path of the winter wind" in the first verse to an anticipation of his death in the last: "My rolling waters will round the bend / And flow into the open sea."[35] Music, as we might expect in this idealized autobiography, figures into the picture at every turn, its role developing along with the subject himself.[36] Its single appearance in the first verse is fleeting: "The whistling ways of my younger days / Too quickly have faded on by." With the onset of adulthood in the second verse, however, the protagonist's growth toward musical self-actualization is enfolded with the narrator's own mounting capacity for capturing the narrative's key elements—in this instance, the exilic view of childhood, sexual awakening, the metonymic demarcation of time's passage in autumn leaves—in musical terms:

> I heard all the songs that the children sing,
> And listened to love's melodies.
> I've felt my own music within me rise
> Like the wind in the autumn trees.

And it is music that Staines toasts last in the final verse's turn toward the chorus:

> So here's to the rainbow that's followed me here,
> And here's to the friends that I know,
> And here's to the song that's within me now,
> I will sing it where e'er I go.

In its iconic enfolding of journey, community, and song, "River" feels like nothing so much as a versification of the affirmations at the center of the folk revival of twenty years earlier as we find them articulated, for instance, in Eric von Schmidt and Jim Rooney's 1994 retrospective of the Cambridge scene in which Staines reached maturity:

> As a result of our lives together, we each found ourselves charting our own course and abandoning the one that had been set for us by our parents or by society at large. . . . The quest became as important as what it was we were questing after. We redefined ourselves as people through the music we chose to sing and play and listen to. . . .
>
> For most of us, music has been the way we got to where we wanted to go, and music, we discovered, is a very important thing in many people's lives, whether they play it or not.[37]

---

you and me, river, run down to the sea"—to a seven-measure phrase. The effect there—with the bass line's downward walk to the tonic—feels much like an underlining of the river's descent to the ocean.

[35] This song, like "A Place in the Choir," appeared on *Whistle of the Jay,* Folk Legacy FSI-070, 1979.

[36] It is worth bearing in mind that the longevity of the folk career—a function of its refusal of identification as youth culture—is a point of pride for many in the industry. As Canadian songwriter Garnet Rogers puts it, "Sometimes reporters will ask me if I think this is a viable career, and that always gets me mad. . . . I'll say, 'Viable? How many rock bands can you name from the '70s that are still working? The '80s, the '90s? I've been doing this full time, making a good living, supporting a family, for over 25 years. How many rock stars can say that?'" See Alarik, *Deep Community*, 5; the interview originally appeared in the *Boston Globe*, 25 January 2002.

[37] Eric von Schmidt and Jim Rooney, *Baby, Let Me Follow You Down: The Illustrated Story of the Cambridge Folk Years*, 2nd edn. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 311.

Bill Staines did not write *Bridge*'s tenth track, "Secret Garden"—it was penned by California folksinger Carol McComb—but the number fits no less securely into the album's overarching concern with music and its potential to channel meaning. McComb's first verse reflects on the songwriter's pursuit of inspiration; searching too hard, she suggests, is as futile as "looking for shooting stars in the sky." The second verse teaches us that making demands of love is just as sure a path to frustration, "like clutching at fistfuls of sand." In the third and final verse, music and love are conceptually united in the lesson that both must simply be taken as they come: "Believing in love is like letting the song sing itself, / The more it comes out, the more you become your own self."

This album's celebration of music takes one of its subtlest forms in its second track, "Movin' It Down the Line." Though the song's title-cum-tagline is drawn from the lingo of the truck driver who is the song's second-person protagonist, Staines's own long history of transcontinental travel clearly lurks just beneath the surface.[38] In the second verse, breaking into the atmosphere of pointlessness Staines has thus far woven around the eternal nowhere of the road, the imagery takes a somewhat surprising turn, as music is put forth as a surrogate for the eternally deferred gratification of arrival:

> Looking for the music up over the hill,
> Feeling like you're nothing but standing still,
> Yeah, you see it all when you're movin' it down the line.

In the bridge, music returns in a more substantial role. The first three lines set forth the slot machine that never pays out as a metaphor for life on the road, a life of travel toward a destination that will never be reached. The three lines that follow propose an alternative form of fulfillment in the spontaneous act of making music:

> You got a one-armed bandit upon your back,
> Says drop another year and I'll pay you back.
> But those old triple-sevens never, ever seem to come your way.
> And from the second-floor window of an old hotel,
> You hear the early morning traffic and the village bell,
> And you find yourself singing like a sparrow at the break of day.

In this image of the trucker, surprised, it appears, at his own capacity for music-making, spontaneous song comes to stand for the promise fulfilled, for the happy outcome that is forever accessible even in the face of the grinding sameness of

[38] For Staines to assume the persona of one who toils at a job he himself has never held—driving a truck, in this case—is not, of course, a failure of sincerity or authenticity in itself. In his autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1943), Guthrie recalls a few hours in the car of a family of itinerant agricultural workers, who at first take him for "one of these here pretty boys that tries to get out of all th' hard work you can!" From the backseat, Guthrie shows off the calluses on his fingertips and offers an extemporized song about farmwork. The family matriarch responds: "Well, I don't know if that guitar boy back there hits any of th' heavy work or not, but he can dang shore sing about it!" (270). Staines's own life of travel is a recurring theme in his work (and promotional literature), manifested in such album titles as *Miles* (1975), *The First Million Miles* (a greatest hits compilation, 1989), *The Happy Wanderer* (1993), and his recent memoir, *The Tour* (Philadelphia: Xlibris Corporation, 2003).

