

***O BROTHER, WHERE ART THOU?:***

**A FUTURE NOMINATION FOR  
THE NATIONAL FILM REGISTRY**

**THESIS**

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**To my parents,  
who love the arts of music and movies**

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## INTRODUCTION

Stephen J. Ross's *Movies and American Society* says of the first commercially shown film in the 1890s, "It did not matter much *what* was filmed, just that it moved. People were intrigued by films of such simple things as smoke puffing from a chimney or waves breaking on a beach" (16). Ross's explanation of an audience's fascination with the kinoscope, the first technological device that showed moving pictures, differs from why we see films today. Ross says, "Most of us go to the movies to have fun: to laugh, cry, boo, cheer, be scared, thrilled, or simply to be amused for a few hours" (xiv). Moviegoers in the late nineteenth century changed from being awestruck by new technology to seeking actively a form of entertainment to make us feel emotions. Similarly, Gregory Waller, in *Moviegoing in America* says that "we seek out, pay for, take pleasure or displeasure in the *experience* of a film—even if the film is shown in a 'home theater' rather than a public venue" (3). Richard W. Haines, author of *The Moviegoing Experience 1968-2001*, writes, "For general audiences, the delicate balance between the art and entertainment made going to the movies fascinating" (5).

For movie buffs like Waller and Haines, this phenomenon of "moviegoing" involves the type of theater (drive-ins, multiplex), the type of projection (reel or automated), cinematography, and much more, that contribute to their moviegoing experiences. For the rest of us, however, the moviegoing experience may be as simple as changing channels, inserting a videocassette in a VCR or a disc in a DVD

player, or even downloading a motion picture feature and watching it on a computer screen. In the twenty-first century, American movie audiences have the convenience of watching movies whenever and wherever we wish. Moviegoing in the new millennium has also become synonymous with a sixty-one inch plasma television for the ultimate “studio experience” ([www.plasma.com](http://www.plasma.com)). The generation of the World Wide Web is apparently still fascinated with the moving image, but audiences are inching toward the goal of bringing the moviegoing experience to their homes, and are no longer interested in going to the multiplex down the street with Dolby-digital sound and stadium seating. Of the moviegoing experience, only the “movie” itself remains exceedingly popular with American audiences. More than ever, the medium of film is reaching more mass audiences today, thanks to cable companies, satellite television, and home entertainment centers. Haines proposes several reasons for the home theater revolution, such as swelling ticket prices and fewer family-oriented films.<sup>1</sup>

Two main elements of the moviegoing experience remain unchanged: 1) that films are “a mass medium of cultural communication” (Sklar iv); and 2) that tangible piece of tape magically produces the moving images we love to watch. Though audiences do not realize it, a moviegoer’s experience, whether in 1900 or in 2003, also consists of watching a film that has the life expectancy of “less than the single human life span” (Melville and Scott 5). A beloved film that affects a mass audience in one generation may not exist long enough to affect a future generation. How can film thus be considered a method of entertaining (and influencing) mass audiences when it will eventually disintegrate? Ultimately, this disintegration has a heavy

impact on the cultural phenomenon of the moviewatching experience. The influence of moving images as cultural communication is only temporary.

The focus of this thesis is two fold: 1) to describe the work of the primary organization that is preserving American films and ultimately preserving the moviegoing experience, the Library of Congress (LC), and 2) to argue for the Library's preservation of an American film, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, that is important to the moviegoing experience.

Mandated by the National Preservation Act of 1988, the Library of Congress and the National Film Preservation Board (NFPB) select twenty-five films for the National Film Registry each year for preservation. Although the Librarian of Congress is responsible for selecting the final twenty-five films, the public is allowed to submit requests. The Library's endeavor to preserve films that are "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant" means that only a fraction of our culture's films will be preserved. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000)<sup>2</sup> should definitely be nominated for inclusion in the National Film Registry when it becomes eligible in 2010.

According to a LC press release on December 17, 2002, the public nominated nearly 1000 films (LC, PR 02-176) for the 2002 National Film Registry; therefore, the public appears to be somewhat concerned about the Library's selection, but not as interested in preservation as in viewing movies at home. The 2002 home video market accounted for fifty-nine percent of the film industry's revenue in the U.S. (Taub C1).

A moviegoer's tendency to rent or buy videocassettes or DVDs, in the long run, is essentially saving the life of films. In 2001, the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD),

which made its debut in 1995, outsold videocassettes in sales and now steadily dominates rental sales. Furthermore, a new DVD audience has emerged that is upsetting the DVD market. The new audience of “older viewers” is purchasing restored and digitally enhanced American classics (Nichols E34). Because film audiences expect a DVD to provide the “best technological representation of film,” the Film Foundation,<sup>3</sup> a national non-profit organization dedicated to fostering awareness of film preservation, claims the DVD “has been the best thing to happen to film preservation.” Motion picture studios that shied away from film preservation because of its costly and time-consuming process are now investing in preserving films that can be commercially marketed (Bloom 13). For instance, in November 2002, Paramount Home Entertainment released on DVD *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Roman Holiday* (1953) after a two-year restoration (Netherby 11).

As long as moviegoers remain interested in moving images, film audiences will continue to duplicate the moviegoing experience within their own homes, and as long as they purchase the technology to enhance the experience of watching films, the film studios will be forced to produce the films in flawless format. As we move forward in a technologically advanced society, moviegoers’ increasing attraction to the DVD to watch on the latest technological gadget is prompting the seven motion picture distributors of the Motion Picture Association of America to develop preservation methods. MGM and Sony doubled their staff to accommodate preservation needs (Bloom 13). The DVD’s popularity, however, rescues only films that motion picture distributors consider of retail value.

The Library of Congress maintains that it preserves American films that are “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant.” I intend to show how *O*

*Brother, Where Art Thou?* meets the standards set by the National Film Registry, and why preserving this film in its original format is important. The DVD's popularity does not guarantee the medium's survival—we simply cannot preserve every American film. Therefore, as motion picture distributors strive to increase DVD sales, inexperienced film preservationists will look to organizations such as the National Film Preservation Board and its innovations in methods of film preservation.

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, THE NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION ACT, AND THE NATIONAL FILM REGISTRY

### **The Library of Congress**

The Library of Congress is the largest collector in the world. The Library was established in 1800 by President John Adams, but Thomas Jefferson is acknowledged as its founder of the Library because he “approved the first law defining the role and function of the new institution” in 1802 and created the post of the Librarian of Congress (Cole 12-3).

The Library currently houses the world’s largest film collection. In 1893, it acquired its first motion picture called *Edison Kinetoscopic Records*, registered by W. K. L. Dixon, and in 1942, the Library recognized “the importance of developing a national research collection of motion pictures” and created the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division to collect paper-based films and acquire special donations (Bisbort and Osborne 90). According to the *Library of Congress Information Bulletin: An Online Companion to the Library’s Monthly Magazine*, July 1998, the Library's motion picture collection totals more than one million reels of film that are stored in Library-owned and rented storage facilities in Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, Maryland and Ohio.

Dr. James H. Billington, who was appointed by President Reagan in 1987, is the current Librarian of Congress. Dr. Billington believes that the Library belongs “to all Americans,” and he has been completely devoted to making the Library’s collections available on the World Wide Web, including footage from “the early days of animation” to “glimpses of the Spanish-American War—the first U.S. war in which the motion picture played a role” (Bisbort and Osborne 141). Although the Library recognized the significance of motion pictures and their role in American history since the 1940s, its endeavor to collect and preserve American films would not be legally mandated until forty years later.

### **The National Film Preservation Acts of 1988, 1992, and 1996**

Anthony Slide writes in *Nitrate Won't Wait: Film Preservation in the United States*, interest in film preservation began as early as 1906, according to an editorial account in an industry trade paper, and was mentioned again in 1915 in another trade paper (9-10). Slide notes that “the serious work of film preservation in the United States can be dated from the founding of the Film Library of the Modern Museum of Art in 1935,” an organization that essentially considered film as art and worthy of collecting and preserving (18).

Richard Patterson, in his two-part article, “The Preservation of Color Film,” states that in 1981, the Special Projects Committee of the Directors Guild of America held a panel discussion on the technical steps taken to preserve color film. Panel members were from Columbia Pictures, M.G.M. Laboratories, and U.C.L.A. Film and Television Archive. Martin Scorsese’s special assistant also took part. The Special Projects Committee meeting responded to a “growing concern about the preservation of color films,” and acknowledged that Eastman Kodak, the maker of

film stock widely used in classic American films, consistently advised that the dyes in its color film might fade (694-5).

The National Film Preservation Act of 1988 was introduced in the 100th Congress and signed by President George H. W. Bush on September 28, 1988, becoming Public Law 100-446 (Thomas, [www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov)). The Act serves two purposes: it directs the Librarian of Congress to establish a National Film Registry to register films that are “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant;” it directs the Librarian to establish a National Film Preservation Board (NFPB)(Pub. L. 100-446). The significance of the Act of 1988 is its establishment of the NFPB and the Registry.

The National Film Preservation Act of 1992 was introduced in the 102nd Congress, signed by President Clinton on June 26, 1992, and became Public Law 102-307 (Thomas, [www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov)). The Act of 1992 issues the following statement:

The Congress finds that--

- (1) motion pictures are an indigenous American art form that has been emulated throughout the world;
- (2) certain motion pictures represent an enduring part of our Nation's historical and cultural heritage;
- (3) because of deterioration or loss, less than one-half of the feature-length films produced in the United States before 1951, including only 20 percent of the silent films, still exist and many of the films produced after 1951 are deteriorating at an alarming rate; and
- (4) it is appropriate and necessary for the Federal Government to--

(A) recognize motion pictures as a significant American art form deserving of protection, including preservation and restoration; and

(B) establish a National Film Registry of films that represent an enduring part of our national, historical, and cultural heritage, which Registry should be established and maintained in the Library of Congress; and

(5) to the extent possible, and with the permission of the copyright owners, films selected for inclusion in the National Film Registry should be made widely available to the American public in their Registry versions. (Pub. L. 102-307, Title II, Sec. 202)

The Act's subsequent Sections 203-215 justify Congress' formal acceptance of the medium of film as an "American art form" and the urgency to preserve American films. The Act of 1992 specifies the duties of the Librarian of Congress, authorizes a \$250,000 appropriation, identifies the seventeen members to serve on the National Film Preservation Board, specifies their duties, authorizes the films inducted into the National Film Registry to become property of the U.S. Government, and mandates a study of the state of preservation of American films (Pub. L. 102-307). This study resulted in the four-volume *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation*. *Film Preservation* describes the current practices of film preservation, and it includes transcripts of Congressional hearings regarding the Act and statements in response to the Act from organizations and individuals in the motion picture industry.

The National Film Preservation Act of 1996 was introduced in the 104th Congress and signed by President Clinton on October 11, 1996, becoming Public Law

104-285 (Thomas, [www.thomas.loc.gov](http://www.thomas.loc.gov)). The Act of 1996 authorizes continuing preservation studies and increases the membership on the National Film Preservation Board from seventeen to nineteen members. The Act of 1996, in effect for seven years, expires in October 2003.

The National Film Preservation Act of 2003 was expected to be introduced in the 108th Congress in September 2003. According to Mr. Steve Leggett, Staff Coordinator for the NFPB, the Act of 2003 was introduced into Legislation on November 21, 2003. I have included current legislative information on the Act in the Conclusion. Dr. Billington, in a statement to the Senate Rules Committee on April 8, 2003, states:

We will be requesting reauthorization of the NFPB for 10 years, and extension of its \$250,000 appropriation. The legislation includes minor technical changes to the Board, and the addition of new language expressly directing coordination of the NFPB and the film preservation program with the ongoing research and initiatives of the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center at Culpeper, [Virginia]. ([www.rules.senate.gov/hearings/2003/040803LOC.htm](http://www.rules.senate.gov/hearings/2003/040803LOC.htm)).

The Conservation Center to which Dr. Billington refers was authorized under Public Law 105-144, signed by President Clinton in December 1997. The *LC Information Bulletin*, July 1998, announces the acquisition of the Culpeper property:

The existing building was originally built in the 1960s as a back-up operations center for the Federal Reserve in the event of a Cold War emergency. The three-story building is almost completely underground, making it energy efficient and readily adaptable for low-temperature and humidity storage -- the conditions needed for the

long-term preservation of the Library's priceless motion picture and recorded sound collections. . . . The Library will now be able, for the first time in its history, to plan with the Architect of the Capitol for the construction of a state-of-the-art facility dedicated to the long-term conservation of our national audiovisual heritage.

### **The National Film Registry and Literary Adaptations**

Presently, the earliest literary adaptation in the National Film Registry is *Rip Van Winkle* (1896), based on Washington Irving's story "Rip Van Winkle," which was published in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon* in 1820 (McMichael 609). *Rip Van Winkle* consists of eight short silent films, and it was inducted in the Registry in 1995. Of the first twenty-five films initiated into the National Film Registry in 1989, ten films are literary adaptations, including Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). To date, the National Film Registry includes an estimated 121 literary adaptations based on literary works (out of 350 total films).

Louis Gianetti's *Understanding Movies* (9th ed.) lists three different types of literary adaptations: "loose," "faithful," and "literal" (406). Though *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* claims to be based on Homer's *Odyssey*, director Joel Coen clearly indicates the film is a loose adaptation by setting the film in 1937 Mississippi. Regarding literary adaptations, A.O. Scott writes, "Now [books and movies] are often different in interesting ways, and thinking about the ways screenwriters and directors approach the challenges of literary adaptation can be helpful in evaluating the success or failure of their movies as movies" (4). Both Joel and his brother Ethan Coen wrote the screenplay. The film's success as a loose adaptation chiefly

relies on *O Brother*'s homage to Preston Sturges' film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), and not the occasional nod to characters' names in Homer's *Odyssey* and its journey structure. In *Sullivan's Travels*, the main character John L. Sullivan desires to make a film, a literary adaptation of a fictional book *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* by a fictional author, Sinclair Beckstein. Thus, the Coens' film is actually the literary adaptation of the fictional (non-existent) book in *Sullivan's Travels* rather than Homer's *Odyssey*. The film's claim to be a loose literary adaptation of Homer's epic demonstrates the unique filmmaking style that establishes the Coens as auteurs.

## CHAPTER TWO

### JOEL AND ETHAN COEN

Since their first release, *Blood Simple* (1984), and with the critical success of *Fargo* (1996),<sup>4</sup> Joel and Ethan Coen have become firmly established as American independent filmmakers. Rarely mentioned in the media independently from one another, their filmography includes: *Blood Simple* (1984), *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Miller's Crossing* (1990), *Barton Fink* (1991), *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994), *Fargo* (1996), *The Big Lebowski* (1998), *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001), and *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003). While Joel Coen is credited as the director of every film and Ethan Coen is credited as the producer, both are credited as the writers of all their films.

