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"The Varied carols I hear": The music of the New Deal in the West

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“THE VARIED CAROLS I HEAR”: THE MUSIC OF
THE NEW DEAL IN THE WEST

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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ABSTRACT

**“The Varied Carols I Hear”: The Music
of the New Deal in the West**

by

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The Federal Music Project and subsequent WPA Music Programs served as components of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal” efforts to combat the economic devastation precipitated by the Great Depression. Operating during the years 1936 to 1943, these programs that engaged unemployed musicians mirrored similar efforts of the Federal Theatre, Art and Writers’ Projects. Though the Federal Music Project proved to be the largest of the cultural programs in terms of both employment and attendance, to date it has received the least attention from scholars. This dissertation demonstrates that, given the societal landscape of 1930s America, a regional perspective is imperative to an analysis of the music programs. And, contrary to earlier histories, the Federal Music Projects and WPA Music Programs of the West were successful in expressing the ethnic and cultural diversity of the region, thus achieving a primary goal of the Roosevelt administration.

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I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

Walt Whitman

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“If President Roosevelt had done nothing else but establish the Federal Music Project, that alone would be sufficient to account him great.” So declared a Southern California musician during the height of the Great Depression. The newspaper editorial in which the statement appeared concluded: “this opinion will be confirmed by thousands of musicians and music lovers.” Initiated in 1935 as an aspect of President Franklin Roosevelt’s “New Deal” plan for economic recovery, the Federal Music Project (FMP) represented one of four Art Projects (designated Federal Project Number One, or Federal One) of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) intended to alleviate unemployment caused by the economic depression.¹

Approval of the FMP was widespread. “Since there has been a United States, there has ever been the problem of how to bring the world’s great music to the people of America as it is brought to all classes in Europe,” editorialized the *San Diego Union* in 1936. The article queried, “after more than 150 years, is the answer here?” Responses in the affirmative came from across the nation, and even from across the Atlantic. A London, England, magazine described the WPA Federal Music Project as “the most important experiment in music ever undertaken by any people.” And the eminent Austrian composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold was quoted in 1938 as saying: “Nowhere in Europe is there anything that even compares with the Federal Music Project. Of course,

¹ Richard D. Saunders, *Hollywood Citizens Journal*, June 19, 1937, Administration, Central Files of WPA, 1935-44, Federal Music Project National and Special Reports, 1936-39, Entry 811, box 24, Hierarchical Reference Report by Record Group 69 Work Projects Administration, National Archives and Records Administration; hereafter referred to by file description/Entry or File/box number/NARA.

we have state subsidized opera, but no country in Europe has anything to equal this. It is heartwarming to see those splendidly trained musicians performing concerts of high caliber for the public at nominal admissions, and in most cases, free of charge as a phase of governmental activity.” American composer Charles Wakefield Cadman described the FMP as the “finest constructive force that has ever come into American musical life.”²

Unlike the other aspects of Federal One, the response to the Music Project remained positive, often singularly void of political partisanship. “When the New Deal is mentioned in company, there is sure to be division of opinion, some persons being strongly for it and others strongly against it, for it is not a matter as to which many are neutral or indifferent,” wrote one southern California editorial. Yet, “a few innovations” such as the Federal Music Project “have been generally accepted as good...” And a Republican newspaper argued “the Federal Music Project ... is not only free of politics, it is one of the most exciting and hopeful experiments made under the New Deal.” The editorialist concludes: “If it is boondoggling to make America music-conscious, and if the Federal Music Project is an example of politics in the WPA, then I say let us have more of the same.”³

The FMP would in other important ways prove to be the most successful of the WPA cultural ventures. At its peak nearly 16,000 were employed by the FMP, far more than any other Federal One program. By 1941 WPA musicians performed 7300 separate

² Ruth Tanton, *San Diego Union*, December 31, 1936, Entry 811, box 24; “Special Report on Sponsorship,” entry 811, box 25; “1938-1938 FMP Activities Report,” November 1938, entry 803, box 1; “National and Special Reports,” entry 811, box 23; all in NARA.

³ Long Beach *Press Telegram*, May 24, 1936, entry 826, box 46; “Special Report Prepared for the President’s Advisory Committee on Education,” Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, New York *World-Telegram*, October 7, 1936, entry 811, box 24, both NARA.

original compositions of 2558 American composers. By March of 1940 more than 249,612 separate programs were performed for aggregate audiences of 158,617,432 persons. Music teachers hired to provide musical instruction for the underprivileged – operating primarily in rural areas where instruction was unavailable – taught 1,557,764 classes with an aggregate class attendance of 17,672,428.⁴

The Federal Music Project restructured in the summer of 1939 and became the WPA Music Program, requiring local sponsorship of twenty-five percent; the music programs in many regions remained so popular that local financial support often far exceeded this minimum requirement. By 1940 the efforts of the New Deal music programs shifted largely to concerns of national defense, and in December of 1941 all remaining WPA programs existed to aid the War effort. By the time of its termination in July of 1943, the FMP and WPA Music Programs had presented a variety of musical forms to incalculable numbers of American music lovers, and the education units of the New Deal music projects had employed thousands of teachers who provided instruction to countless millions of Americans who otherwise could not have afforded them.