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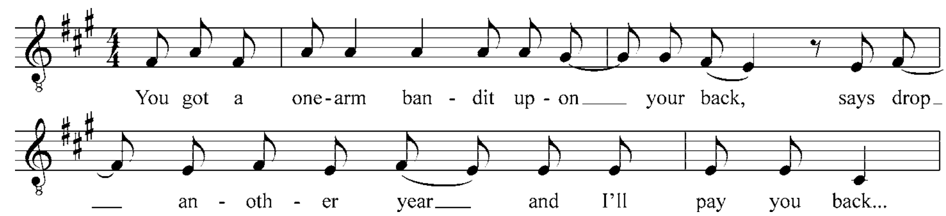
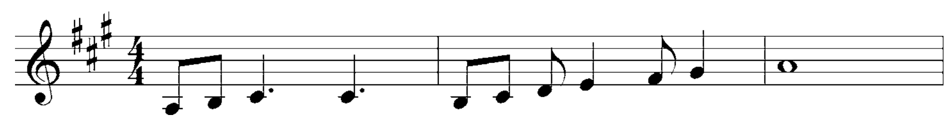


Example 2a. Bridge (opening), "Movin' It Down the Line," from *Bridges* written by Bill Staines, © Copyright Secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.



Example 2b. Solo (opening), "Movin' It Down the Line," from *Bridges* written by Bill Staines, © Copyright Secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.

daily life. The discovery of his own voice seems to take place in some numinal region between the sound of the morning traffic—a metonymic signifier for the life of travel—and a village bell, with its overtones (as it were) of spatial fixity and the stability of community. And the actual early morning through which the driver is living is transmuted, through the closing simile, into a poetic abstraction, a "break of day" in which we cannot help but discern a familiar image of hope and renewal.

The musical results are immediate and, as often with Staines, moving to a degree belied by their simplicity. The bridge gives way to a guitar solo over the verse's chord changes, as the protagonist appears to give himself over completely to the musical world he has discovered. The solo's opening gesture (a version of which had already entered as a countermelody to the second vocal verse) consists of a scalar ascent whose ultimate arrival at A4 seems calculated to accomplish the precise counteracting of the vocal fall from A3 that initiated the bridge (Examples 2a and 2b).[39] Against a backdrop of prosaic sameness, redemption through music is thus hinted at, discovered, and accomplished in the most economical strokes.

In 1979, Steven Mailloux, a leading figure in the then promising young field of literary criticism broadly known as "reader theory," sought to confront the curious problem of Ishmael's disappearance as narrator from the later stretches of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Reader theory is, in general, concerned with bringing the reader's experience of a literary or poetic work to bear on interpretation, directing critical attention away from a conception of the work as a static, objectified whole in which meanings are embedded wholesale by the author, toward the time-bound unfolding of the reader's encounter with the text, whose meanings—now constantly negotiable—come into existence only at the moment of this encounter. In these terms, Mailloux suggests that Ishmael, in effect, outlives his usefulness to Melville,

[39] Registral conventions used here follow those established by the Acoustical Society of America, in which middle C is C4.

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rooting Ishmael's disappearance in an understanding of the purpose the character serves early in the book:

> Early chapters of the novel prepare the way for later ones, not simply by revealing new information but by arming the reader with interpretive habits, specific ways of reading. In the early chapters, Ishmael (a schoolmaster on land) teaches his reader to see the rich significances of the later chapters. Indeed, reading *Moby-Dick* is a process of learning to read it.[40]

Though Staines never withdraws, Ishmael-like, from the scene of his own music, and his goal is not to inculcate a way of reading (or listening) so much as to sustain one, the service he provides in the foregoing songs seems closely parallel to that provided by Ishmael—or rather Melville through Ishmael—in Mailloux's vision. As firmly as Staines lays hold of folk's capacity for what Simon Frith has described as "lyrical realism" ("asserting a direct relationship between a lyric and the social or emotional condition it describes and represents"[41]), and as richly as these songs may embody Donald Clarke's rough-and-ready description of folk song (they are "easy to remember, easy to sing, and seem to be about things that matter"[42]), the senses of reality and mattering in these songs are ultimately inseparable from the promises they make on music's behalf, that is, from the prescriptions they set forth concerning music's uses and meanings. Whether or not Staines's lyrics are "about things that matter," they are about music's mattering, affirming music's capacity to assume a role in memory and identity formation, in forging community in the face of diversity, in affording life a sense of fulfillment. As closely as the depths of allegory and resonances of meaning are bound up, in the case of *Moby Dick*, with Ishmael's instructions to the reader in the pursuit of interpretive depth, so, too, does the emotional impact of Staines's music seem inseparable from his systematic lessons in music's capacity for emotional impact.

Diegetic Choruses, Sing-along and Otherwise

If the experience of Staines's music is strongly conditioned by his deployment of music and music-related imagery in his songs' poetic diegeses, crucial, too, is his frequent deployment of a more specific effect through which this linkage emerges in its most focused form: moments at which these two musical realms—the songs' real-time performance and the songs' lyrical fixation on song—become one. It is to such moments of diegetic music that we now turn.