Carolyn Russell aptly describes these talented siblings, born in Minnesota in 1955 (Joel), and 1958 (Ethan), as a fusion of director/producer/writer:

By the time the Coens were ready to begin their first feature film together, a crucial transformation had taken place. Joel and Ethan Coen had become the Coen brothers, a double-brained, quadruple-handed creative entity that would pump new blood into the independent film scene and foreground the ascension of a new kind of post-studio age, film school-educated auteur. (5)

Russell briefly describes the Coens' film career, which began with a simple camera bought with the money they made from doing yard work, and led to making short films while at New York University and Princeton, and on to being serious filmmakers in the 1960s (Russell 4).

Fans of Joel and Ethan Coen are familiar with their repeatedly casting a circle of gifted actors such as Holly Hunter, Frances McDormand, M. Emmet Walsh, John Turturro, Steve Buscemi, and John Goodman. The Coens have now gained the loyalty of George Clooney, the star of *O Brother*, who appears in his second Coen brothers film *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003), with Catherine Zeta-Jones. Using these actors repeatedly creates an unusual relationship among filmmakers, actors, and audience, a relationship few filmmakers dare to build. Auteur directors Alfred Hitchcock and Woody Allen are exceptions, who created similar bonds with veteran Hitchcock actors like James Stewart and Cary Grant, and Allen veterans like Diane Keaton, Alan Alda and Mia Farrow. The Coens' appreciation of the director/actor/audience relationship allows it to continue as a significant part of the American filmgoing experience.

Holly Hunter and John Goodman first collaborated with the Coens in *Raising Arizona*, a film known for its "campiness"<sup>5</sup> because of the peculiar plot, in which a thief meets and marries a delusional policewoman who convinces her newlywed husband to kidnap a baby. While Hunter did not reappear in another Coen film until *O Brother*, John Goodman worked with the Coens in *Barton Fink*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*, and *The Big Lebowski*. John Turturro appeared in *Miller's Crossing*, *Barton Fink*, and *The Big Lebowski* prior to his role in *O Brother*. Newcomer, and now Coen veteran, George Clooney first appeared in major

blockbusters like *Batman & Robin* (1997) before accepting roles in moderate-budget films like *Three Kings* (1999). Because movie audiences were accustomed to George Clooney on the big screen as a television actor turned movie star, the success of *O Brother*, in essence, depended not on the traditional Hollywood idea of success (box office sales, for example), but on becoming one of the “Coenheads” (*Rolling Stone* film critic Peter Travers’s term) and Coen fans’ acceptance of Clooney as worthy of the Coens’ eccentricity.

*O Brother* may not appear to be as original as previous Coen brothers’ films, but it successfully combines all three elements mandated by the National Film Registry for preservation—it has cultural, historical, and aesthetic significance. The Registry requires only one of these elements. This film’s view of America’s approach to complicated issues, such as racism, industrialism, women’s roles and religion give it cultural significance. That part of its historical significance relates to film history is exemplified in its title, a reference and tribute to Preston Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels* (1941). The film’s claim as a literary adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey* is characteristic of the Coens’ unusual filmmaking style. Because *O Brother* is set in 1937 Mississippi, yet supposedly based on a Greek epic, the oddity of connecting Preston Sturges’s 1941 film, Homer’s *Odyssey*, and the Great Depression Era, reinforces what Hollywood already knew: the Coen brothers are atypical filmmakers who bring originality to their vision of American culture. Finally, the music represents the aesthetic significance of the film.

Kevin Jackson of *Sight & Sound* says *O Brother* is “stuffed to bursting point with the minutiae of Americana popular culture and folk memory” (38). The Coen brothers’ works are chiefly original screenplays, except for *Miller’s Crossing*, based

on Dashiell Hammet's *The Glass Key*. *O Brother's* claim that it is based on Homer's *Odyssey* surely raised the eyebrows of many Coenheads. Strangely enough, *The Odyssey* has been untouched by a film industry infatuated with epic stories like *Ben-Hur* (1959) and *Gladiator* (2000). Epic stories have developed into epic films and currently dominate American theaters; moviegoers have not tired of the epic adventures in *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. Homer's influence will next be seen in *Troy* (2004), with actor Brad Pitt as Achilles, a film crediting both Homeric epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. However, *O Brother* is far from being an epic film, and thus the film's claim as a literary adaptation gives the Coens the opportunity to dabble with a literary work through their own methods.

Rob Content of *Film Quarterly* remarks that *O Brother* is described as a "backdrop of an American crisis," which Content says is common for the Coen comedies (42). The Coens derived the film title from Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Preston Sturges's films are used today to study film and American culture. Tom Sturges, who wrote the foreword to his father's autobiography, *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges*, reveals a story about his watching *Sullivan's Travels* in a college film course, and realizing for the first time the effect of his father's films on an audience. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is the closest audiences will have to a moviegoing experience that displays America in a diverse style that represents the very diversity of the culture it parodies. The Coens, devoted Preston Sturges fans, claim *Sullivan's Travels* as their favorite Sturges film (Levine 159). *O Brother*, however, is not the first time the Coens have based one of their scripts on a Sturges

film. *The Hudsucker Proxy* is also a tribute to Sturges and other film directors of the same era (104-5).

Danny Duncan Collum of *Sojourners* remarks, “Like everything truly important in American popular music, the *O Brother* phenomenon flew in under the radar, undetected by the air traffic controllers of the official culture” (52). The popular bluegrass, folk and country songs, heavily embedded into *O Brother*, essentially make it a revival of roots music. A repeated theme in *O Brother* is “looking for answers,” and the music that resonates through the film becomes the sole provider for all the answers. *O Brother* is not a musical, however, but its use of music is similar to *Sleepless in Seattle*’s use of music to provide a “double perspective” (Giannetti 226), in which *Sleepless*’s romantic ballads remind the audience of an era devoid of divorces. Unlike *Sleepless*’s romantic songs that offset the film’s build-up of the romantic meeting of Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, *O Brother*’s music, directed by T Bone Burnett, creates a unique blend of roots music that can be regarded as a personified liberator of the three escaped convicts-turned-music-stars and the audience that embraces them.

### **The Coen Brothers Today**

The Coens brothers’ collaboration in original screenplays and filmmaking stops with *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001). In the Coens’ subsequent films they include credit to additional writers, including *Intolerable Cruelty* and *The Ladykillers* (2004), starring Tom Hanks. In *Bad Santa* (2003), starring Billy Bob Thornton as well as the late John Ritter, the Coens are credited for the story.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

A blind old man on a flatcar picks up the three escapees, Everett, Pete and Delmar. The old man predicts their future:

You seek a great fortune, you three who are now in chains. And you will find a fortune – though it will not be the fortune you seek. But first, first you must travel – a long and difficult road – a road fraught with peril, uh-huh. You shall see things wonderful to tell. You shall see a cow on the roof of a cotton house, uh-huh, and oh, so many startlements. I cannot tell you how long this road shall be. But fear not the obstacles in your path, for Fate has vouchsafed your reward. And though the road may wind, and yea, your hearts grow weary, still shall ye foller the way, even unto your salvation.

Everett, Pete, and Delmar, who are in chains, indeed travel a long and difficult road. (Note the old man says “road” rather “journey,” which could indicate spiritual and personal journeys.) They literally travel many Mississippi miles from the prison farm to Tishomingo, where they record their hit radio song; to Itta Bena; back to the prison farm, where they free Pete, to a Ku Klux Klan assembly; to a remote old cabin somewhere in the woods just so Everett can fetch his ex-wife’s engagement ring. The perils they encounter all bring them near-death situations: the seductresses

(Sirens) who lead Pete to his near-lynching, the Bible salesman who gives Everett and Delmar a vicious beating, the KKK who attempt to lynch Tommy, and the Sheriff who tirelessly hunts them down and sentences them to hang.

But, what are the wonderful things they see? And do they seek the same fortune and what fortune do they all find? How do they obtain their salvation? These questions can be answered by examining how the film meets the National Film Registry's requirement as a culturally significant film.

The three escapees have already encountered their first wonderful thing—the blind old black man himself who tells of their future. To the escapees, he is wonderful because like a *deus ex machina* (who usually appears at the end of a story) he rescues them from the hounds. They ask him his name and about his work and call him “old-timer” and “grandpa.” They seem to notice everything, including the old man's psychic powers about the treasure, but not his race.

The second wonderful thing they see is Tommy Johnson, a young black man whom they call “son.” They have no reservations about Tommy's rumor about singing into a can for money, although Tommy is a black man who says he sold his soul to the devil. In 1937 Mississippi, Everett, Pete, and Delmar's total trust of both the blind old man and Tommy offsets the attitudes toward race that America held in this period. The scenes that involve Tommy—the crossroads, the KKK assembly and the flood—show the escapees' affinity with him, a true integration that goes far beyond Tommy's role as their “a-cump—uh, company—accompluh—the fella that plays the guitar.”

The third wonderful thing that happens is that, the three escapees and Tommy, united as The Soggy Bottom Boys, find their fortune on the radio. They are completely unaware that their recording of “A Man of Constant Sorrow” has become

popular statewide from radio play. Historically, the 1930's are known as The Golden Age of Radio because of its cultural role during the Depression. The radio emerged at the same time as the telegraph and telephone in the early 1900's, but the radio surpassed both and was established as the country's major cultural icon. Political figures, including President Roosevelt, took great advantage of it. The power of the radio is illustrated in the scene after The Soggy Bottom Boys record their song at the radio station; they run into Governor Pappy O'Daniel, and mistake him for somebody looking to make a few extra bucks for singing. Pappy's campaign team urges him to "do a little politickin" with The Soggy Bottom Boys, but Pappy ridicules their idea of politickin' "one-at-a-timin'" when his radio show, The Pappy O'Daniel Flour Hour, is "mass communicatin'!" Later when Pappy publicly pardons The Soggy Bottom Boys over his radio address, the radio broadcast does not save the band's fate.

Individually, The Soggy Bottom Boys seek different fortunes. Of the four band members, we are only certain of the fortune that Everett seeks, reunification with his wife, Penny. He lies to Pete and Delmar about the treasure, therefore making their fortune-seeking vain and delusional. Tommy's fortune, his ability to play the guitar, has already been granted. Rob Content's review points out that Pete dreams of working in a fancy restaurant so that he will be respected as the maitre d', and Delmar dreams of regaining his family's land, but Everett's dream is "even smaller than [Pete's and Delmar's]. He desperately wants to be what his wife and daughters call 'bona fide'—a respectable, middle class professional" (46). In order for Everett to find his "fortune," he must convince Penny that he is "bona-fide." Four short scenes show Everett's quest: with the Wharvey Gals, at Woolworth's, the movie theater, and the banquet hall. In one of the most humorous scenes of the film

a despondent Everett talks to the three Wharvey Gals, who echo their mother's ideology. At Woolworth's Penny is concerned for her children's future, at the movie theater Everett reacts to Penny's moving on with her life, and the banquet hall scene shows Penny's idea of a bona fide husband. Penny's role is vital to the fortunes (real or unreal) that Everett, Pete and Delmar seek. Pete's idea of being an esteemed maitre d' and Delmar's dream of owning land are both attributes of a respected property-owner; but Everett, the most energetic seeker of respect, acquires Penny's hand in marriage after being discovered as a famous Soggy Bottom Boy.

The above survey of several cultural elements in this film indicates that *O Brother* contains the cultural significance required to preserve a film by the Library of Congress. Detailed consideration of four cultural elements follow: Treatment of blacks in the South, specifically their plight during the Depression years; America's expectations that the government, not religious organizations, can help them in the Depression years; the importance of the radio as mass communication, and women's roles. By examining these specific scenes in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, we see that film's theme of "looking for answers" is answered.

### **Treatment of Blacks in the South**

Important cultural events in America demonstrate that the three escapees' trust in the old blind black man and in Tommy Johnson is unusual.

In 1937, the Scottsboro Boys trial was at its height. In 1931, nine young black males boarded a Southern Railroad freight train to look for work; "hoboing was a common pastime in the Depression year of 1931" (Linder 247). When two white women accused the boys of rape, they were believed to have committed the crime before their trials begin. In the course of six years from 1931 to 1937, the

Scottsboro Boys' lawyers presented evidence of their innocence, but all-white juries continued to send down guilty verdicts until one judge overturned their sentences. Furthermore, as the popularity of radio peaked during the Depression, one particular radio show, *Amos 'n' Andy*, "portrayed African Americans [played by white actors] in ways that confirmed the stereotypes and prejudices of its overwhelmingly white audience" (Craig 254). As early as 1931, NBC was petitioned<sup>6</sup> for the demeaning portrayal of blacks in *Amos 'n' Andy*, but NBC ignored the petition. NBC would not take seriously the show's offensive material until the 1950's when the civil rights movement brought protests against it (255). Though the country had Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s, these programs often omitted Blacks. Blacks also took wage cuts and were often discriminated against in relief programs. Because of lack of employment, the migration of Blacks to northern and western states also greatly reduced their numbers in the South (Shannon 228).

Despite the Southern view of Blacks as non-citizens, Everett, Pete and Delmar take Tommy Johnson very seriously, but only after they achieve a personal spiritual salvation. Their integration with Tommy worlds apart from the American cultural values in 1937 Mississippi, reflects cultural values today. In Tommy's first scene, he is in the middle of a crossroads. Delmar notices Tommy first. The shot shows Delmar sitting in the backseat, and while Pete shows annoyance at Everett's comment, "Baptism! You two are just dumber than a bag of hammers!" Delmar noticeably focuses on something outside the car. He moves closer to the front seat, interrupts Everett and tells him to pick up Tommy. Delmar also answers Tommy's inquiry about their direction to Tishomingo. Everett introduces himself and the other two to Tommy, and after hearing that Tommy sold his soul to the devil for

playing the guitar, Everett continues to mock baptism and being saved. The shot shows Everett's cynical expression but we hear Delmar's solemn voice say off-camera, "This ain't no laughing matter, Everett." Delmar, the saved one, takes Tommy's actions to heart, for he tells him, "Oh son, for that you traded your everlasting soul?" Delmar's genuine concern for Tommy's soul contrasts with Pete's concern with the devil's looks and Everett's concern with the Tishomingo deal. Delmar's acknowledging Tommy and Tommy's soul indicates a type of salvation achieved by Delmar. Pete, the next one to be saved and to take Tommy seriously, is first "loved-up" by the Sirens and turned in to the Sheriff for a hanging, and reveals the existence of the treasure to save his life. Because Pete "reveals" a non-existent treasure, his supposed betrayal of Everett and Delmar actually leads to the third and necessary salvation, Everett's. But most important here is that Pete's near death experience leads him to a genuine concern for Tommy. When the trio encounters the KKK assembly, Pete says, "We gotta save him!" In this situation, Pete's fear of the noose allows him to acknowledge Tommy's immediate danger while Delmar remains silent and follows the others' cues. Everett realizes that the Sheriff does not represent Mississippi law but God's law, and Everett, in a moment of crisis, prays first for Tommy's life before Pete's or Delmar's. Like the car scene in which Everett's criticism of religion is interrupted by Tommy, the flood scene also shows Everett's attempt to explain the "miracle" interrupted by the cow on the top of the cotton house and by Tommy; that is, the prophecies of the blind old black man and Tommy. The three escapees' individual paths to salvation enable them to keep Tommy in their group at all times, rather than relegate him to the role of outsider. Their spiritual awakenings—first the dumb one, then the angry one, and finally, the

skeptic—never allow Tommy to be as neglected as most blacks were during the American Depression.