Yet, despite these manifold accomplishments the FMP has become, historically speaking, something of the redheaded stepchild of the New Deal cultural programs.

Dozens of books, both scholarly and popular, as well at least one major Hollywood

⁴ “Report of Performances and Attendance from Inception to March 31, 1940,” The U. S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, box 1, folder 4, Library of Congress; hereafter referred by entry description/Project/box/folder/LOC; “For Release to Afternoon Papers: Ferde Grofe Predicts Great Future For American Music,” FMP, box 24, folder 2, LOC; Florence Kerr to Mary T. Mendres, “Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes,” December 13, 1939, entry 817, box 33, NARA. The administration of the WPA Music Programs did not accumulate statistics as reliably as the FMP, but it would not be unreasonable to estimate the aggregate audience and class attendance for both structures combined to be nearly doubled by the time of the Program’s 1943 ending.

motion picture, have explored the activities of the other divisions of Federal One. The FMP has been largely ignored. Subsequently, a variant of the following has been a common response when explaining the topic of this dissertation, even from some archivists with substantial Music Project holdings in their repositories: “I know of the plays of the Theatre Project, and the State Guides of the Writers’ Project. And I have seen some of the murals of the Federal Art Project. But there was a New Deal project for music, too?”

The reaction is wholly understandable. Despite the undeniable interest and enthusiasm produced throughout its duration, the Federal Music Project has received the least historical attention of all the Federal One programs. At present, only one frustratingly slight and seriously flawed book has been published specifically addressing the FMP, as well as two unflattering doctoral dissertations. The lack of consideration accorded the FMP can be explained by a number of factors, not the least of which being the intrinsically fleeting nature of musical expression compared to the other art forms supported by Federal One; theatre productions can be restaged, murals and other artistic creations can be preserved through time, and books can be republished for future generations.

The present obscurity of the Music Project can further be explained by a combination of several other factors, including the appeal of Depression-era radical politics (wrongly ascribed as absent from the music projects) among some scholars, as well as the lack of high profile and charismatic personalities in the FMP (the FAP employed Jackson Pollock and other regionally famous artists; John Houseman and Orson Welles worked for the FTP; and the FWP included writers Saul Bellow, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright,

Studs Terkel and John Cheever.) And the few recent studies that have addressed the FMP have not been positive; they conclude that the New Deal music projects constitute a “failure,” left behind an over-all record that was “rather dismal,” “lacked creativity,” and “effectively muted the diversity of the American mosaic.”

It is to a degree a response to these denigrating and erroneous conclusions that this present study forms its primary theses. First, the Federal Music Projects and later WPA Music Programs can *only* be understood through a regional lens; more than any other artistic activity of the 1930s, musical forms and expression reflected specific regional realities. In the West, the FMP administration (though certainly not immune to the prejudices of the age) encouraged participation across racial, ethnic, class, religious – and to a lesser degree gender – lines. And many of these developments occurred through “grass-roots” efforts that challenged a national administration intent upon the exclusive presentation of traditional classical forms of musical expression.

Marxist philosophy impacted all the arts in the United States during the Depression era, but the Music Project stands as the only aspect of Federal One to completely avoid the resulting political fallout resulting from the aesthetic representations of this social and intellectual movement. The music programs in the West, however, effectively melded the goals and early ideals of the New Deal into an artistic expression that reflected the prevailing notions of 1930s nationalism combined with a progressive, even at times radical, orientation. With rise of the Popular Front coalition of Left, union, and other anti-Fascist forces later in the decade, many of the WPA musical programs in the West stand as powerful and effective representations of this potent political unification. And because of the immense popularity and general lack of controversy surrounding the New

Deal music projects in the region, their impact continued well into the War years, providing entertainment and morale for both military and civilian audiences, and in the process forging the ideas for a “new nationalism” that has proven an enduring force in modern America.