In my earlier discussion of "River," I passed over one key detail in the passage of the final verse into the chorus. After Staines delivers the closing salute to his own music at the end of the last verse—"Here's to the song that's within me now, / I will

[40] Steven Mailloux, "Learning to Read: Interpretation and Reader-Response Criticism," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 12/1 (Spring 1979): 97. Mailloux cites Harrison Hayford's reading of Melville's novel as critical in shaping his own (98).

[41] Simon Frith, "Why Do Songs Have Words?" in *Music For Pleasure: Essays on the Sociology of Pop* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 112.

[42] Donald Clarke, *The Rise and Fall of Popular Music: A Narrative History from the Renaissance to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 451.

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sing it where e'er I go"—he speaks two words to the audience on his way into the closing chorus: "Help me."

Such injunctions are a familiar part of Staines's pre-song patter (he preludes this album's performance of "A Place in the Choir," for example, with the words, "There's a chorus to this, help me out on it").[43] Though there is indeed a strong sense that the sing-along chorus of "A Place in the Choir" functions, at each particular live performance, as a case in point—a potent instantiation of just the sort of universal music-making the lyrics celebrate—the lead-in to the final chorus of "River" seems calculated to accomplish something even more specific than this (the audience has been singing along lustily for two choruses already, after all). For the strong implication here is that the task to which Staines summons the audience's aid is the performance of that song he has just named, the one that is within him now. The music being depicted and the music being performed at that very moment thus collapse into each other; Staines is found not only singing about the discovery of his song but literally singing it, there and then, with the audience invited to take part in its performance. He thus scripts into this tale of the transcendent power of music a role for the auditors before him, and the idealized, semi-mythological narrative of the music-centered life bleeds directly into the real world of the performance.

The protagonist of *Bridges*'s sixth track, "The Happy Yodel," seems a close cousin to that of "River," a wandering musician who, in this case, is making his way home to a girl he hopes is still waiting for him. Here, too, the principle of diegetic song (that is, the actual performance of the song being depicted lyrically) becomes critical, but it is deployed to a markedly different end—in some respects, an opposite one.

"The Happy Yodel" first appeared on Staines's album *Miles*, released in 1975, the year in which Staines won the National Yodeling Championship at Texas's Kerrville Folk Festival.[44] Staines's craft—which remains in dazzling form at the time of the 1983 recording—is showcased in the yodeling that makes up the second half of this song's chorus (no singing along with this one). What is ultimately accomplished in "The Happy Yodel," though, is strongly conditioned by its turn toward explicitly diegetic song at the outset of the chorus:

> And I sing her a yodel, a happy yodel,
> And we will be married in spring.
> The birds'll be singing, the bells'll be ringing,
> And she'll be wearing my ring.
> [yodeling]

As yodeling made its way into the twentieth-century American pop-cultural landscape, songwriters not infrequently dealt with its flagrant spectacularity—beneath which lurked the constant threat of absurdity—through the activation of diegetic pretexts. One thinks, for example, of the persistent self-referentiality of the yodeling

[43] We have observed Staines's gift for inspiring audience participation, an element so central to the folk aesthetic it hardly bears comment; as Simon Frith writes of the ideology at work here, "In folk there [are] no stars or hit, no distinctions between performers and audience." See Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 29.

[44] "The Happy Yodel" written by Bill Staines. Ⓒ Copyright secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.

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song that the Seven Dwarfs perform for the title character in Walt Disney's 1937 movie *Snow White*: "Ho hum, the tune is dumb, The words don't mean a thing. / Isn't this a silly song for anyone to sing! / [yodeling]." "The Lonely Goatherd," in Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1959 *The Sound of Music*, makes continual reference to the yodel as performance while ringing playful changes on potential rhymes with "Goatherd" (e.g., "Folks in a town that was quite remote heard [yodeling]/Lusty and clear from the goatherd's throat heard [yodeling].")

But the convention of the diegetic yodeling refrain provides Staines with the opportunity to achieve rather more than Hammerstein's goatherd. For the poetic pretext of the yodel lays bare the purely fantastic nature of the narrative unfolding here, situated as we find ourselves in a world in which the traveler announces his eminent arrival not by cell phone, say, but by casting a happy yodel across the valley. Though Staines speaks in the first person throughout, and tells a familiar autobiographical tale of life on the road, the trope is mapped onto a pre-mechanistic pastoral landscape patently remote from Staines's own, his "I" lodged, in this case, in the persona of one of this landscape's fantastic inhabitants. This use of first person has the effect of placing the entire song into quotation marks, as it were: this ceases to be a Bill Staines song about a wandering singer so much as a Bill Staines performance of a song spilling spontaneously forth from an imagined wandering singer.

It is precisely the establishment of this critical distance that allows us to make sense of the rather tricky relationship between the poetry of this entire song and Staines's own characteristic poetic voice. Staines's lyrics, concerned as they persistently are with spinning universal truths around familiar experiences through everyday language, frequently dance near the border of cliché, laudable largely in so rarely crossing it. In this song, it is hard to escape the sense that this border is not so much approached as freely crossed and recrossed, as if to probe in a most self-conscious way the stylistic conventions by which Staines's own art is so studiously regulated. The demands of the metrically tight-knit rhyme scheme Staines sets for himself are met time and again with improbably convenient, even worn out word choices: "I've walked down the highways and come down the byways"; "There's a girl in the valley and her name is Sally"; "The birds'll be singing, the bells'll be ringing."