### **Salvation for Mississippi**

Herbert Hoover's blindness to the country's economic troubles led to Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory in the 1932 Presidential election. Hoover's statement, "Nobody is actually starving" was printed in newspapers nationwide (Brendon 89). In late 1932, fifteen million Americans were unemployed, and they were looking for answers, specifically from the government.

The banquet hall scene is very important because it is there that The Soggy Bottom Boys promote political peace, marriage, and harmony. The Boys' rise to fame is inexplicable. One scene shows a newspaper headline that reads, "Soggy Bottom Boys A Success—But Who Are They?" Another scene shows a store owner telling his customer he cannot keep the Soggy Bottom Boys' record on the shelf. In another, a record dealer urges the radio station manager to sign the band to a record deal because the "record's gone through the goddamn roof" and "the whole state's gone apey." But reasons are never given for the popularity of "A Man of Constant Sorrow." Is the band's mysterious identity a part of their success? Why is this particular song a hit record?

Perhaps the song's popularity lies in its echo of Americans' feeling that they lack government assistance during the Depression:

I am a man of constant sorrow  
 I've seen trouble all my day.  
 I bid farewell to old Kentucky,  
 The place where I was born and raised.

(The place where he was born and raised.)

For six long years I've been in trouble

No pleasures here on earth I found.

For in this world I'm bound to ramble

I have no friends to help me now.

(He has no friends to help him now.)

The last verse of the song refers to a spiritual dependence in troubled times:

Maybe your friends think I'm just a stranger

My face you'll never see no more.

But there is one promise that is given

I'll meet you on God's golden shore.

This last verse also parallels the later scene where Everett and Delmar break Pete out of prison. In the first shot of this scene, lightning flashes illuminate the bare boughs of a tree. As the camera pans downward, the lightning flashes next illuminate a noose. The camera pans further downward through the roof of the prison farm to Pete's bed. Pete whispers, "God forgive me. I could not gaze upon that far shore." Pete's cry deflects the last verse, rendering only the first two verses as the main stuff of the song, and thus leaving the Soggy Bottom Boys as men of constant sorrow without the golden shores. They speak for the people of the Depression.

The banquet hall scene plainly shows that the American people need a political figure interested in the troubled man. In the hall, opposite the stage on which The Soggy Bottom Boys perform, we see a large cross-shaped object on the wall—it does not appear to be a window simply because the setting is nighttime, and the cross is brightly lit, almost glowing. We see point-of-view shots of the audience

as Pete and Delmar sing on stage, and the cross is prominent, but when Homer Stokes, the KKK wizard, enters the banquet hall, the glowing cross is invisible. Shots that follow Homer and Pappy are medium shots that omit the stage and the audience. When Everett rushes to the stage to perform “A Man of Constant Sorrow,” his point-of-view shot shows the prominent glowing cross, with the camera angle clearly showing the cross at Everett’s eye-level. This shot later contrasts with Homer Stokes’s head blocking the view of the bright cross. As the crowd’s wild enthusiasm provokes Everett to assume the spotlight, Pappy’s and Penny’s genuine confusion is conveyed when they drop their jaws. Homer Stokes, however, interrupts the performance with his rant about the Black band members. The audience does not take long to boo him and throw him out of the banquet hall.

Stokes’s attack of The Soggy Bottom Boys is political suicide. Pappy, however, cries, “Goddamn! Opportunity knocks!” Pappy climbs on the stage and, as the film script says, “joyfully shakes his fat ass in time to the music” (96). Pappy’s dancing, like Everett’s, provokes the audience. When he gives his speech, Pappy’s point-of-view shot, like Everett’s earlier, includes the glowing cross. Pappy’s proclamation of The Soggy Bottom Boys as his “Brain Trust” refers to Roosevelt’s Brain Trust, a group of academic advisors who “took full advantage of Roosevelt’s ideological eclecticism” (Brendon 98). Pappy’s nominating The Soggy Bottom Boys as his Brain Trust elevates the band to an entity that provides the answers for Americans lost in the Depression, whether they can really provide them or not.

### **The Golden Age of Radio**

In the 1930’s, during the depression, radio was a way of life. Many books are devoted to the history of popular radio shows during The Golden Age of Radio,

depicting American culture in quiz shows, Hollywood-gossip shows, and musical acts. That Americans took radio very seriously was confirmed by the 1938 Halloween broadcast of Orson Welles' *The War of The Worlds*. Welles' broadcast of a re-enactment of a Martian invasion led many Americans to believe aliens had actually invaded. Welles' became a star thereafter (Rhoads 102). Radio audience research also revealed that the majority of listeners found radio news objective and trustworthy more than newspapers because of its partisanship and anti FDR sentiment (Craig 219).

*O Brother* depicts both sides of an American culture that took radio as seriously as Americans did in the 1930's. After The Soggy Bottom Boys cut their record, they run out of the radio station, whooping and hollering, while Pappy and his campaign crew exit their car. This scene shows the collision of two worlds: an integrated band and a political candidate in turmoil during the Depression years. As the two worlds near each other, Delmar excitedly tells Pappy, "Hey mister! I don't mean to be telling tales out of school, but there's a feller in there who'll pay ya ten dollars if you sing into his can." The camera pans to a close-up of Pappy as he bluntly replies to Delmar, "I'm not here to make a record, you dumb cracker. They broadcast me out on the radio." Pappy's cranky, rude answer is like Hoover's indifference to the people hit by the Depression. As Pappy and his crew walk towards the radio station, The Soggy Bottom Boys silently stand and listen as Pappy shoots one insult after another at his crew. He admonishes them about their idea of "politickin" and criticizes his son, telling him "if [your mother] seen ya, she would a died of shame." In the full shot, The Soggy Bottom Boys see Pappy's back as he waves his hands in the air and says, "We're mass communicatin'!" Pappy fully knows the power of the radio, for he walks into the radio station, drops his cranky

voice, and politely says, “Hi there! How ya doing?” In the scene at Wash Hogwallup’s house, the men sit around the box radio, listening to friendly and soothing Pappy’s voice. His voice on the radio has total control as he says, “use cool clear water and good pure Pappy O’Daniel flour.” In the banquet hall scene, Pappy raises his arms, as he did outside the radio station, and addresses the audience and the listeners at home, with the naturalness of an orator’s voice, like a circus ringleader, who matches the audiences’ wild enthusiasm.

Historically, Pappy O’Daniel was a Texas Senator who eventually served as a United States Senator from 1941 to 1949 (<http://bioguide.congress.gov>). Wilbert Lee (Pappy) O’Daniel, originally born in Ohio and raised in Kansas, ran a Texas flour mill and sponsored a radio program over the Texas Quality Network. He delivered his own commercials on the radio for his flour, and when he entered the campaign race for Texas governor in 1938, O’Daniel not only used the radio to his advantage in the gubernatorial race, but also for his flour business, “all the time plugging his flour and singing his commercial theme-song, ‘Please pass the biscuits, Pappy!’” (Barnouw 113). *O Brother’s* “Pappy O’Daniel Flour Hour” is also reminiscent of the radio Presidents. Though Hoover was the first “radio President,” Roosevelt is known as “the first political star of the radio age” (Craig 154). While Hoover declined CBS’s suggestion to use the radio for White House speeches, Roosevelt, aware of the radio’s popularity, developed CBS’s idea into his popular “Fireside Chats.”

The film also shows that, in American homes, people really listened to the radio. In the Wash Hogwallup scene, Everett, Pete, Delmar and Wash quietly sit around the box radio and listen to “Pappy O’Daniel’s Flour Hour”. Later, during the banquet hall scene, while Homer Stokes rants about the sins of the Soggy Bottom Boys, one shot shows a man and woman intently listening to a box radio that emits

Stokes's crazed voice. But the most important radio broadcast in the movie is Pappy O'Daniel's pardoning of The Soggy Bottom Boys. When the Sheriff threatens to hang The Soggy Bottom Boys, Delmar protests, telling the Sheriff that Pappy's pardon "went out on the radio." The two next shots show the Sheriff's reply, "Is that right?" and a close-up shot shows the mean old hound dog's eyes raise up, like a man would raise his eyebrows. As soon as the Sheriff says, "We ain't got a radio," The Soggy Bottom Boys know they are doomed, and their faces instantly fill with panic. Everett's eyes fill with tears, Delmar's jaw drops and Pete says, "Lord have mercy." A man with no radio is no man to deal with.

### **Women's Status and Values**

Like the three Sirens who seduce and capture Pete and turn him in to the Sheriff, *O Brother* shows women as the driving force behind men's actions.

Exactly one hour of the film rolls by before we find that Everett's role is a "paterfamilias." Even after Penny's entrance in the film at Woolworth's, Everett's made-up treasure still exists. The purpose of our escapees' journey, to find the treasure, crumbles into pieces in the very next scene, in the movie theater where Pete forewarns Delmar and Everett about the treasure bushwhacking. After they break Pete out of prison, the treasure disappears altogether in a defining scene in the film when Everett confesses to having made up his treasure because of his wife. Knowing that the other two would not go with him for that reason, Everett made up the buried treasure. Everett breaks out of prison, dragging his two chain-gang mates with him, specifically to stop his wife's wedding.

The very next scene continues the theme of women as a motivator. The scene following Everett's confession shows the KKK assembly, where the escapees save

Tommy's life, but not before the Wizard makes his speech about "culture n' heritage," a culture where women seek protection "From darkies! From Jews! From Papists! And from all those smart ass folks say we come descendant from the monkeys!"

As for Vernon Waldrip, what is his motivation for marrying Penny McGill Wharvey? Thus far, women drive the Sheriff to use the Sirens as seductresses, Everett to make up the treasure story, and the KKK to plan to lynch Tommy to protect their women. Even Delmar believes the Sirens "loved-up" Pete, turning him into a toad. What image of woman drives Waldrip to see Penny as a worthy wife?

*O Brother's* depiction of Penny's strong intentions to replace Everett as the paterfamilias brings up questions of women's rights during the Depression era. According to *Women's Rights in the United States: A Documentary History*, in the 1930's, women were concerned with rights in the labor movements. A 1913 essay by Blanche Grozier reveals that women fought against legislation that tried to limit women's work hours and types of employment because of their "delicate nature" (246). Other writers claim that since the Depression, childcare has ceaselessly been an important issue facing working mothers (Baxandall, Gordon, Reverby 255). When women began to rally for employment equality, childcare was as an important cause in their movement. Roosevelt's Federal Emergency Relief Administration temporarily eased these concerns by creating nursery schools, thereby also creating jobs. But at the end of World War II, federal funds for childcare programs were discontinued in 1946 (257), sending women's issues with employment equality and nursery care back to square one.

Penny McGill Wharvey, however, is not typical of the 1930's working mothers during women's rights labor movements. The scenes in which she appears, the

Woolworth's scene and the banquet hall scene, show her goal to be a married woman. Like Everett who lies about the treasure to get back to his wife, Penny, too, makes up a story about Everett's death, not solely as an explanation to her daughters about their father's absence, but to legally be available to remarry. In the Woolworth's scene, she tells him, "What was I supposed to tell 'em? That you were sent to the penal farm, and I divorced you from shame?" Everett looks down and grimaces and says, "I get your point." Later, she says, "I gotta think about the little Wharvey gals. They look to me for answers." At this point in the film, people have been looking for answers in different ways: Wash Hogwallup's wife runs away to look for answers, people are baptized in the woods because they look for answers, Big Dan Teague says the Bible has the answers. Penny, however, appears to be the only one actually providing an answer for herself and her daughters by marrying Waldrip.

As previously discussed, radio was a popular form of entertainment. One particularly popular radio genre was the soap opera. Penny's story sounds very much like a 1930's soap opera, for "in many instances, it was the result of a marriage of an average woman to a man of wealth and power. Of course, this dramatic device allowed audiences to fantasize about the luxury that came with affluence." (MacDonald 235) These soap operas, however, clearly passed the message to their listeners that such stories were, just that, stories, or as noted in a 1935 publication, "Cinderella story" (236). *O Brother*, set in the Depression, now presents a story of a divorced woman, with an ex-husband in prison and seven daughters, now engaged to a bona fide suitor. Like Pete and Delmar who seek an invisible treasure, Penny, too, seeks answers in financial security.

A central scene depicting Penny's lofty ideas occurs when Everett and Delmar reach an unknown town during one of Stokes's campaign speech. Upon the Wharvey gals' introduction on the campaign stage, Everett hears their name and approaches them. At this point in the film, we know nothing of Everett's marriage or children. In the following scene, Everett looks up at three of his daughters, who are still on the stage. As Everett looks up into their faces, their words echo Penny's view of a proper marriage:

Youngest: Daddy!

Middle: He ain't our daddy!

Everett: Hell I ain't! Whatsis 'Wharvey' gals? - Your name's McGill!

Middle: No sir! Not since you got hit by that train!

Everett: What're you talkin' about - I wasn't hit by any train!

Youngest: Mama said you was hit by a train!

Middle: Blooey!

Oldest: Nothin' left!

Youngest: Just a grease spot on the L&N!

Everett: Damnit, I wasn't hit by any train!

Oldest: At's right! So Mama's got us back to Wharvey!

Youngest: That's a maiden name.

Middle: You got a maiden name, Daddy?

Everett: No, Daddy ain't got a maiden name; ya see -

Older: That's your misfortune!

Middle: At's right! And now Mama's got a new beau!

Youngest: He's a suitor!

Everett: Yeah, I heard 'bout that.

Middle: Mama says he's bona fide!

Everett: Hm. He give her a ring?

Middle: Yassir, big'un!

Youngest: Gotta gem!

Oldest: Mama checked it!

Middle: It's bona fide!

Youngest: He's a suitor!

Everett: Hm. What's his name?