The WPA emerged out of the \$4.8 billion Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. The leadership of the entire WPA fell to Harry Hopkins, a lanky Iowan and social worker by training, who proved a dedicated, socially conscious and resolute public servant. Hopkins placed Jacob Baker, previously employed as an engineer, with the responsibility of appointing directors for all the white-collar programs. Fortyish, bald and paunchy, Baker represented the yang to his new boss’s yin, his technical and theoretical sensibilities complimenting Hopkins idealism. A staunch individualist criticized in some quarters for his leftist political sympathies, Baker no doubt viewed Federal One as the vanguard of the vast cultural changes already in progress across the country.⁵

In late July of that year, the four national directors for Federal One accepted their new positions; Henry Alsberg for the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP), Holger Cahill for the Federal Art Project (FAP), Hallie Flanagan for Federal Theatre Project (FTP), and Nikolai Sokoloff for the FMP. Hopkins expressed strong hopes for the cultural projects;

⁵ Baker left his position as head of the Division of Professional and Service Projects in late 1936 and was replaced by Ellen Woodward, who was subsequently replaced by Florence Kerr in 1938. Kerr served in the capacity until program’s end in 1943. Baker would remain engaged with the Roosevelt administration, however, working in the co-operative movement throughout the late New Deal period.

he believed that the results of these “less tangible” programs would produce the greatest benefits, even creating “in some ways a new base of American life.”⁶

The Federal One programs would be controversial from their creation. With the notable exception of the Music Project, all the national directors were to varying degrees associated with the avant-garde, experimental, or “modernist” elements within their respective fields. None of them, however, were directly aligned with the burgeoning Communist Party USA (CPUSA), an organization that found considerable appeal among artists of the Depression era. Henry Alsberg, a fervent political progressive, came to the FWP after a brief career as a lawyer and then editorial writer for the New York *Evening Post*. Living in Europe as a correspondent at the time of the fall of the Russian Czar, Alsberg aligned himself with the Bolshevik Revolution in October of 1917, but later published articles critical of the violence and suppression that followed. Alsberg was subsequently denied entry passports into the Soviet Union, and remained anathema to the leadership of the CPUSA. Within the ranks of the FWP itself, however, radical writers sometimes found employment; Jack Conroy for example, author of the widely read “proletarian novel” *Disinherited*, worked on four separate writers’ projects, including the Missouri project’s “state guidebook.”

Radical artists also painted murals for the Art Projects, producing some of the most memorable and lasting artifacts of the WPA. (Yet, as Michael Denning writes, “an unknown young radical painter, Jackson Pollock, was fired for being a Communist sympathizer.”) The choice of FAP director Holger Cahill came after careful

⁶ Harry Hopkins, *Spending to Save: The Complete Story of Relief* (New York: Norton, 1936), 174-175. In 1937 the Historical Records Survey would be added to Federal One.

consideration; Jakob Baker was well aware of the rift between the academy and professional artists on one side, and the suspicion this “establishment” evoked among younger, bohemian and often radical artists on the other. The selection of Cahill offered something of a compromise: Not an artist or critic himself, but a devotee, Cahill encouraged the creation and expression of American populist art. Cahill encouraged an egalitarian sensibility about art appreciation while on the staff at the American Museum of Modern Art in New York City, striving to make art assessable and vital to the general public rather than simply an antiquarian pursuit of the privileged.⁷

Hallie Flanagan, national director of the FTP, remains one of the most colorful figures of 20th century American cultural history. Described by one newspaper at the time as barely five feet tall and weighing no more than a healthy Great Dane, Flanagan’s diminutive physical stature belied an intense ambition and creative brilliance. A classmate of Harry Hopkins at Grinnell College in Iowa, upon graduation Flanagan entered Radcliffe College where she distinguished herself as a theatrical writer and director. Flanagan later attended George Pierce Baker’s world-renowned Workshop 47 at Harvard, and in 1926 Flanagan became the first woman to be awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship; her assignment was to research contemporary theatre in Ireland, England, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Latvia, France, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy and Russia. Prior to her position with the Roosevelt administration, she directed the Experimental Theater as a faculty member at Vassar College.

Of the four white-collar WPA art projects, the FTP proved the most controversial, and also the one whose performances and accomplishments most reflected the personality

⁷ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1997), 80.

of its national director. “The theatre, when it’s good, is always dangerous,” director Flanagan has been quoted as saying on more than one occasion, and plays such as *Power* and *Triple A Plowed Under*, and especially the FTP “living newspaper” presentations, early on attracted the suspicion and ire of the political right-wing. But Flanagan was adamant when she wrote directors Morris Watson and Joseph Losey of the play *Injunction Granted* for changes they had made without her consent: “Morris, I want you and Joe to be clear about this. As I have repeatedly said I will not have the Federal Theatre used politically. I will not have it used to further the ends of the Democratic party, the Republican party, or the Communist party.”⁸

Flanagan had insisted from the start that any theatre sponsored by the United States should “do only such plays as the government can stand proudly behind” by being “national in scope, regional in emphasis, and American in democratic attitude.” Nevertheless, a Congressional act abolished the FTP in the summer of 1939; the newly formed Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities led by Texas Congressman Martin Dies had concluded that “a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party.” The Writers’ Project was subjected to condemnation, but allowed to continue. The Art Project would also fall under the veil of suspicion and be closely monitored. The Music Project alone escaped all investigation.⁹

⁸ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Noble Offset Printers, Inc., 1940), 73.