Needless to say, this laying bare of the constructed character of his own poetic discourse need not be read as criticism in the negative sense, nor is there any internal justification for reading it thus. We know this language for what it is, Staines seems to say, and we'll take it. The conventions of Staines's own poetic language may indeed come under clear-eyed scrutiny here, but to an end that feels like nothing so much as celebratory embrace, a happy foregrounding of the stylistic premises underpinning this music's community-affirming power to feel familiar.

The power of the diegetic chorus to strike at otherwise inaccessible kernels of truth is explored in a very different way in *Bridges*' third track, "Walker Behind the Wheel." In yet another scene from a musical life on the road, this song's first-person protagonist is a fiddle player whose band enjoys a successful gig, then repairs to the bar, where most of the action takes place. In the second verse, an old man "full of whisky" approaches the fiddler to pass on some of the hard lessons of his own life as a traveling musician, and asking the young fiddler to offer some news on their shared home state of Texas. Upon its final iteration, the old man clarifies that the

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Chord Changes A:
E-flat A-flat E-flat A-flat B-flat E-flat
E-flat A-flat E-flat A-flat B-flat E-flat

Chord Changes B:
A-flat E-flat B-flat
E-flat A-flat E-flat A-flat B-flat E-flat

0:00	**Chord Changes A**	[Instrumental introduction]
0:18	**Chord Changes A** Spoken	It was the middle of Montana on a cold October night, When our van pulled up outside the door. We'd been three months on the road, four hundred miles that day; We were tired, but we loaded our stuff out onto the floor.
0:35	**Chord Changes B** sung	Well, it was Jack on the guitar and Bill on the bass, Tom on the lonesome steel, And I played the fiddle around the place, And it was Walker behind the wheel.
0:54	**Chord Changes A** Spoken	Well, the crowd was with us that night, the dancers stepped up high and around, And we played like we hadn't played in awhile. At the end of the evening, you know, even the management was pleased, So afterwards we all hit the bar with a smile,
1:11	**Chord Changes B** Sung	When this guy full of whiskey comes over to me, And says with a look in his eye, "Well, I can tell by your tags you're from Texas, boy, Brother, well so am I. Tell me,
1:29	**Chord Changes B** Sung	"Do the bluebonnets carpet the fields in the spring? Does the Brazos still run to the sea? Does the sun still shine down on those Texas girls? Once one gave her love to me.
1:49	**Chord Changes A** Spoken	"You see, son, there was a time when my song was just as sweet as yours, And I traveled and I worked with the best. But day after day, well it got to be year after year, And I found that the road gives you no time to rest.
2:07	**Chord Changes B** Sung	"Runaway dreams put a rope to my soul, The nights took my company, Then the gin got the lyrics to most of my songs, And the age took my memory. But tell me,
2:25	**Chord Changes B** Sung	"Do the bluebonnets carpet the fields in the spring? Does the Brazos still run to the sea? Does the sun still shine down on those Texas girls? Once one gave her love to me.

Figure 2. Formal structure, "Walker Behind the Wheel" written by Bill Staines, © Copyright Secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.

"picture of home" he craves is one only the fiddle can provide, that music alone is capable of revivifying the Texas he remembers (the full lyrics appear in Figure 2).

Though there is a powerful emotional impact in the very thought that this musician trusts most what only music can provide, the question of what precisely is provided at the song's close is complex, one that requires turning first to ambiguities raised near its opening.

2:45	**Chord Changes B**	[Guitar solo]
3:03	**Chord Changes A** Spoken	"So I guess I see a lot of myself in you and your friends here, I see the poet, and I see the clown, and sometimes the king. But just you take care of yourself and try not to end up like me, With a whole lot of empty dreams and no song to sing.
3:22	**Chord Changes B** Lines 1–3 spoken Line 4 sung	"Well, I didn't mean to go preachin' to you, let me buy you a beer, I guess I've spent too much time talkin' alone. You really are pretty good on that fiddle from what I can hear, You paint me a picture of home. And tell me,
3:40	**Chord Changes B** Sung	"Do the bluebonnets carpet the fields in the spring? Does the Brazos still run to the sea? Does the sun still shine down on those Texas girls? Once one gave her love to me.
3:59	**Chord Changes B** Sung	"Do the bluebonnets carpet the fields in the spring? Does the Brazos still run to the sea? Does the sun still shine down on those Texas girls? Once one gave her love to me."
4:18	**Chord Changes B** Sung	Now it's Jack on the guitar and Bill on the bass, And Tom on the lonesome steel, I played the fiddle around the place, And it was Walker behind the wheel.

Figure 2. Continued.

The song begins, after a 16-measure introduction, with sixteen measures of talk over a repeated guitar riff (accompanied by what I term, in Figure 2, "Chord Changes A"). With a move to the subdominant (for "Chord Changes B," at 0:35), the voice breaks into actual melody, the lyrics turning toward a bird's-eye view of the situation that we are likely to identify at once as the chorus: "It was Jack on the guitar, and Bill on the bass. . . ."

A second spoken verse follows (0:54), after which Staines returns to the same four lines of melody, but this time with a new set of words (1:11), introducing us to the older musician. When the four-line melody is repeated at once (1:29) with a third set of words—"Do the bluebonnets carpet the fields in the spring," etc.—we are forced to revise our earlier grasp of the song's structure: *this* must be the real chorus.[45] The verses, we now realize, are composed of Chord Changes A and B in turn, with speaking over A and singing over B, followed by a chorus composed of the "bluebonnet" words set to a repetition of B (with the same melody). This is precisely the structure played out in the following twelve lines.