Youngest: Vernon T. Waldrip.

Middle: Uncle Vernon.

Oldest: Till tomorrow.

Youngest: Then he's gonna be Daddy!

Everett: I am the only damn daddy you got! I'm the damn paterfamilias!

Middle: But you ain't bona fide!

Everett: Hm. Where's your mama?

Youngest: She's at the five and dime.

Middle: Buyin' nipples!

As Everett looks at his three daughters, he looks most worried when they say Waldrip is “bona fide.” His voice becomes more serious when he asks his daughters about Waldrip’s giving Penny a ring. Before we meet Penny in the next scene in the Woolworth’s store, we already have a clear idea of Penny’s goals.

Everett's concern with Waldrip and the ring shows his awareness of Penny's concept of "bona fide" and marriage. In the banquet hall scene, as she leaves with her arm linked in Everett's, he announces that he and Penny will remarry and he names the Soggy Bottom Boys his "best men." Everett then says, "Already got the rings," and takes Penny's hand, but she no longer wears a wedding band. She tells Everett she left her ring in their old cabin, "I ain't worn it since our divorce came through. It must still be in the rolltop in the old cabin. Never thought I'd need it." When Everett tries to suggest they use Waldrip's ring as their engagement ring, Penny quickly draws her hand away from Everett's and announces, "Ain't gonna be no wedding."

While Penny's idea of marriage reflects most women's views on the importance of the engagement ring, Everett simply says, "It's just a symbol." Everett, who earlier claims in the banquet hall scene, "I'm goddamn bona fide! I got the answers!" now has no answers for Penny. Furthermore, despite Everett's new social status, and his traveling to the old, now destroyed cabin and near death experience, Penny still refuses the ring that Everett fetches from the rolltop desk.

Penny represents the woman who sees marriage as her life's goal, and she also represents a woman who has the power to win men like Waldrip and Everett. As early as 1910, in an essay by Emma Goldman, feminists claimed that marriage merely provided a home for wives, a home that eventually became a prison because it was his home and his things (208). While Penny's character may lack ideals of her fellow 1930's feminists, she shows that her character, during the hard times of the Depression, somehow appeals to Waldrip, despite her seven daughters (and perhaps inability to

conceive a son) and fugitive husband. Penny's ability to attract a man to assume the financial and emotional responsibility for seven children is as much a feminist characteristic as those of her counterparts.

Penny's quick switch from Waldrip to Everett shows she has no real commitment to either man, only to her children. Penny's strong actions in the name of motherhood in *O Brother* are quite opposite of women's roles in films in 2003. A *New York Times* article says that television shows like "Xena, Warrior Princess" and children's films like *The Powerpuff Girls*, convey one important theme in women's roles: "The message from Hollywood is clear: You've come a long way baby. Now kill someone" (Leland). In the October 19, 2003, article, "I Am Woman. Now Prepare To Die," *The Times* reported that Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 1's* (2003) opening weekend drew forty percent of female ticket buyers despite its gruesome content. The article claims that the movie is about maternal loss, in which the main character decapitates her victims as revenge for "being denied the role of bride and mother" (Leland). Critics claim that violent women in film portray women as no longer victims, but *Kill Bill* still maintains that motherhood and marriage are necessary for a woman's well being. Penny's method of counting to three and walking away is effective, and quite humorous, like a mother talking to a child. When Penny refuses Everett's idea of using Waldrip's ring as her engagement ring, she says, "I have spoken my piece and counted to three." She walks away, and Everett throws his hat down and says, "Oh goddamnit! She counted to three! Sonofabitch!" Penny's message to Everett is loud and clear.

When women's roles are written and directed by male writers and directors, women's roles will never cease to be portrayed as either fertile and marriage-bound as in *O Brother*, or as a murderous villainess as in *Kill Bill*, or as a sexually-liberated woman as in Home Box Office's *Sex in the City*. Film and television, a male-dominated industry, seems to be "looking for answers" with women's roles. Women directors and writers may provide answers soon.

## **Conclusion**

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* shows Americans dealing with the hardships of the Depression, like The Soggy Bottom Boys who cut a record to make ten dollars, and Penny who seeks to remarry for her family's financial stability. Americans looked to the government instead of their church to repair the gap between the rich and the poor. When The Soggy Bottom Boys are named the Mississippi governor's "Brain Trust," they also become, as Everett explains to Delmar, "the power behind the throne, so to speak." In doing so, The Boys interweave the cultural elements that affect them—racism, industrialism, women's values and status, and religion—and the American people.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is historically significant because it successfully merges the four types of film histories that Louis Giannetti describes in *Understanding Movies* (9th ed.):

Theorists have charted four different types of film history, each with its own set of philosophical assumptions, methods, and sources of evidence: (1) aesthetic film histories—film as art; (2) technological film histories—motion pictures as inventions and machines; (3) economic histories—film as industry; and (4) social histories—movies as a reflection of the audience’s values, desires, and fear. (487)

The Coens are important to aesthetic film history because they pay homage to Preston Sturges’s artistic and visual accomplishments. They are important to technological film history because they use a new method of filmmaking called digital intermediate (Org, Mathews B1). They shot *O Brother* on film, converted it into a digital file, manipulated the film’s look, and then converted it back to film stock for distribution, a process also used by Gary Ross’s *Pleasantville* (1998) and George Lucas’s *The Phantom Menace* (1999). Today, Hollywood’s filmmaking is motivated by economic success, and the Coens are exemplars of independent filmmakers. Finally, the Coens know that audiences go to the movies to escape, but

the problems of historical films, such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, and literary adaptations pose the question of whether audiences "believe" what they see on the screen.

This chapter will focus on the Coens' significance to aesthetic film history, in particular the Coens' homage to writer/director Preston Sturges. Three of Preston Sturges's comedies that are in the National Film Registry will briefly be considered. Because they are in the Registry and the Coens related *O Brother* to one of these films, it follows that *O Brother* is a film worthy of preservation. *O Brother's* opening shot as an invocation of *Sullivan's Travels* is shown through the Coens' use of a multitude of camera angles, including bird's-eye view, high and low angle shots, dolly shots, close-ups, panning, and establishing shots. An examination of the crucial sequences of scenes during Sullivan's "death" and Pete's "death" shows, remarkably, that in both films, these sequences run exactly twenty-minutes, forty-two seconds. *O Brother* "reincarnates" Pete, of all places, in a movie theater.

**Preston Sturges in the National Film Registry: *Sullivan's Travels*, *The Lady Eve*, and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek***

The three Sturges films that the Library of Congress has inducted into the National Film Registry are *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) in 1990, *The Lady Eve* (1941) in 1994, and *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944) in 2001. Of these three films, only *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* was nominated for an Academy Award, for Best Writing, Original Screenplay. Sturges's sole screenplay that won an Academy Award for Best Writing, Original Screenplay, was *The Great McGinty* (1940), the first screenplay he wrote and directed.

The Coen brothers are very familiar with Sturges's films. Levine writes:

The [Coen] brothers in particular were big fans of the films of Preston Sturges—*The Great McGinty*, *The Lady Eve*, *The Palm Beach Story*, and especially the Hollywood Satire *Sullivan's Travels*. Like the brothers, Sturges wrote his own witty, talk-filled screenplays, created eccentric characters, liked to use a recurring company of actors, had a strong visual sense, and made films that were more ironic and satirical than other American directors. (104)

The Coens' familiarity with Preston Sturges's comedies is evident because they decided not only to make a film as a tribute to Sturges, but also to name *O Brother* directly after the fictional John L. Sullivan movie that was never made in *Sullivan's Travels*.

Interestingly, Sturges incorporates "moviegoing" and its effect on the moviegoers into these films. *The Lady Eve*, often described by film critics as a battle of the sexes, is the story of two lovers, Charles Pike, the son of a wealthy businessman, and Jean, a cardshark's daughter who attracts wealthy men for her father to swindle. When Jean falls in love with Charles, she calls off the scam, but Charles's bodyguard finds out about Jean's con; Charles calls off the engagement, and Jean, emotionally wounded, resumes the scam. Charles and Jean are like two main characters in a series of short picture shows—movies within a movie. For instance, in the restaurant scene on the cruise ship, the scene portrays Jean holding up a mirror so that the frame shows her fingers at the top and bottom of the frame and the mirror's reflection in the frame's center. We hear her witty narration about the women circling Charles's table like hungry sharks. From this point on, we think of Charles as an actor in Jean's movie, but when he calls off the engagement, he abandons the movie within the movie. Jean later attends Charles's party disguised

as a British heiress, the Lady Eve. Because we know that Jean is Lady Eve, again we think of Charles as an actor in Eve's movie. Sturges shows this when the bodyguard, certain of Lady Eve's true identity, is stuck outside the house and is forced to watch Eve's "show" through a windowpane. After Eve and Charles marry and go on their honeymoon, we watch Eve tell Charles of the many men in her past, although she knows that Charles will be hurt and leave her. He indeed gets off the train. Eve's hand is shown in the frame's corner as she pulls back the window curtain, and Charles's figure is in the frame's center of the windowpane. Our last movie within a movie shows Charles walking away from the "camera." As "actors" who are acting, who are we to believe?

*The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, written after *Sullivan's Travels*, has a premise opposite that of *The Lady Eve*, which dramatizes Jean/Eve's and Charles's romantic relationships. *Morgan's Creek's* is about life's drama that happens when you are not at the picture-show. The setting is World War II, American soldiers are being shipped to war, and American girls' attitude is "ya gotta kiss the boys goodbye." Trudy Kockenlocker wakes up married after attending a wild farewell party for soldiers; she later discovers she is pregnant but does not even remember the soldier's name. At the heart of *Morgan's Creek* is the fact that had Trudy not lied to her father about going to the picture-show with her childhood friend, Norval Jones, when she went instead to the party, she would have avoided her predicament. The storyline becomes more complicated as Trudy, her sister, and Norval attempt to fix Trudy's situation by having Trudy marry Norval under the same name as the "unknown" soldier, to give her baby a father. The night that Trudy and Norval attempt to elope, they tell her father they are going to the movies, to which he replies that movies are for holding hands and snuggling. Twice "moviegoing" is

used to dupe Trudy's father and shown as entertainment for dating, but nobody goes to the picture-shows.

*Sullivan's Travels*, however, depicts no romantic pursuits or family crises. It is a movie about the movies, about a director's restlessness with making screwball comedies. John Lloyd Sullivan selfishly wants to make a picture that will give the poor the answers they are searching for, but Sullivan realizes (as he is in mid-air in an airplane) that he cannot make a picture with answers because he is not the one with the answers. His experience with genuine human kindness and cruelty—and not the simulation of it while he poses as a hobo—gives him a new understanding of the answers the unfortunate seek in a picture-show itself. No passionate kisses end the film as when Eve and Charles reunite on the boat. No miracles happen like Trudy's giving birth to sextuplets and Norval's acceptance of all six babies as his. Instead, the last scene of *Sullivan's Travels* shows Sullivan and The Girl superimposed on a montage of people laughing. Sullivan realizes "there's a lot to be said for making people laugh." This statement brings audiences full-circle from the opening shot of the dedication: "To the memory of those who made us laugh: the motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and in all nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little, this picture is affectionately dedicated." Sullivan's final words, "Did you know that's all some people have? It isn't much . . . but it's better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan," show his understanding of the moviegoing experience, not as a film director but as a laborer chained to other prisoners. The act of moviegoing in *Morgan's Creek* is used for storytelling purposes, and when the characters only say they are going to movies, big events occur. Moviegoing is used as an art form in *The Lady Eve*, and when the characters twice fall in and out of love, they become actors playing actors in a battle of the sexes. But

moviegoing is treated as a “privilege” for Sullivan and the chain-gang in *Sullivan’s Travels*. Sullivan realizes that a social commentary film about the poor would only be a “privilege” for the rich because they know nothing about being poor, and therefore decides to continue making comedies for audiences who actually see film as a necessity much like food and shelter. Sullivan keeps ending up in Hollywood despite his attempt to escape Hollywood because he never truly cuts his ties. Sullivan’s misfortune occurs not during the time that he spends in the penitentiary as a laborer, but during the ninety minutes he spends as a wanderer, searching for experiences to put him in a position to make the picture-show to end all picture-shows.

### ***Sullivan’s Travels and O Brother, Where Art Thou?***

The Coen brothers pay homage to Preston Sturges through their auteur filmmaking. Reviews of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* duly note that its film title derived from Sturges’s *Sullivan’s Travels*, but, as Rob Content points out, “reviewers have made an easy game of matching characters in [*O Brother*] with their supposed counterparts from *The Odyssey*” (Content 45). Reviews, such as those in *The Chicago Sun-Times* by Roger Ebert and *Rolling Stone Magazine* by Peter Travers, and many more, cite Homeric parallels. The Coens’ claiming *O Brother* as a literary adaptation, and taking its title from a fictional, proposed film in a 1941 classic film, leaves audiences with a head-scratcher, because neither *The Odyssey* nor *Sullivan’s Travels* is a well-loved pop culture icon, like the annually televised *The Wizard of Oz*, a staple in every American home. It is as if the Coens made *O Brother* as an inside joke—but for whom? *O Brother*’s reviews allege that the Coens have never read Homer’s *Odyssey*; therefore the film’s allusions to the epic most likely leave

literary critics unsatisfied. Had the Coens not claimed that *O Brother* is based on *The Odyssey*, would reviewers have examined *O Brother* as Sullivanesque—that is, as the film that John L. Sullivan intended to make in *Sullivan’s Travels*? Sturges fans, who know that Sullivan’s “movie” is based on a “novel,” recognize that the Coens, too, base *O Brother* on the “novel.” Sturges fans also know that Sullivan realizes that true suffering is beyond description. Thus, why would the Coens be compelled to make the movie Sullivan wanted to make—a film that “teaches a moral lesson” and “has social significance”? The bigger question is, have the Coens made Sullivan’s film for him, which has also been suggested by critics, and does it belong in the National Film Registry?

Like Sturges, the Coen brothers write and direct their own films, but Levine observes that “for film buffs who know their genres and their directors, the films of the Coen brothers are a feast of clever references . . . They have parodied, commented on, embraced, subverted, and renewed each genre in turn” (viii). Therefore, the Coens have taken film history and rewritten it with their own stories and filmmaking style. The Coens clearly announce—not once, but twice—the inspirations for *O Brother*. In addition to naming their film after the film that was never made in *Sullivan’s Travels*, the Coens allude to epic poetry. *O Brother’s* invocation to the Muse is the Coens’ parallel to Homer’s invocation to the Muse of poetry.

*O Brother’s* opening shot begins with the following incantation:

O Muse!

Sing in me, and through me tell the story

Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,

The wanderer, harried for years on end . . .