[45] I have had occasion already to tip my hat to reader theory at its heyday, and am obliged do so again here, as manifestly as Stanley E. Fish's pathbreaking work on Milton eavesdrops on this reading of "Walker Behind the Wheel." As Fish puts it, "Everything depends on the temporal dimension. . . . a reader first structures the field he inhabits and then is asked to restructure it (by changing an assignment of speaker or realigning attitudes and positions)." See Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," *Critical Inquiry* 2/3 (Spring 1976): 474.

Things again become uncertain, however, in the final verse. We return to spoken monologue, as anticipated, over Chord Changes A (3:03), but when Chord Changes B roll around (3:22), the man continues to talk through their first three lines, almost as if even this song is in danger of eluding him—this is the first time in the song (outside of the guitar solo) that this progression has occurred without its characteristic vocal melody. As a result, when the man at last launches into melody for the "bluebonnets" material (3:40), it comes with a sense of structural dislocation; the first sounding of this melody ordinarily comprises the second half of a verse, not the chorus itself, and we cannot be altogether sure which one this counts as.

Though the sense of a chorus returns more forcibly when the "bluebonnets" material—words and music alike—is repeated (3:59), what follows muddies the waters considerably. For the song closes with a final sounding not of this chorus but of the "Jack on the guitar" quatrain we *first* took to be the chorus, as if to reassert its viability as the song's central idea (4:18). We walk away with the curious sense that the song has, in effect, two competing choruses, one belonging to (and delivered in the first person by) each of the two musicians in the story.

It would be a mistake to speak with too much confidence about what this moment means.[46] But it would be a mistake, too, to ignore the interpretive possibilities that seem to linger closest to the surface. Setting side by side two of the most striking features of this song's closing stretch—the touching call of the older man for a *musical* picture of home and the surprising return of the younger musician's voice at the end—we might well be inclined to understand the latter's closing "chorus" as a direct, literal response to the older man's plea. The old musician asks for a picture of home in song, and song is what the young man provides through the return—a diegetic one this time—of the first sung music he offered. The ironic twist of the tail, of course, is that the home depicted is not the desired one, Texas, but the one both of them ultimately opted for: the road. The absence at the center of the older man's bleak world remains unfilled, and even his effort to center the song structurally around his nostalgia for Texas, through his vision of its rightful chorus, is compromised in the end. A different chorus, and a different home, insist on preeminence. And it is the self-conscious engagement with the conventions of the chorus itself, the perennial heart of the folk song, that provides the stage upon which this drama unfolds.

"Into the open sea": Composing Traditional Music

As we have seen, Staines is fond of imagining rivers emptying to oceans; the Brazos does it in "Walker Behind the Wheel," and the rolling old namesake of "River" does it at the end of life's journey. One reason the image works so potently in Staines's hands, I suggest, is that it provides a lucid metaphoric framework for the aspirations

[46] Matters are made especially treacherous by Staines's fondness for returning to opening verses at the end, with or without discernible narrative justification; "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Railroad Blues," "Secret Garden" (as in McComb's original), and "I Bid You Goodnight" all feature returns of part or all of their opening verses as their closing ones.

of his own artistry. It is from the language of traditional music that his songs are perceived to flow—he "write[s] songs that seem like traditional folk songs"[47]—and no greater artistic victory is possible than watching his own creations "slide . . . easily into the folk music canon."[48] I will explore shortly the possibility that the closing number accomplishes for the album as a whole just such a musical flowing into the open sea of traditional song, if through means so subtle that they almost certainly linger shy of the threshold of intentional design.

The issues in play are almost as old as the audio recording of "folk music" itself. No sooner had OKeh Records talent scout Ralph Peer—and his counterparts at Columbia, Paramount, and Victor who soon followed—demonstrated that there was money to be made in the harvesting of the nominally authorless songs rural Americans had been singing, unrecorded, since time immemorial than it became clear that even more money stood to be made by owning copyrights to newly composed songs that retained a plausible aura of folk authenticity. As rapidly as songwriters swept into the breach, and as fertile a creative field as folk-style music has proven from then till now, an uneasy détente persists in the question of the precise relationship between the old and the new in this arena, between the twin goals of originality and stylistic continuity with what has come before.

The crackdown in 1996 by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) on campfire singing at children's camps, including nonprofit camps that charge for attendance, came as a grim (and to many, bafflingly counterintuitive) lesson in the fact that however deeply a song taps into the stylistic behaviors of folk music, its enjoyment of folk music's cultural behaviors are much more restricted. Nowhere in the media blitz surrounding Metallica's copyright infringement suit against Napster.com do we find heartstrings tugged quite as effectively as in the *Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of the Oakland, California, Girl Scouts who find themselves unable to sing "Edelweiss," "God Bless America," or "Happy Birthday."[49] Yet, clear as it may be that songs issuing from the pens of contemporary songwriters working in the folk idiom can be legally regulated as intellectual property, the more interesting question that remains is to what extent many of these songs can properly be said to be the product of their copyright holders' intellect in the first place. "[T]he musical practices that support traditional music transmission," as Anthony McCann has put it, "abide by models of creativity, collaboration, and participation that together add up to the antithesis of the text-based, individualist, and essentially capitalist nature of intellectual property regimes."[50] Woody Guthrie's

[47] Craig Harris, biography of Bill Staines, http://allmusic.com.