Homer invokes the Muses, the nine sister goddesses. *O Brother's* incantation calls the Muse to tell the story of "that man," that is, "the wanderer."

The opening invocation to the "Muse" is not only an allusion to the first lines of *The Odyssey*, but also to their Muses of film directing, Preston Sturges and John L. Sullivan. The Coens have not made Sullivan's film for him. They have "Coenized" *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* They drop the moral lessons by having three prison convicts as the main characters who steal, lie, and are "almost loved up." Whereas Sullivan wanted to "hold a mirror up to life," the Coens drop the social significance by using camera angles that suggest exaggeration of the film's events. To illustrate these points, we will consider two corresponding segments in *Sullivan's Travels* and *O Brother*: the opening scenes and the sequences about "the deaths" of Sullivan and Pete.

### **The Opening Scenes**

The opening scene of *Sullivan's Travels* is extraordinarily different from the rest of the film. In a fast-paced conversation, Sullivan, Mr. Hadrian and Mr. LeBrand discuss Sullivan's next film project. The opening sequence of shots of their film, which turns out to be a movie within a movie, is the primary instigator for the myriad reactions and emotions in this first scene. The movie within the movie shows an extreme long-shot of a fast-moving train, the top whistle blowing black smoke, and a side whistle blowing white smoke. Two men struggle on top of the train, one man in dark clothes, the other in light clothes. They fall in between the boxcars, but the high-angle shot shows both men clinging to the side of the boxcar, appearing to hang upside down from the bottom of the train. As they climb the side of the boxcar and wind up back on top of the train, the light-clothed man shoots the

other man four times; the injured man reaches out and chokes the other, and then they both fall into the ocean. “The End” appears on the screen in a wavy motion that mimics the ocean’s waves.

Sullivan (light suit), in reaction to this scene, jumps out of his seat excitedly tells his two producers (dark suits) that the train/fight scene they just watched has social significance, that it is the kind of picture he wants to make. The dark-suits merely shrug and say that Sullivan’s next film at least needs to have “a little sex in it.” Then they lecture him on his naiveté about economic hard times—after all, he is a successful director who had a privileged upbringing. Sullivan reacts to their harangue by deciding to find out “what trouble is,” a decision that sends the dark-suits into an uproar at the thought of their star director among the common people. In this short scene, we see Sullivan’s frustration over his career and his determination to make a picture show “that would realize the potentialities of film as the sociological and artistic medium that it is.” The producers’ indifference to Sullivan’s proposal quickly contrasts with their alarm when Sullivan announces his bold experiment. The scene ends when one of the dark-suits requests a copy of the script “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” then adds, “Make that two copies. Why should I suffer alone?” Mr. LeBrand’s statement is the theme of *Sullivan’s Travels* and subsequently the premise for the Coen’s *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

In *O Brother’s* opening scene, Everett, Delmar, and Pete, chained together, attempt to jump on a moving train. According to Bob Fisher’s “Escaping From Chains,” this scene was manipulated by digital intermediate:

The sequence was clearly too dangerous to shoot with a real, moving trains. Instead of using stunt doubles, the actors were filmed pantomiming the shot in front of a bluescreen. The moving train was

filmed as a background plate, and the two elements were composited by Digital Domain. (47)

Unlike *Sullivan's Travels* that contains numerous shots with trains—Sullivan and The Girl travel by train and Sullivan is dragged into a train by his attacker, who is then killed by a train—this scene in *O Brother* is the only train scene. Sullivan's theory of a socially significant film represented by two men fighting on a train and falling into a body of water, is not fully mimicked by the Coen brothers. *O Brother's* train scene shows the prisoners struggling to be one entity whereas the two men fighting on the train supposedly represent capital and labor attempting to destroy each other. The Coens take this socially significant "film" and instead tribute *O Brother's* train scene to two comical train scenes in *Sullivan's Travels*. In *O Brother*, we have a long shot of the three escapees running through a cornfield, followed by a close shot of a moving train. The train suddenly obstructs our view of the prisoners, but the camera cranes upward and over the train, so that we can still see the prisoners running through the cornfields. The next shot again reveals the prisoners still running toward the train. These extended shots of the prisoners running toward the train contrast the next sequence that shows the prisoners jumping on the train. A close-up of the prisoners chained legs as they run beside the train exaggerates the prisoners' ease of running through the cornfields without once stumbling. It is further exaggerated by the camera angles: from the side of the train, showing the prisoners desperately trying to keep up with it; from the inside of the boxcar, showing Everett's satisfied sigh once he boards the boxcar and is oblivious to his chained mates; and from the boxcar's ceiling, showing a rather unique angle of the three prisoners, like a continuous line with Everett standing up, Delmar lying down and Pete's prospectively smaller figure below Delmar's feet.

Everett's comment, "Say, any of you boys smithies?" refers to Sullivan's ridiculous attempt to talk to the hoboes about their economic hardship. Sullivan and The Girl jump on the train, and Sullivan absurdly asks the hoboes, "How do you feel about the labor situation?" This is like Everett's exaggerated attempt to find out if any of the hoboes are "trained in the metallurgic arts" and if they were blacksmiths "before straitened circumstances forced [them] into a life of aimless wanderin'." *O Brother's* train scene also echoes the humorous scene where Sullivan and The Girl attempt to jump off the train. Sullivan, arms outstretched, runs beside the train as The Girl scuffles back and forth inside the boxcar; Sullivan cynically tells her he cannot keep running, and when The Girl finally jumps off, they stagger for a little while and then tumble in the grass. *O Brother* similarly exaggerates the prisoners' falling out of the boxcar. The high-angle shot shows the prisoners stumbling, one by one—first Pete stumbles on the rocks, then Delmar is dragged out of the car, and finally Everett is pulled to the floor. A close up shot shows Everett's panic-stricken face as he is dragged out of the boxcar with his arms outstretched, another exaggeration to show his futile attempt to keep from being dragged. Because we know they are chained together, their falling out of the boxcar like a domino effect and tumbling down the field is very comical. This scene greatly stresses their unity, but not as Marxist figures.

### **The "Deaths" of John L. Sullivan and Pete**

In *Sullivan's Travels*, the sequence of scenes after Sullivan's "death" briefly shows other characters' reactions to his "death." We then see what happens to Sullivan in the labor camp, such as scenes with the Trusty and inside the church. The Coen brothers mimic Sturges's technique, but first we see detailed scenes that

show what happens to Everett and Delmar when they think Pete is still alive as a “toad.” Unlike Sullivan, who befriends the Trusty in the labor camp, Everett and Delmar meet Big Dan, who beats them, steals their money, and “kills” Pete. After Pete’s “death,” then we see brief shots that show his near-hanging by the Sheriff, who calls Pete by name whereas Sullivan becomes an anonymous “Richard Roe,” and his return to the prison farm.

John L. Sullivan is considered “dead” after they discover the body of Sullivan’s attacker in the morgue, wearing the shoes he has stolen from Sullivan at the shelter. The shoes with Sullivan’s identification card sewn in the soles will later be referenced by *O Brother*, connecting Sullivan’s disappearance to Pete’s. After the newspapers announce Sullivan’s “death,” we see a sequence of brief reactions shots from his ex-wife (who was extorting money from Sullivan), his film crew, and The Girl. A medium shot of The Girl is followed by a shot of a fast-moving train, and then by Sullivan’s head on the boxcar floor as he awakens. The train that separates these two shots is the last shot of a train in the film. It separates the director Sullivan from the Sullivan who emerges from the train as someone who wants to find out “how it feels to be alone . . . in trouble . . . without friends . . . without credit . . . without checkbook and without name.” His first reaction to his situation is violence; we see a Sullivan who grasps a rock and hits a railroad employee, a crime for which he is sentenced to six years of hard labor. In the labor camp, Sullivan, immediately labeled as “the fresh guy,” befriends the Trusty. When the Trusty releases him from the sweatbox, the dehydrated Sullivan falls into his arms. The Trusty tries to give him hope and tells him, “maybe [The Mr. will] let you go to the pitcher show Sunday. Now wouldn’t that be something? Huh? Huh?”

*Sullivan's Travels* has several scenes where a character might be expected to react to a situation, but reaction shots are curiously omitted. For example, in the Lunch Box scene, when a movie crewmember gives a handful of money to the Counter Man as repayment for feeding the penniless Sullivan and The Girl, his reaction to the unexpected payment is hidden. People experience hard times, but when the counterman happens upon good times, we are excluded from his reaction. Sturges's exclusion of close-up reaction-shots becomes clear as we consider the most important part of the film, the church scene. Inside a church, a close-up shows the preacher's face as he sings "Let My People Go." Suddenly, several close-ups follow of prisoners, parishioners and the picture-show, which is a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Then we see a downpour of close-ups of cheeks broadening, teeth showing, eyes gleaming, open mouths guffawing. The genius of this scene lies in Sullivan's "awakening" to those around him and acknowledging their reaction to the simple animation film of Goofy getting his nose stuck on flypaper. Sullivan asks the Trusty, "Am I laughing?" but the Trusty only points and laughs at the cartoon. The next shot shows Sullivan's wife leaning over his gravestone, still speculating that he "faked" his death to get out of paying her alimony check. In the next shot, Sullivan and The Trusty discuss Sullivan's predicament. Sullivan asks, "What kind of people get their pictures in the paper?" The Trusty answers, "Ball players, girls . . . when you die, if you was important enough." Sullivan then says, "I've had that." The Trusty then suggests, "murderers?"; Sullivan then confesses to the "murder of John L. Sullivan," and gets his picture in the paper.

The Soggy Bottom Boys are also important enough to get their name mentioned in the paper. Their picture, however, is not in the paper because their identity is unknown, so the sequence of scenes surrounding Pete's "death,"

specifically the omission of reaction shots, contrasts with Sullivan's "death." Sullivan's "death" is blamed on his inability to associate with the hoboes (remember, he winds up back in Hollywood after his first attempt to go out on his own as a laborer). The Girl says, "I should have gone with him . . . I knew he'd get in trouble without me." Pete's transformation is blamed on his "fornicating with some whore a Babylon," but he is actually "killed" by Big Dan, the Bible salesman. The first shot after Pete's disappearance is a bird's-eye shot of Delmar's face followed by a low-angle close-up of Delmar's shoes, a direct reference to *Sullivan's Travels*. This shot corresponds to the same angle shot of Sullivan's bare feet in the homeless shelter, where he wakes to find his shoes have been stolen. In *Sullivan's Travels*, where reaction shots in the labor camp scene emphasize Sullivan's emotional experience in the church scene, the Coens do not use reaction shots during Pete's "death." They use a variety of close-ups during Pete's "transformation," but once Big Dan "kills" Pete, the close-up reaction shots are omitted.

In the restaurant, we see a reaction shot of Big Dan at overhearing Delmar and Everett. He slowly turns his face toward the camera so that we see that he wears an eye-patch, and his menacing expression foreshadows his role. Everett, who earlier accepts Pete's transformation by wizardry, now shows no reaction to Big Dan's role as a Bible salesman, even though Everett holds no religious beliefs. As Big Dan professes that he sells "the only book" with the answers, Everett, without hesitation, accepts Big Dan. In the picnic scene, again Everett fails to react to Big Dan's beating Delmar with the tree bough. When Big Dan first hits Delmar, Everett merely says, "What's going on, Big Dan?" Delmar then throws himself at Big Dan and tries to tackle him. Big Dan hits Delmar three times before knocking him on the ground. Everett says, "I don't get it, Big Dan," and Big Dan hits him over the

head. For a third time, Delmar tries to tackle Big Dan but Big Dan overpowers Delmar, throwing him to the ground. When Big Dan first enters the scene, we know that he is extremely interested in the shoe box, but when he finally opens the box to find a toad, only a medium shot is used. Instead, we see Delmar's close-up reaction shot as Big Dan squishes "Pete" and throws the toad against the tree.

The next scene reveals that Pete is still alive; we see a reaction shot of Pete's horror when he sees the Sheriff, who the Soggy Bottom Boys know as the "devil." Like Everett's and Big Dan's lack of reactions, Pete shows no reaction when the Sheriff tells him, "Your friends have abandoned you." When he sees the noose swinging over the tree, and he says, "Goddammit! God forgive me!" Pete's reaction is not to his fear of death, but rather to his weakness of not safekeeping the treasure. His loyalty to Delmar and Everett as fellow treasure-seekers is like a criminal's loyalty to the mob leader. The next scene shows Delmar and Everett sitting in the back of a truck as it drives down a dusty road where prisoners are working, but they do not attempt to hide, as they do in the montage during "I'll Fly Away" and in the upcoming movie theater scene, where they slide down their seats to hide from the prison guard. In the campaign scene, Everett's daughters are happy to see him despite being told he was hit by a train. Penny, who "fakes" Everett's death to get a divorce, has no reaction to suddenly seeing Everett after his "demise" by a train.

The movie theater scene is the most important scene without reaction shots. *Sullivan's Travels* has three movie theater scenes—the opening scene, the scene at Ms. Zeffie's house, and the church scene—but *O Brother* has one single movie theater scene. Instead of close-ups to show Delmar and Pete's reactions to seeing Pete alive, the camera shows a long shot of Delmar and Pete as they turn around and stare at Pete. The next shot shows Pete saying, "Do not seek the treasure,"

followed by a two-shot of Delmar and Everett's amazement. Delmar says, "We thought you was a toad," and Pete has a puzzled look. In the next medium shot, Delmar slowly enunciates his toad comment, but Pete ignores it and again says, "Do not seek the treasure." Two important things happen here without reaction shots—Pete's reappearance and his news about the treasure-ambush. Pete's "resurrection" in the movie theater corresponds to the church scene in which Sullivan's chain-gang march into the church to watch a movie, like Pete's chain gang march into the movie theater where Everett and Delmar are. The Coens, however, do not mimic Sullivan's "awakening" as close-ups show the chain-gang and church members watch a Mickey Mouse cartoon; instead, nobody on Pete's chain-gang laughs, and we cannot see the full movie screen. We see no "moral" lesson, like Sullivan's passage from capitalist to laborer. Instead, Delmar and Everett break Pete out of prison after they realize he is still alive, and Pete is especially racked with guilt for squealing about the treasure. When we eventually find out that Everett lies to his two companions because of his wife's upcoming marriage, his lying about the treasure alludes to Sullivan's comment, "There's always a girl in the picture. Haven't you ever been to the movies?"

## Conclusion

*O Brother's* direct references to *Sullivan's Travels* also include Sullivan's questions about how hoboes get their food, and The Girl says, "They steal chickens!"; a young boy in a whippet tank takes Sullivan and his film crew on a wild car chase, like Hogwallup's son who rescues Everett, Pete and Delmar from the burning barn; both Sullivan's wife and Everett's wife are concerned with their own financial well-

being rather than loyalty to their husbands; both films leave the romantic endings ambiguous, with no “final kiss” between hero and leading lady.

In the 1930s, Sturges was the “sole major Hollywood director who filmed only his own original screenplays” (Henderson, ed. 5). The Coen brothers did not make Sullivan’s film for him. They pay homage to Preston Sturges by naming *O Brother* after Sullivan’s fictional movie and injecting certain scenes that allude to *Sullivan’s Travels*, but in developing their own story about three escaped convicts in 1937 Mississippi, they do not attempt to create a socially significant film. A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* says *O Brother* is another Coens’ “whiz-kid inventiveness.” Kent Jones of *Film Comment* writes that the Coens are “the Siegfried and Roy of art cinema” (45). The Coens’ allusions to Sturges’s film recreates Sullivan’s belief that “film is the greatest educational medium the world has ever known.” The Coens, in fact, teach us about Preston Sturges and his contributions to the history of film.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

#### **Music: Down from the Mountain**

The human capability of music appreciation is indeed a scientific mystery. Darwin believed music was the first method of communication before man achieved speech, and was used in courtship or as a “social glue” in large groups (Wade F1). Whether music appreciation has neurologically evolved, however, cannot be proved. Thus, inexplicable is our association of music and movies, like associating the sound of short shrill shrieks with Hitchcock’s shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), or associating Peter Gabriel’s song “In Your Eyes” with John Cusack’s holding up the boombox in *Say Anything* (1989). No scientific explanation exists for why and how music evokes emotions, but its significance is an integral part of film studies. Randy Thom, a film sound designer, dismisses the theory of film as an isolated visual medium: “You may have noticed, as I have, that when you’re in a movie theater and the sound stops working for some technical reason, funnily enough you never hear anybody in the theater say, ‘It’s okay, film is a visual medium anyway’” (Thom 2).

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is proof of Thom’s opinion. Within the first three minutes of the film, we hear a steady hammering sound, followed by the song “Po Lazarus,” performed by the prisoners who are hammering, and then another song, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” performed by Harry McClintock. Thirty minutes

into the film, we have heard six songs, all of which enhance the scene in which they are played. By opening with these songs, the Coen brothers establish *O Brother's* unique film sound—roots music. In October 2001, The Public Broadcasting System aired *American Roots Music*, a four-part series on eight musical styles the program defines as the foundation of roots music: Blues, Country, Bluegrass, Gospel, Cajun, Zydeco, Tejano, and Native American (*Roots Music*, 2001). The film's sixteen songs that makeup the musical score are divided into opening credits, individual scenes, climax, and closing credits. Roots music is the moviegoer's cue to the *mise en scène* and should be carefully considered, like *Jaws's* (1975) short bass notes that indicate a shark attack. Should the film sound be muted or have technical problems, an audience watching *O Brother* would be greatly deprived of the songs' significance to the film's theme.

The National Film Registry has previously inducted films with soundtracks that have produced popular songs, including "As Time Goes By" from *Casablanca* (1942), "Everybody's Talkin'" from *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and "The End" from *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In films that use already popular songs, Thom points out that often the scenes are edited to the music. The rock group The Doors did not record "The End" specifically for Francis Ford Coppola's war movie, but rather Coppola had a reason for using the song (7). Similarly, with "As Time Goes By," actor Dooley Wilson is more than just a piano-player named Sam who plays the song for lovers Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart; when Sam plays the song for both lovers, but in separate scenes, the song becomes a voice for the lovers who forsake their love for a greater purpose.

The sixteen songs that make up *O Brother's* soundtrack are previously recorded songs that lend to the film's purpose, but the Coen brothers infuse the songs in a distinctive manner characteristic of their work. The Coens, who, as noted above, build relationships with the same actors, also employ the same composer, Carter Burwell. However, the Coens' collaboration with Burwell on ten films, from debut film *Barton Fink* to *Intolerable Cruelty*, is interrupted by their enlisting T Bone Burnett, a producer and songwriter who has played with music legends Bob Dylan and Elvis Costello, as *O Brother's* music director. Although Carter Burwell is credited with "additional music" for *O Brother*, this "non-roots" music is applied to three specific characters: the Sheriff, who is associated with a shrill pitch similar to horror movie music prior to a murder scene; George Nelson, who is accompanied by low-pitched quick drumbeats like a Morse code; and Big Dan, "a man of large appetite," who is ironically introduced with soft piano music in a first-class restaurant. Except for these characters, presented through "additional music," *O Brother's* musical score is comprised of roots music.

Many film soundtracks with popular songs from the film's era incorporate *Billboard* hits with a musical score to act as a theme, such as the piano music for Forrest's character in *Forrest Gump* (1994). *Forrest Gump*, set from the 1950's to the 1980's, also includes Motown hits like The Supremes' "Stoned Love" and country hits like Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again." *O Brother* does no such thing; a thematic musical score is completely absent. *O Brother* exploits roots music as the thematic musical score to make the music the storyteller of the America it depicts in the film. The music selected for *O Brother's* soundtrack portrays many facets of American history, such as the Great Depression, the Ku Klux Klan, integration of

the African-American community, women's rights, the invention of the radio, and spirituality.

### **American Roots Music in the Library of Congress**

Because the roots music is our clue to understanding *O Brother's* aesthetic sound, a brief discussion of roots music is necessary. The *American Roots Music* television series and book is a collaboration of the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, the Experience Music Project and Ginger Group Productions.

The *American Roots Music* book features many musicians who originally wrote the songs that appear on the *O Brother* soundtrack, such as Harry McClintock, Jimmie Rodgers, Ralph and Carter Stanley, and the Carter family. The term "American roots music" refers not just to folk music, but to music pioneers who ultimately influenced the modern music genres we hear today—the "chronicler[s] of the ongoing story of America told through song" (13). Bonnie Raitt, who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2000, writes in the Introduction:

Roots music reflects where we've been – politically and sociologically, as well as musically. Early field recordings like those we have from John and Alan Lomax represent such an important contribution to how we can learn about – and celebrate – our past. They tell us where this music really lived, where it came from, and how our own history developed. (8)

The *American Roots Music* four-part television series is housed in the Library of Congress. According to a LC press release on March 17, 2003, Ginger Group

Productions, producer of *American Roots Music*, donated nine segments of the television series to the American Folklife Center, created by Congress in 1976 “to preserve and present American folklife” (LC, PR 03-012). The Library of Congress’s recognition of American roots music as essential to the “understanding of American culture and folklife” (LC, PR 03-012) validates the Coen brothers’ use of roots music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*.

### **American Roots Music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?***

American roots music in *O Brother* can be divided into five sections: the opening scene, The Soggy Bottom Boys’ songs, the religious songs, the governors’ songs, and the closing scene. The opening scene consists of two songs, “Po Lazarus” and “The Big Rock Candy Mountain.” These two songs will be discussed in relation to the film’s statement rather than in relation to main characters who have songs of their own. The escapees, Everett, Pete and Delmar, meet Tommy Johnson to form the integrated band The Soggy Bottom Boys, who sing two songs, “A Man of Constant Sorrow” and “In the Jailhouse Now.” Tommy sings “Hard Time Killing Floor Blues,” a song that deeply affects the escapees. The Soggy Bottom Boys experience a breakdown; the band first loses Tommy, but he leaves behind his guitar, and then the threesome loses Pete, who leads them to the final song associated with them, “Didn’t Leave Nobody But the Baby.”

The religious songs in the film are associated with Everett, Pete and Delmar, but not directly, like a Soggy Bottom Boys tune. Instead, the religious songs in the film are sung by an outside source to which the escapees, Tommy and even the audience find themselves listening. Before they meet Tommy, the escapees experience a religious rebirth; a baptism to the tune of “Down to the River to Pray.”

The religious song “I’ll Fly Away” appeals to the film audience because the song dominates a montage of scenes of the escapees’ adventures. When they discover Tommy imprisoned by the Ku Klux Klan, the escapees and Tommy listen to the KKK Wizard sing “O Death” as the KKK prepares for Tommy’s hanging. After the escapees save Tommy and they are reunited as The Soggy Bottom Boys, the band then encounters another hanging—their own—and they listen intently to “Lonesome Valley” as the Sheriff makes his preparations. The two gubernatorial candidates, Pappy O’Daniel and Homer Stokes, share a campaign theme of “sun” images. However, Pappy’s theme song, “You Are My Sunshine,” and Stokes’s theme song, “Keep on the Sunny Side,” have entirely different histories. The closing scene features the song, “Angel Band,” sung first by Everett’s daughters and then by the blind prophet, whose voice and squeaky flatcar remain the last images of the film.

### **The Opening Scene: “Po Lazarus” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain”**

The opening sequence of *O Brother* begins with the following incantation, with each line appearing on screen independently:

O Muse!

Sing in me, and through me tell the story

Of that man skilled in all the ways of contending,

The wanderer, harried for years on end . . .

Before the first line of the incantation appears, the lone sound is a steady hitting sound, although we cannot yet tell who or what is producing the sound. As soon as the third line of the incantation is revealed, a man’s voice yells, “Po Lazaruz!”, followed by another man’s voice that echoes the words, and yet another man’s voice, and still one more man’s voice that echoes these two words. Four times “Po

Lazarus” is repeated before the opening shot. As the frame fades to black, the singing continues.

The next frame reveals a panning shot of a dusty field with nothing in sight. The singing, however, continues. Although the singing dominates the film, the panning finally reveals a man on horseback carrying a gun. A second man on horseback is shown before the source of the singing is revealed: a chain-gang.

As the camera pans the singing prisoners, the shots are taken from all angles. Shots are from a low angle, then in front of the prisoners, in back of them, to the side, and overheard, showing their chains. The first and last shots of the prisoners are of their legs and the axes pounding on the rocks. Plainly shown are the ethnicities of the men on horseback and the prisoners, the “white” men and the “slaves.”

The lyrics to “Po Lazaruz,” as heard in the film, are

Well, the High Sheriff, he tol' his Deputy,

Won't you go out and bring me Laz'rus.

Well, the High Sheriff tol' his Deputy,

Won't you go out and bring me Laz'rus

Bring him dead or alive, Lord, Lord

Bring him dead or alive.

Well the Deputy he tol the High Sheriff,

I ain't gonna mess with Laz'rus.

Well the Deputy he told the High Sheriff,

Says I ain't gonna mess with Laz'rus

Well he's a dangerous man, Lord, Lord.

Alan Lomax recorded this version of “Po Lazarus” in 1959. According to the album notes from *Southern Journey: Bad Man Ballads/Songs of Outlaws and Desperadoes* (Volume 5, The Alan Lomax Collection), Lomax found this type of prisoner-chant common in the Mississippi prison system, and considered “Po Lazarus” to be the “finest African-American ballad he and his father John had ever recorded.” This particular album from the Alan Lomax Collection contains three different versions of “Po Lazarus”; the version that appears in *O Brother* is the third and final version from the album, and is performed by James Carter and prisoners.

The prisoners then stop their singing and grunt in unison as they bear down their axes on the rocks. The film fades to black and the next song follows immediately. “Po Lazarus’s” juxtaposition with the next song, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” is extremely interesting. I shall first discuss the historical context of “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” and then the film content as it relates to these two songs.

Hal Rammel’s *Nowhere In America: The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Other Comic Utopias* discusses Harry McClintock’s song, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” written in 1929, as a reference to The Land of the Cockaigne, which portrays an image of a “poor man’s paradise” (2). The engraving, entitled “Land of Cockaigne,” completed sometime after 1570, is attributed to the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) website describes the engraving as follows:

The Land of Cockaigne, known in Dutch literature as Luilekkerland (country of the lazy and gluttonous), was described in very popular stories as a mythical place where there is no need to work, and where food and drink are so abundant that we need only open our mouths to

take in what we desire. . . . three figures—a soldier, a farmer, and a clerk—are shown sleeping off the effects of their overindulgence, or waiting for more drink to imbibe—as the clerk does at left. Some of the remains of their meal are strewn on the platform encircling the tree in the center, while the mountain of buckwheat in the background and the house covered with tarts at right indicate this land has plenty to spare. The image's moralizing intent—to decry the vices of sloth and gluttony—is apparent from the first part of the Dutch inscription below: “The lazy and gluttonous farmers, soldiers, and clerks get there and taste all for nothing.”

([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/brue/hod\\_26.72.44.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/brue/hod_26.72.44.htm))

“Po Lazarus,” although not sung in its entirety, is about the treatment of slaves in the South, or as Lomax says, “concerns the doomed attempt of an exploited and underpaid black laborer to even up the score by stealing the payroll from his bosses” (Kaye, *Southern Journey* notes). “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” is associated with a contrasting image of a Utopian society. This Utopian image, according to Rammel, also comes from a different culture, Dutch. These two songs juxtaposed echo the opening remarks of the *American Roots Music* series regarding European and African immigrants who brought with them to America folk songs that were hundreds of years old and that they memorized to help them remember their native lands. The important feature of American roots music is that it merges these folk traditions, as *O Brother* does within its first few minutes.

*American Roots Music*, additionally, classifies McClintock as a “singing cowboy,” among the genuine cowboy singers who made recordings in the 1920’s and 1930’s, such as the most famous singing cowboys, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers (26).

Singing cowboys took old songs and commercialized them. Thus, the first three minutes of *O Brother* is characterized by a prison-chant of “the tragedy of the black man” (Kaye, *Southern Journey* notes) followed by cowboy music, songs sung by genuine cowboys that ultimately turned into Hollywood hits. The Coens’ turning our three escapees into an old-timey hit band, The Soggy Bottom Boys, depicts them as “singing cowboys,” and separates them from the prison camp they leave behind. By beginning the film with the image of the prison-camp and the Alan Lomax recording of “Po Lazarus,” the Coens introduce us to roots music and their style of integrating roots music into a Hollywood production.

McClintock’s song is the only one in the film that is played in its entirety. Therefore, I shall consider it in its entirety with its corresponding shots. The “Utopia” of which Rammel writes is evident in the lyrics as well as in the film’s images.

The first verse of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” is

One evening as the sun went down,  
 And the jungle fires were burning,  
 Down the track came a hobo hiking,  
 And he said, "Boys, I'm not turning  
 I'm headed for a land that's far away  
 Besides the crystal fountains  
 So come with me, we'll go and see  
 The Big Rock Candy Mountains.

An extreme long shot of the prisoners who were previously singing “Po Lazarus” is followed by a low-angle shot that seems to be from the point of view of our hoboes. Suddenly, we see three figures pop up from within the cornfields. They run a few

steps toward the camera before one of them grunts, and they simultaneously drop into the cornfields again. They run towards the camera, towards the audience—the land that is far away in an imaginary place “beside the crystal fountains.” The quest for Utopia is set. The three escapees are running towards their idea of a Utopian society that does not exist.