[48] http://www.redhouserecords.com/Staines.html.

[49] Lisa Bannon, "The Birds May Sing, But Campers Can't Unless they Pay Up: ASCAP Warns the Girl Scouts That 'God Bless America' Can Hit Legal Sour Notes," *Wall Street Journal,* 21 August 1996, A1. Len Chandler recalls what was, for him, the happy outcome of the case involving two of his civil rights songs: "When the documentary on King was done, those two songs were used because they had been so widely sung and the creators of that documentary thought that they were folk songs. Luckily, Harold Leventhal didn't think so, because I had copyrighted them and published them in *Sing Out!*" See "*Wasn't That a Time!*": *Firsthand Accounts of the Folk Music Revival*, ed. Ronald D. Cohen (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995), 141.

[50] Anthony McCann, "All That Is Not Given Is Lost: Irish Traditional Music, Copyright, and Common Property," *Ethnomusicology* 45/1 (Winter 2001): 90. McCann's section of "References and

account of the generative process behind his own melodies strongly suggests that McCann's caveats are fully in play; Guthrie's creative debt to existing music, as he describes it, far exceeds the notion of "style" as it is normally understood, pressing toward something more like centonization:[51] "I mix up old tunes, I wheel them and I deal them, and I shuffle them out across my barking board, I use half of two tunes, one-third of three tunes and one-tenth of ten tunes."[52] Though few would accept this formulation outright as an accurate description of Guthrie's work (it is difficult to see, in any case, how the math could be made to tally), it obviously speaks importantly to the issue of just how fine a line the folk songwriter is called on to walk between the old and the new.[53] I suggest that Bill Staines's delivery of "I Bid You Goodnight," the last song on *Bridges*, brings precisely this line into view.

There is an obvious comfort in the simple fact of returning to the open sea of traditional song at the album's conclusion; it was with time-honored tradition that Staines began, and with time-honored tradition that he ends. "I Bid You Goodnight" has its origins in the hymn "Sleep On, Beloved"—with words (1871) by Sarah Doudney and music (1884) by Ira Sankey—which enjoyed broad popularity by the end of the nineteenth century as a funeral hymn.[54] Redacted through generations of oral transmission in the Bahamas, it entered the American popular music scene through a 1965 recording by Bahaman singer-guitarist Joseph Spence and the Pindar Family.[55] By the decade's end, the Grateful Dead were regularly closing shows with a version of the song based on Spence's, which also inspired recordings by artists as diverse as Aaron Neville, The Incredible String Band, and the Dixie Hummingbirds. Thus, by Staines's 1983 performance, it carries the force of an old standard.

If much of the power of "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd" inhered, as I have suggested, in the fantasy it offers Staines's audience of participation in a moment in

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Other Relevant Bibliography" surveys the large and growing, literature on the subject of copyright law and music, traditional music in particular.

[51] Relevantly, the validity of the idea of "centonization" as an account of a compositional practice has itself come under considerable scrutiny even in the context of that repertoire to which it was first applied (Gregorian chant), most importantly in Leo Treitler, "'Centonate' Chant: *Übles Flickwerk* or *E pluribus unus*?" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 28/1 (Spring 1975): 1–23.

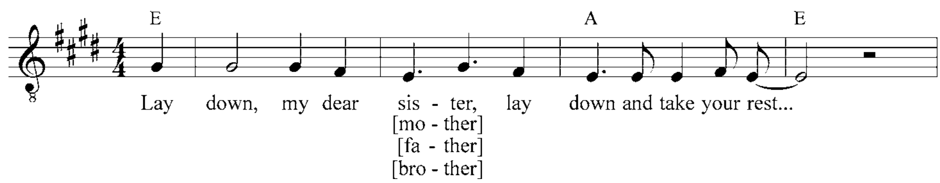
[52] *Born To Win*, ed. Robert Shelton (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 24. Guthrie was also known to use the same tune, or very similar tunes, with a variety of words. "Almost all of Guthrie's influential songs," Gene Bluestein observes in *Poplore*, "were based on variations of standard folk and popular tunes, including such widely accepted songs as 'This Land is Your Land'" (88). On this topic, see also Jackson, "Is This Song Your Song Anymore?," 255; and the editorial annotation to Guthrie's "Ladies Auxiliary," in *The Collected Reprints from Sing Out! The Folk Song Magazine*, vols. 7–12, 1964–1973 (Bethlehem, Penn.: Sing Out Corporation, 1992), 23.

[53] Guthrie's account clearly elides, as does the discussion of Staines's work that follows, with that strand of folk song research engaged in the isolation of tune variants and "tune families"; see, for example, B. H. Bronson, "Samuel Hall's Family Tree," in *The Ballad as Song* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 18–36; and Charles Seeger, "Versions and Variants of 'Barbara Allen' in the Archive of American Song to 1940," in *Studies in Musicology, 1935–1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 273–320.

[54] On the genesis and early reception of this hymn, see Ira David Sankey, *My Life and the Story of the Gospel Hymns* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), 259–60.

[55] The song appeared in 1966 on *The Real Bahamas,* Nonesuch H–2013 (mono) and Nonesuch H–72013 (stereo). An earlier Bahaman version of the song, recorded by Alan Lomax in 1935, is now available on *Deep River of Song: Bahamas 1935,* Rounder 1822, 1999.