The second verse contains fantastical images, “cigarette trees” and a place where “the sun shines all day”:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
 There's a land that's fair and bright,  
 Where the handouts grow on bushes  
 And you sleep out every night.  
 Where the boxcars all are empty  
 And the sun shines every day  
 And the birds and the bees  
 And the cigarette trees  
 The lemonade springs  
 Where the bluebird sings  
 In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

In the corresponding shot, the three figures jump out the cornfields again and run closer to the camera. The three figures, however, remain dark and obscure.

The third full verse mentions cops and dogs, two recurring images in *O Brother*, specifically the Sheriff and his hound dog, referred to as “The Devil.” This verse then describes bountiful farms:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains  
 All the cops have wooden legs

And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth

And the hens lay soft-boiled eggs

The farmers' trees are full of fruit

And the barns are full of hay

Oh I'm bound to go

Where there ain't no snow

Where the rain don't fall

The winds don't blow

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

As the third verse begins, a three-shot reveals our escapees: three white men.

The image should immediately strike the audience as odd, since the men in the prison camp in the opening scene are all African-Americans. Did these three prisoners come from the same prison camp? The previous verse with its imaginary images corresponds to these three white men supposedly escaping from a prison camp, and suggests the film's awareness that it is unlikely that three white men could escape from a Mississippi prison. The next shot reveals a farm from the escapees' point of view. Next, another low-angle shot suggests the point of view not of the escapees, but of a chicken. The frame shows the escapees' legs chained together as they run around the chicken, and then from a low-angle shot we see the escapees' intent faces, as they look down at the chicken. A full shot then shows all three men chasing the chicken.

The fourth verse, associated with only one shot in the film, reads:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

You never change your socks

And the little streams of alcohol

Come trickling down the rocks  
 The brakemen have to tip their hats  
 And the railway bulls are blind  
 There's a lake of stew  
 And of whiskey too  
 You can paddle all around it  
 In a big canoe  
 In the Big Rock Candy Mountains

The corresponding shot shows the escapees running away from the camera, with one of the men holding the chicken in his hand as they run down a dirt road. The lyric's implausible elements, a whiskey lake and streams of alcohol, perhaps suggest that the escapees' catching the chicken (the Utopian farm), in a way, forecasts their attempt to seize riches. The escapees' running away from the camera—running from their idea of a society that does not exist—with the chicken in hand suggests that their attaining riches may lead them back to imprisonment. This, in fact, happens in the film.

The fifth and final verse refers to imprisonment and invokes the opening scene of *O Brother*:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,  
 The jails are made of tin.  
 And you can walk right out again,  
 As soon as you are in.  
 There ain't no short-handled shovels,  
 No axes, saws nor picks,  
 I'm bound to stay

Where you sleep all day,  
 Where they hung the jerk  
 That invented work  
 In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.  
 I'll see you all this coming fall  
 In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

The corresponding shot reveals the three escapees feasting on their chicken, but then they hear the far-away sounds of barking dogs. Their fearful response is shown by the flash-pan shot from the escapees' faces to the woods. The next shot is another eye-level shot in cornfields; we see the escapees' legs running through the cornfields. And finally, in the last shot, the camera pans from train tracks at eye-level to reveal a long shot of the escapees running towards the train tracks, with the frame suddenly enveloped by a passing train. Again, the escapees run towards the camera, but as the music stops, and the film's first real dialogue ensues, the escapees fail to escape on the train. They fail to hop aboard the Utopian society.

**Songs of The Soggy Bottom Boys: "A Man of Constant Sorrow,"  
 "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues," "Didn't Leave Nobody But the  
 Baby," and "In the Jailhouse Now"**

According to Harry Smith's 1952 *Anthology of American Folk Music*, a Kentucky musician named Richard Burnett (1883-1977) wrote a ballad in 1913 called "Farewell Song," which eventually became the song "A Man of Constant Sorrow" (41). Ralph Stanley and Carter Stanley, native Virginians known for their "old time mountain music," made "A Man of Constant Sorrow" one of their signature songs. The Stanley brothers learned "A Man of Constant Sorrow" from their father,

a logger at a sawmill who often sang at home and in church (Wright 45). Carter Stanley, who died in 1966, is survived by his brother Ralph Stanley, who recently worked with T Bone Burnett on a new album following the success of the *O Brother* soundtrack. Dan Tyminski's performances of "A Man of Constant Sorrow" as the voice of Everett (not one of the song's original old-time singers Ralph Stanley) carry this traditional song into the twenty-first century. The Soggy Bottom Boys appear not to care for the old-timey song's success. When they perform it at the radio station, they are preoccupied with the money earned for "singing into a can." And though Everett is particularly amazed by the standing ovation for The Soggy Bottom Boys at the banquet hall, the song is not only interrupted by Stokes's outcry, but by Everett's attention to Penny. Furthermore, when Penny demands her old engagement ring, the Boys make the long trip to Everett's old home, and forget their success in the banquet hall.

Nehemiah "Skip" James, who wrote "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" in 1930 during the Great Depression, was featured in the October 2003 Public Broadcasting Service series, Martin Scorsese's seven-part series *The Blues: A Musical Journey*. The first series "Feel Like Going Home," directed by Martin Scorsese, describes James's style as one of "haunting despair" and "the most evocative of the oppressive societal conditions in which he long lived." The series also shows James as a great influence on Robert Johnson, the blues musician on whom many of *O Brother's* reviewers believe Tommy's character is based. According to *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, though, an actual blues artist named Tommy Johnson originated the crossroads story (Cobb 288). The popular legend of Robert Johnson holds that an inexperienced Johnson would often attend the local dances and play the artists' guitars during the

performance breaks. Johnson himself soon showed such skillful guitar playing that the musicians were sure that he had sold his soul to the devil. Robert Johnson's influence stretches to popular guitarists today such as Eric Clapton and the Rolling Stones. Tommy's rendition of "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" evokes one of the most memorable scenes in *O Brother*. Close-up shots of the escapees' faces show their contemplative expressions as Tommy sings the poignant song: "[H]ard time here and everywhere you go/Times is harder than ever been before . . . And you say you had money, you better be sure/Cause these hard times will drive you from door to door." Everett's far-away expression precedes a shot of Tommy's singing, followed by Pete's far-away expression, then another shot of Tommy. The next frame shows Delmar's looking off to the side, followed by another shot of Tommy. The back and forth shots of the three escapees and Tommy's singing imply that they are all thinking of "hard times." While Tommy is still singing in the background, Delmar, barely audible, suggests that the men sleep outside instead of in a nearby barn, and the others agree. Pete then mentions the money, the "treasure," that Everett claims he has stashed away. They each discuss, in the same emotional tone of Tommy's song, their plans for their share of the money. Pete desires to be a "maiter dee" in a fine restaurant. Delmar wants to buy back his family farm because "you ain't no kind of man if you ain't got land," a sentiment that echoes the Oklahoma land race. Everett's lack of plans for his share of the money confuses Pete, and rightly so, since Everett attempts to embody reason and logic. But before Pete can question Everett about the money, he is interrupted by the Sheriff's dog. Skip James's "Hard Time Killing Floor Blues" provides insight into *O Brother*, as Rob Content says of the escapees' desires, "[A]ll these small human aspirations are as hopelessly out of reach as the Big Rock Candy Mountain. Watching the campfire scene, we know that

they'll never really see the money" (Content 47). As the voice of reason, Everett's inability to answer the question in the campfire scene forecasts that the "treasure" does not exist and that the escapees will find "treasure" from another source.

Alan Lomax recorded Mrs. Sidney Lee Carter's version of "Didn't Leave Nobody But the Baby" in 1959 in Mississippi. Featured on the album *Southern Journey: Highway Mississippi/Delta Country Blues, Spirituals, Work Songs & Dance Music* (Volume 3, The Alan Lomax Collection), Mrs. Sidney's lullaby originally included these lyrics: "Go to sleep you little baby (2x)/Your mama gone away and your daddy gonna stay./Didn't leave nobody but the baby." Mrs. Sidney Carter knew many children's songs and entertained her own children with her singing. Gillian Welch and T Bone Burnett wrote additional lyrics to Mrs. Carter's lullaby, taking the song beyond its one-minute duration to the hypnotic lullaby that enraptures Pete, Everett and Delmar.

Like Mrs. Sidney Carter, Jimmie Rodgers was from Mississippi. Recognized as the "Father of Country Music," he recorded "In the Jailhouse Now" in 1928. Tim Blake Nelson (Delmar) and John Turturro (Pete) actually sing this song, in contrast to George Clooney's lip-synching "A Man of Constant Sorrow." During the first verse of "In the Jailhouse Now," we see three different situations: Delmar sings, Everett pleads with Penny, and Pappy whispers into Waldrip's ear a plan to switch sides in the campaign. Pete performs a fantastic yodel that the banquet hall audience applauds. The second verse of the song continues with the same three situations: Delmar sings, Everett pleads again, but Stokes enters the scene and argues with Pappy over the gubernatorial race. A sudden burst of Pete's yodeling interrupts their argument. When Delmar and Pete launch into crooning "in constant sorrooooww," like a cattle call, the words immediately beckon Everett, and he

instantly leaves Penny's side and rushes to the stage. By invoking The Father of Country Music, The Soggy Bottom Boys pay their final tribute to roots music.

### **Religious Songs: "Down to the River to Pray," "I'll Fly Away," "O Death," and "Lonesome Valley"**

"Down to the River to Pray" was originally published in *Slave Songs of the United States*, a collection of 136 songs, compiled in 1867 by William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison. The original published title of "Down to the River to Pray" was "The Good Old Way," which is today considered a traditional gospel song. Pete, Delmar and Everett sit around a campfire when Pete and Everett burst into an argument over Everett's stealing from Pete's cousin Wash Hogwallup. The two-shot of Pete and Everett, with the back of Pete's head on the left side of the frame and Everett's head in the center; makes it easy to notice the white-ropes on the right side of the frame, worn by a group headed for baptism. As Pete and Everett argue, however, Pete, who is facing the white-robed figures, does not notice them walking through the forest. Instead, Everett, whose back is turned away from the white-ropes, becomes aware of the strangers, as they sing "Down to the River to Pray," and he asks, "What the hell's that singing?" Our attention, therefore, is not drawn to who the white-robed figures are, but to what they are singing. Furthermore, during Pete and Everett's argument, the singing interrupts Everett's statement, "It's a fool who looks for logic in the chambers of the human heart." The song's interference with Everett and Pete's dialogue is consistent with the constant interruption of Everett's speeches throughout the movie. Everett describes himself as "the one with capacity for abstract thought" and "endowed with the gift of gab," but he never really offers any complete thoughts. For instance,

when he speaks of “sentient bein’s,” he suddenly sees Pete, who is back in the penitentiary, and when he scoffs at baptism, Delmar interrupts him to pick up Tommy Johnson. The main point of each instance is that Everett’s thoughts are interrupted by a parallel idea. He speaks of conscious beings but then spots a ghostly Pete, whom he mistakes for “Pete’s brother.” Everett chides Delmar and Pete for being baptized, and then they pick up Tommy, who has just sold his soul to the devil. Thus, in relation to Everett’s comment on the heart as a foolish source of logic, “Down to the River to Pray” is a song in which the speaker’s urgent wish for baptism provides a questionable approach to “looking for answers.” Delmar and Pete are baptized, but Everett refuses.

Albert E. Brumley wrote “I’ll Fly Away” in 1929. In 1986, when Brumley was inducted into SESAC<sup>7</sup> Hall of Fame, a performing rights organization for songwriters and publishers, “I’ll Fly Away” had been recorded over five hundred times. The montage that accompanies the song bears a recurring theme: unlike the “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” background for low-angle shots of Everett, Pete and Delmar, shots of the escapees during “I’ll Fly Away” show the three men either reaching or looking up. A medium shot shows an apple pie, hot from the oven, taken from a windowsill by somebody below the ledge. We see Delmar’s head peek above the windowsill and leave a dollar bill and then three figures dash away. A high-angle shot shows the escapees huddled on a porch for shelter from a rainstorm, and another high-angle shot shows the escapees, particularly Everett, waving his hands in the direction of the Dapper Dan pomade. Despite the high-angle shots that suggest the escapees’ belief in the religious images of flying to “God’s celestial shore” and to a “land where joy shall never end,” the focus of the montage is, in fact,

Everett, the man of reason who refused baptism during “Down to the River to Pray.” After they steal the apple pie, we see Everett thoroughly enjoying it, eagerly licking his fingers, and tossing a newspaper into the campfire, where the first page slowly burns to reveal an article on the popular but mysterious band called The Soggy Bottom Boys.

The *O Brother* soundtrack labels “O Death” as a traditional song, but in the June 2003 issue of the e-zine, *bluegrasscountry.org*, a recent interview with Ralph Stanley credits Dock Boggs as the original writer. Stanley, who sings the a cappella version during the KKK scene, claims Boggs lived a mere fifteen to twenty minutes from him in Virginia, and that he first recorded “O Death” with his brother Carter Stanley ([http://www.bluegrasscountry.org/ezone/issue02/ralph\\_stanley\\_interview.php](http://www.bluegrasscountry.org/ezone/issue02/ralph_stanley_interview.php)). Like Skip James, Boggs was a musician who was hit hard by the depression; both James and Boggs experienced a revival in the 1960s and toured folk festivals that re-established and recognized them as talented musicians of their times. The KKK scene that features “O Death” again singles out Everett—his pomade emits a recognizable odor to Big Dan who exposes Everett’s black face (painted black to rescue Pete from prison).

The Fairfield Four (actually, three) sing “Lonesome Valley,” a variation of the traditional gospel hymn “Jesus Walked This Lonesome Valley.” Again, as with the previous three religious songs, Everett becomes the focus of attention. Three gravediggers sing another a cappella song about death, and this time Everett falls to his knees and prays for Delmar, Pete and for Tommy. He looks upward and his eyes show genuine fear; his ultimate reason for praying: “I just want to see my daughters again. Oh Lord, I’ve been separated from my family for so long . . . Let me see my

daughters again. Please Lord, help us.” We then see a point-of-view shot as he looks down to see water trickling near his knees. The singer’s voice strengthens, “You’ve got to go to the lonesome valley,” as Everett stands up and again looks at something the camera does not show us. Finally, from Everett’s point-of-view, we see a tidal wave and then a close-up of the Sheriff. A high-angle shot shows the escapees being engulfed by the tidal wave, then a shot of the back of Everett’s head followed by frames that suggest we are at the bottom of a body of water. As different objects float across the frame, particularly Dapper Dan pomade cans, “Lonesome Valley” completely dominates. The singers’ final bass notes are replaced with the plopping of the Dapper Dan pomade cans floating to the water’s surface, and finally by the splash of Everett’s head as he comes up for a big gulp of air.