Example 3a. Verse 1 (opening), "I Bid You Goodnight," from *Bridges* by Bill Staines (Red House Records RHR25), © Red House Records, Inc. 1984.



Example 3b. Verses 2–5 (opening), "I Bid You Goodnight," from *Bridges* by Bill Staines (Red House Records RHR25), © Red House Records, Inc. 1984.

music's history when the folk ballad carried genuine political force (back through Burke's "conduit"), so, too, does "I Bid You Goodnight." This frankly religious song offers not an invitation to actual religious communion but the comfort of imaginary re-situation into a past in which Christianity's power to configure community in a realm beyond the everyday could be unproblematically accepted (the question of the historical reality of this past is immaterial). But there is more at work here than this. For through the most economical of gestures, Staines succeeds in sweeping great swaths of the whole preceding album to the open sea with him. As widely as his tunes are praised for their feeling of preordination, that they spring straight from the canon and are instantly fit for a return to it, Staines opens this song by allowing us the briefest peek behind the curtain, as it were, at one compositional mechanism through which just this effect is accomplished.

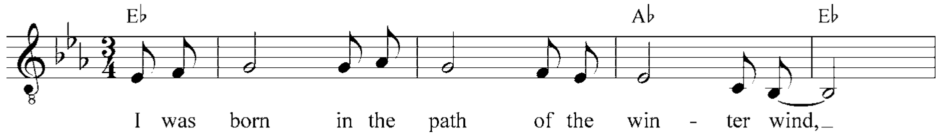
The poetic structure of "I Bid You Goodnight" is simple, its five verses identical except for the change of a single word in the first line ("brother" becomes "sister" in the second verse, then "mother," then "father," then "brother" again).

> Lay down, my dear brother, lay down and take your rest.
> Lay your head upon the Savior's breast.
> I love you, ah, but Jesus loves you the best,
> And I bid you goodnight, goodnight, goodnight.

Musically, however, the verses are not performed identically. The opening line of verse 1 falls from E through C-sharp and B for the syllables "your rest"; the following four verses resolve via F-sharp to E at the same place (Examples 3a and 3b).

Though the first verse thus departs from what appears to be Staines's sense of how the tune really goes, it does have one crucial effect: it renders the first line of this song a close structural relative of the opening line of the song that came before, "River" (Example 4).

Here, too, we find an opening line that reached scale degree $\hat{3}$ on the first beat of its first measure, recalls $\hat{3}$ as the high note of its second measure, descends stepwise to $\hat{1}$ for the opening of the third measure, then moves through $\hat{6}$ to $\hat{5}$. Such harmonic events as take place in this line are identical to those of its counterpart in "I Bid You Goodnight": two measures of I, one of IV, then back to I.



Example 4. Verse 1 (opening), "River" written by Bill Staines, © 1978, renewed MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.

"River" (verse):

D	D	G	D
D	Em	Asus4	A
D	D	G	D
D	A	D	D

"I Bid You Goodnight" (verse):

E-flat	E-flat	A-flat	E-flat
E-flat	E-flat	E-flat	B-flat
E-flat	E-flat	A-flat	E-flat
E-flat	B-flat	E-flat	E-flat

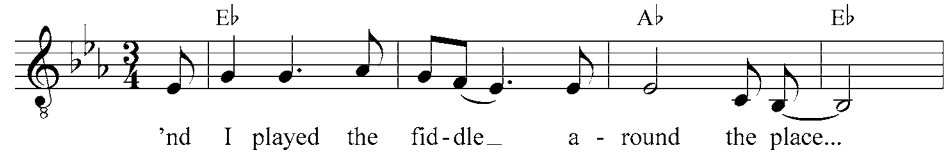
Figure 3. Chord changes, "River" and "I Bid You Goodnight," from *Bridges* by Bill Staines (Red House Records RHR25), © Red House Records, Inc. 1984.

Nor do the similarities end there. Taking this melodic recollection as our cue, we may well be moved to take note that the entire verse of "River" is nearly identical in its harmonic course with the verse of "I Bid You Goodnight." Though they arrive at V through slightly different means in their second lines, the points of similarity far outnumber points of dissimilarity. The progressions, with each chord representing a measure, might be represented as in Figure 3.

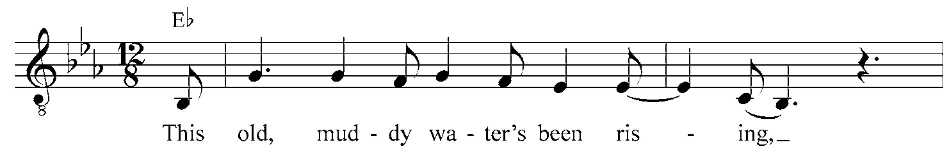
This is, needless to say, one of folk music's most time-honored progressions; the "chord change family" to which these two tunes belong is vast, its members including "Amazing Grace," "Boil 'em Cabbage Down," and hosts of others. But the proximity of these two songs, and the apparent invitation to associate them offered by the melodic similarities of their first lines, may well prompt reflection on just how fully "River" participates in some of folk's most familiar conventions.

And "River" is not the only song touched by this possibility. The opening gesture of "River," together with its harmonic underpinnings, is essentially identical to the opening of the final phrase of the verses (and choruses, wherever we locate them) to "Walker Behind the Wheel."[56] Example 5 shows its first appearance.