### **Politickin’: the Governors’ songs “You Are My Sunshine” and “Keep on the Sunny Side”**

“You Are My Sunshine,” written by Jimmie Davis and Charles Mitchell, is not historically correct in the film. The song was actually written in 1940, three years after the 1937 setting. In the film, this song plays twice: first in Wash Hogwallup’s house (Pete’s cousin) and then again in the banquet hall; both times it is clear that it is the “Mississippi” governor’s campaign song. As noted in Chapter Three, Pappy O’ Daniel was the governor of Texas, but Pappy, who plays the role of the Mississippi governor in *O Brother*, is also not historically correct. Everett, Pete, and Delmar take no notice of the song when they first hear it on the box radio at Hogwallup’s house, but they are forced to sing it at the banquet hall at the governor’s request, where Everett says, in mock sincerity, “Governor – that’s one of our favorites!”

“You Are My Sunshine” first plays as a distant song on a box radio around which Everett, Delmar, Pete and Wash quietly sit. The song’s last verse, as played on the radio, is

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine  
 You make me happy when skies are gray  
 You'll never know dear, how much I love you  
 Please don't take my sunshine away.

The men do not speak to each other. Everett and Pete sit on the same sofa, each concerned with his own thoughts. Everett combs his hair with his pomade, Dapper Dan. Wash whittles. When the song ends, a voice talks of biscuits and flour-hours. In these frames the four men are not interested in the radio discourse. The simple song “You Are My Sunshine,” is widely recognized today. In the film, however, Everett, Pete and Delmar are indifferent to the upbeat optimistic tune. Oddly, Gus Weill’s Introduction in *You Are My Sunshine: the Jimmie Davis Story* claims that Davis’s life is a reflection of the American Dream. Davis, a sharecropper, became the Louisiana state governor in 1944 and served two terms, and also broke into Hollywood and the music industry. The Soggy Bottom Boys, like Davis, get into music, but remain unaware of their success.

Homer Stokes’s theme song, “Keep on the Sunny Side,” plays a total of four times, more than any other song in the film, including “A Man of Constant Sorrow.” The Carter family, Alvin Pleasant (“A.P.”) Carter, his wife Sara Carter, and Sara’s cousin Maybelle Carter, recorded “Keep on the Sunny Side” in 1928 and adopted it as their theme song. *O Brother’s* soundtrack credits A.P. Carter with writing the song, but Ada Blenkhorn and J. Howard Entwisle originally composed it in 1899, when Blenkhorn’s wheelchair bound nephew, for whom she cared, often requested to

be pushed “down the sunny side of the street” (Horstman 54). *O Brother’s* soundtrack renewed interest in the Carter family, and resulted in a new book, *Will You Miss Me When I’m Gone?: The Carter Family & Their Legacy in American Music* (Zwonitzer 2002). According to Zwonitzer, the headstones of A.P. and Sara Carter show “the perfect likeness of a 78 record, perfect in its roundness, and the words ‘Keep on the Sunny Side’” (333). The song first plays as Homer Stokes’s campaign truck passes by a farmer who is plowing. When Everett and Delmar ride into town after losing Pete to the Sirens, Stokes’s campaign again features the band The Whites performing the song on stage. After the KKK scene, The Soggy Bottom Boys plan to crash Homer Stokes’s party in the banquet hall, and “Keep on the Sunny Side” can be heard from outside of the building. Finally, “Keep on the Sunny Side” follows “Angel Band,” the final song in the final scene, wrapping up the movie during the final credits. Incidentally, The Soggy Bottom Boys are not directly included in any of the shots mentioned above, alienating them from Stokes’s song as they are alienated from Pappy’s song. While they seem to have an affinity with James’s blues or McClintock’s Utopia, The Soggy Bottom Boys cannot relate to these lyrics:

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side,

Keep on the sunny side of life.

It will help us everyday, it will brighten all the way

If we’ll keep on the sunny side of life.

Unable to relate to “You Are My Sunshine” and to “Keep on the Sunny Side,” they are rendered antiheroes with whom the audience identifies.

## The Closing Scene: “Angel Band”

After his attempt to give Delmar and Pete the scientific explanation for the flood, Everett spots Tommy and asks him, “What you ridin’ there, Tommy?” Tommy answers, “Rolltop desk!” the very same piece of furniture in which Penny tells Everett he will find her engagement ring. As soon as Tommy answers, we hear singing, obviously young girls’ voices. The flood scene fades to black and the words, “my race is nearly run” accompany the black frame. As soon as the song’s line ends, and right on tempo, Everett says, “All’s well that ends well.” The singing fades as he stands behind Penny and offers her the engagement ring, but she refuses it and says it is not hers. Penny asserts, “I counted to three” and quickens her pace, with Everett quickly following her out of the frame. The next shot shows five of Everett’s daughters singing the words to “Angel Band.” One of the daughters stands on the train tracks and points to the final image of the movie, the blind prophet plowing his trolley down the train tracks, away from the audience. His voice joins the girls, singing these final lyrics:

Whose blood now cleanses from all sin and gives me victory

O come Angel Band, come and around me stand

O bear me away on your snow white wings to my immortal home

O bear me away on your snow white wings to my immortal home

In a film filled with lyrics about God and American Society, these last few lines of “Angel Band” bring *O Brother’s* homage to roots music to full-circle.

## Conclusion

In 2001, the Recording Academy<sup>8</sup> honored the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack with a Grammy for Album of the Year. The soundtrack garnered four

other Grammy awards, including Best Male Country Vocal Performance for Ralph Stanley's "O Death," Best Country Collaboration with Vocals for Dan Tyminski, Harlan Allan and Pat Enright's "A Man of Constant Sorrow," Best Compilation Soundtrack Album for a Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media for T Bone Burnett, and Producer of the Year (Non-Classical) for T Bone Burnett. The success of the soundtrack spawned a second album, *Down From the Mountain*, which won Best Traditional Folk Album for T Bone Burnett.

Peter Kivy briefly discusses music and film in *New Essays on Musical Understanding*, but he acknowledges film as the most powerful artistic influence on mass culture in our century. Kivy credits philosopher Noel Carroll, when he writes that film music is "the modifier" and the moving image is "the indicator." Kivy explains that if the music expresses a certain lyric, then the moving image assumes the meaning of the lyrics (179). The thirteen songs in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* function as the film's modifiers. Because the songs include notable artists of American roots music, the film is essential to the history of American film and music. More importantly, the film's soundtrack has a greater purpose. Kivy affirms Wade's *New York Times* article about the mystery of music appreciation but says music undoubtedly arouses emotions. Kivy discusses Colin Radford's 1989 "emotions and music" theory as a simple logical concept—when the day is rainy and dreary, we become depressed. Like the "perceptual quality" of a rainy day, music, too, affects perceptions that evoke emotions. The Coen brothers' exploitation of American roots music in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* causes moviegoers to reflect on the past, thereby stirring memories of nostalgia, and perhaps of wistfulness for an American era long-forgotten.

## CONCLUSION

On November 9, 2003, I e-mailed Mr. Steve Leggett, Staff Coordinator of the National Film Preservation Board, regarding the status of the National Film Preservation Act of 1996, which as noted in Chapter One, came up for renewal in October 2003. On November 10, 2003, Mr. Leggett replied to my inquiry via e-mail, as follows, "For a variety of reasons, still not yet introduced. Hope to have it introduced before they adjourn later this month and then work to get it passed in 2004, 2nd year of 108th Congress."

On November 26, however, an e-mail from Mr. Leggett announced that Legislation for the Act was officially introduced on November 21, 2003. The official title of the Bill is "A Bill to Reauthorize and Amend the National Film Preservation Act of 1996." It was sponsored by the Honorable John Conyers, Jr., of Michigan in the House of Representatives and by the Honorable Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont in the Senate. On November 21, 2003, Senator Leahy stated, "Motion pictures are an important part of our American experience and provide an extraordinary record of our history, our dreams, and our aspirations." On November 23, 2003, Representative Conyers, Jr., stated, "We all know that motion pictures are amongst this nation's cultural treasures, going beyond entertainment to represent American ideals and values to people across the world." As the Senate and House of Representatives move forward to pass the Act of 2003, their remarks to

Congressional committees stress the importance of the preservation of American films.

Furthermore, the legislative bill, in “Section 102. Reauthorization and amendment,” states in subsection C, part 2, that the Librarian of Congress shall “review the comprehensive national film preservation plan, and amend it to the extent necessary to ensure that it addresses technological advances in the preservation and storage of, and access to film collections in multiple formats . . . .” The Act of 2003 will revolutionize the way visual media are stored and preserved in the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center in Virginia, which was specifically designed to handle the Library of Congress’ needs.

A *Wall Street Journal* article discusses the controversy over the technique called “digital intermediate” to manipulate scenes (Org, Mathews E1). The Coens used digital intermediate to achieve the look they wanted, “the feeling of old, hand-tinted postcards” (Fisher 103). How does digital intermediate affect the aging process of film? Unfortunately, nobody knows. Though the Coens used digital intermediate, they “kept the manipulation to a minimum” (Fisher 103). When *O Brother* becomes eligible for nomination into the National Film Registry in 2010, the obvious question here is whether film preservation organizations, specifically the Library of Congress, will be able to keep up with digital cinema advancements.

Some film historians claim that movie audiences will ultimately reject digital cinema because the moving images will appear unrealistic. The war between grain and pixels may be causing much hullabaloo in the film industry, but Hollywood appears to be taking advantage of digital intermediate, which combines them both. Almost a hundred films this year, compared to nearly a dozen in 2002, were enhanced by digital intermediate (Org, Mathews E1).

Of the seven major motion picture studios, only Paramount Pictures (<http://www.paramount.com/filmpreservation>) and Sony Pictures have entire websites dedicated to the studios' efforts for preserving films (<http://www.sonypicturesmuseum.com>). As the film industry continues to produce digital cinema, motion picture studios are still struggling with transferring film to DVD format. Fred Kaplan's article, "When Bad DVD's Happen to Great Films," says that making digital transfers is still a new art, and films like Coppola's *Godfather* boxed set is disappointing compared to the original negative (1). Because DVDs do not guarantee a film's survival in its original format, the National Film Preservation Board still leads the way in film preservation. Films inducted into The National Film Registry must be "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant." We have seen that *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* meets all three criteria and should be nominated when it becomes eligible in 2010. Joel and Ethan Coen display American cultural elements such as women's roles, industrialism, racism and religion. Historically, they pay homage to Preston Sturges, a writer/director with three films in the National Film Registry. Aesthetically, the Coens' use of American roots music is probably the most important aspect of the film. The Coen brothers' auteur film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* should be preserved in the National Film Registry.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> There is staggering statistical information on the rise of the number of R rated films since 1968. According to Haines, in 1968-1969, the number of R rated films was 124 and G rated films was 187. In 2001, the number of R rated films was 493 and G rated was 15. See Haines's Chapter, "The Demise of the Production Code: Product Shift" in *The Moviegoing Experience, 1968-2001* (81-85).

<sup>2</sup> The Internet Movie Database, an Amazon.com company, is a comprehensive "collection of movie information." Its website is [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com). Film information cited in this thesis was posted on IMDb at the time the thesis was written. Based in Europe and in the United States, IMDb reserves the right to withdraw or delete any information from the site at any time.

<sup>3</sup> The Film Foundation was founded in 1990 by Martin Scorsese and seven other directors: Woody Allen, Francis Ford Coppola, Stanley Kubrick, George Lucas, Sydney Pollack, Robert Redford, and Steven Spielberg. Robert Altman and Clint Eastwood joined thereafter. For more information, visit the website at [www.film-foundation.org](http://www.film-foundation.org).

<sup>4</sup> The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is a registered trademark. *Fargo* won an Academy Award for Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. Frances McDormand also earned an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role in *Fargo*. The website is [www.oscars.org](http://www.oscars.org).

<sup>5</sup> Louis Giannetti's *Understanding Movies* (9th ed.) defines "campy" as "An artistic sensibility typified by comic mockery, especially of the straight world and conventional morality. Campy movies are often ludicrously theatrical, stylistically gaudy, and gleefully subversive."

<sup>6</sup> In 1931, Robert Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, gathered a petition with 740,000 signatures from his African American readership, protesting against the portrayal of blacks in *Amos 'n' Andy* and to have the show taken off the air. However, NBC ignored the petition, as did the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP declined to support Vann's petition because they argued, "that its portrayal of blacks was essentially harmless" (Craig 255).

<sup>7</sup> SESAC initially stood for Society of European Stage Authors and Composers. The company was founded to serve European composers not fully represented in the United States. SESAC was designed to represent songwriters and publishers and their right to be compensated for having their music performed in public. Today, SESAC represents international performers from nearly every music genre. The website is [www.sesac.com](http://www.sesac.com).

<sup>8</sup> The Recording Academy is a registered trademark. The Grammy's are the only peer-presented award to honor artistic achievement, technical proficiency and overall excellence in the recording industry. The website is [www.grammy.com](http://www.grammy.com).

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*Three Kings*. Dir. David O. Russell. Perf. George Clooney, Mark Wahlberg, Ice Cube. Warner Bros, 1999.

*Troy*. Dir. Wolfgang Petersen. Perf., Brad Pitt, Eric Bana, Orlando Bloom. Warner Bros, 2004. (Note on IMDb: Since this project is categorized as being *in production*, the data is subject to change or could be removed completely.)

## VITA

Lynnette Lombardo was born in San Marcos, Texas, on December 8, 1971, the daughter of Ray Lombardo and Maria Gutierrez Lombardo. After graduating from San Marcos High School, San Marcos, Texas, in 1990, she attended the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas. In 1992, she entered the UD Rome Program and studied abroad in Rome, Italy, for one semester. During her senior year at UD, she worked for the luxury hotel The Mansion on Turtle Creek, in Dallas, Texas, as a switchboard operator. She earned her B.A. in English from UD in December 1994, and continued to work for the Mansion until July 1995, when she visited (and stayed in) the Mansion's sister luxury hotel The Lanesborough in London, England.

Lynnette then relocated to Austin, Texas, in August 1995. From 1997 to 2001, she worked for The Office of the Attorney General as a Human Resources Specialist and Office Manager. In September 1998, she traveled to Europe. Before committing to graduate school full-time, she wanted to travel in the States, and visited New York City, Lake Tahoe, San Francisco, Memphis, and New Orleans; before committing to writing her thesis, she traveled to Chicago to see a Cubs game. In 1999, she entered the Graduate School of Texas State University - San Marcos, Texas.

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