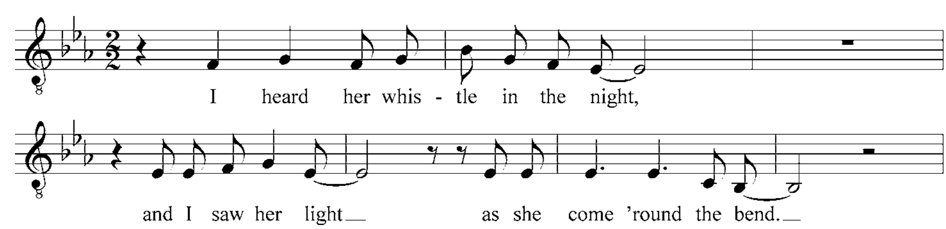
56 To refer to this as the "final phrase" of the chorus belies somewhat the significance of the moment. As Figure 3 shows, the harmony is, in fact, returning to the progression with which each verse begins—that is, to the dominant harmonic idea of the song—providing it here with melody for the first time.



Example 5. Verse 1 (excerpt), "Walker Behind the Wheel" written by Bill Staines, © Copyright Secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.



Example 6. Verse 1 (opening), "Louisiana Storm," from *Bridges* by Bill Staines (Red House Records RHR25), © Red House Records, Inc. 1984.



Example 7. Verse 1 (opening), "Railroad Blues," from *Bridges* by Bill Staines (Red House Records RHR25), © Red House Records, Inc. 1984.

Example 8. Verse 1 (opening), "Bridges" written by Bill Staines, © Copyright Secured MINERAL RIVER MUSIC (BMI). ADMINISTERED BY BUG. All rights reserved. Used by Permission.

A version of the same melody appears, too, in the opening of "Louisiana Storm" (track 9, Example 6), though at a faster tempo, and without the characteristic harmonic move to IV. It also underpins the opening of "Railroad Blues" (track 8, Example 7), allowing for the more loose-limbed elaboration. This gesture's essential features even haunt the more animated contours of the opening of "Bridges" (Example 8), despite the higher reach of the first measure, the obvious rhythmic differences, and the phrase's ultimate goal (in this case, the tonic).

That such points of congruity exist is hardly surprising in itself. We are obviously dealing with one of the basic melodic building blocks of a musical idiom that does not have all that many blocks to begin with (similar melodic incipits can be found in tunes ranging from "Who Will Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot?" to "The Water Is Wide" to "Jesse James" to "Jesus Loves the Little Children"). But Staines's idiosyncratic rendering of the first verse of "I Bid You Goodnight," briefly casting upon this gesture the spotlight of structural anomaly, has the effect of bringing into view the participation of his own work in the age-old mobilization of melodic archetypes of just this kind. The process of melodic recurrence shown in the foregoing handful of examples cannot be understood, of course, as a failure of imagination; better, perhaps, as something more like the mapping of the verse-chorus dynamic onto the album as a whole. Just as the discursive journey through the material of the verses (most apt to be the provenance of the soloist) gives way to the homecoming of each chorus (most apt to belong to the audience), so melodic originality per se—though far from absent—gives way time and again in the album's course to the return of the familiar voice of the community.

Staines's return to the folk music canon in "I Bid You Goodnight" forms, with "The Ballad of Pretty Boy Floyd," a fitting bookend. But the details of this particular return to tradition work to show that, musically, we never really left.

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Staines may indeed be ambling farther down the same artistic road Woody Guthrie trod—to return to that observation of Nanci Griffith's cited early in this discussion—but his leg of the journey is passing through markedly different historical and cultural terrain than Guthrie's did. If Guthrie was called on to create a repertoire that would (among other things) sustain and abet a broad, polyvalent populist upheaval in its ambitions to configure an American future, Staines's chief obligations are not to the future but to the past. Staines does not offer his audience a real program for cultural or political change, the moment having passed for folk music to enjoy such aspirations. He offers, instead, the opportunity to reinhabit imaginatively a world in which such aspirations existed, crafting a generalized but finely wrought image of music as a thing of significance, together with subtly crafted assurances that audience members are—at the moment they listen and occasionally sing along—assuming their place in an age-old community of folk music's faithful. To recapitulate the essential course this argument has taken: *Bridges*' first song links Staines's persona to Guthrie's iconic model, gently redoubling the Guthrie ballad's emphasis on the singer himself as hero. The subsequent album weaves music repeatedly into narratives of social redemption and personal self-actualization, and the diegetic choruses that pepper the album effectively collapse the worlds of Staines's poetic subjects into that of his immediate audience. Finally, a melodic tweak to the traditional song that closes the album has the effect of bringing many of the songs that have come before directly into the fold of traditional music, eliding the musical experiences of the past with the musical experience of the present.

A few sentences after her invocation of Guthrie, Griffith makes another observation just as thought-provoking, if less flamboyantly quotable: "It seems to me that the art of folk music is passing it on with clarity."[57] This "clarity" would seem to be conceptualized in Staines's work not as a form of transparency, as the maintenance of a passive window onto musical tradition, but as something more like a cinematic

[57] Griffith, liner notes, Staines, *Going to the West.*

projection, a conjuring of illuminated images focused carefully enough to take on the impression of life and vitality. What is vivified is not an illusion, of course, so much as a structure of faith. And it is a faith that Staines understands as well as anyone how to keep.

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