⁹ Hallie Flanagan, “Opening Address to the First Production Conference of the Federal Theatre Project,” 22 July 1936, Administrative Records, Federal Theatre Project/George Mason University, 1; Flanagan, *Arena*, 347.

The professional qualifications of FMP director Nikolai Sokoloff were beyond dispute. Born in Russia in 1886, he was both the son and grandson of accomplished symphony musicians. A prodigy, he played the violin with the Kiev Municipal Orchestra (which his father, Gregory, conducted) by the age of nine years. Two years later the family moved to the United States, selling young Nikolai's violin to afford the passage. The Sokoloffs eventually settled in Connecticut, and when Nikolai learned of a scholarship audition at the Yale School of Music, he scrounged an old violin in anticipation of the event. Excitement turned to utter disappointment upon his arrival at the New Haven campus; Nikolai had received misinformation. The competition had been held the previous week, the scholarship already awarded. Sokoloff was granted an impromptu audition by Horatio Parker (evidencing in young Sokoloff a personal persuasiveness and determination even at a tender age) and so impressed the renowned conductor that the young violinist was awarded a special scholarship. Nikolai Sokoloff became, at thirteen, the youngest student enrolled at the Yale School of Music.

Following several years' study, while still a teenager, the future FMP director became a member of the violin section of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. But as was expected of serious musicians, Sokoloff sought further musical training in Europe, studying under Vincent D'Indy and Eugene Ysaye in France. He eventually performed a successful tour as a violin virtuoso, and a temporary conductorship of the Manchester Symphony Orchestra in England redirected Sokoloff's ambitions toward conducting. Returning to the United States, he served in a number of capacities before being named the conductor of the recently formed Cleveland Symphony Orchestra in 1920. Here Sokoloff developed a national and international reputation as guest conductor in over a hundred

cities in the United States, Canada, Cuba, and Great Britain. Just prior to his position with the New Deal, Sokoloff organized and conducted a symphony orchestra in New York City.

But the assignment of Nikolai Sokoloff as national director of the Federal Music Project represents a departure from Jacob Baker's other choices for the administration of Federal One. Sokoloff did not embrace the experimentalist impulses emerging in the field of music in the first decades of the 20th century. His predilections tended exclusively toward classical works, particularly symphonic music. Educated in the Romantic school of musical presentation, Sokoloff favored the traditional works of primarily European composers. His disdain for popular music was unrestrained, which the ordinarily reserved Sokoloff denounced in rather colorful terms. To one reporter he argued that jazz and swing did not represent popular music at all: "Popular music is music that endures through the years, as Handel's *Messiah* and the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven – that's popular music. I'd bet more people today in the world know the Fifth Symphony – and it was written one hundred years ago." And the national director felt just as strongly about embellishments to performances of symphonic or chamber music: "The clever dance arrangements of classical airs," he told one meeting of music directors, "are as ludicrous as your lovely grandmother made up to look like a chorus girl."¹⁰

The collection and performance of folk music aroused considerable interest and enthusiasm by the 1930s, and Sokoloff agreed that "great symphonies have been written around the folk songs of Russia or Germany." But the new national director initially

¹⁰ Charleston (South Carolina) *News-Courier*, "WPA Music Chief Here on a Visit," February 11, 1936, entry 840, box 36; "Special Report on Sponsorship," *Albuquerque Journal*, September 16, 1937, entry 811, box 25, both NARA.

discouraged folk music activities in the FMP because “much of it still remains parochial” and “musicians and scholars are not entirely agreed” as to “whether the folk music of America will furnish material for great and lasting works.” Sokoloff, however, encouraged American composers to create their own symphonic scores. He told a Southern California newspaper: “I believe very firmly that we should give the good American conductors a chance when there are vacancies in these orchestras, and I believe we should give plenty of opportunity to American composers of merit.” Yet, as stated in the FMP preliminary report, the “administration has had no intention of fostering incompetence.”¹¹

Though his choice as FMP national director represented something of a departure for Baker, because of Sokoloff’s professional stature the assignment provoked little objection. At least one complaint over the decision, however, arrived in Harry Hopkin’s office. Mrs. Henry Morgenthau from Bar Harbor, Maine, and wife of the Secretary of Treasury, wrote:

A great many people of the musical world who are summering here feel very much concerned at the appointment of Mr. Sokoloff to manage the welfare of the musicians. They and I feel that Mr. Sokoloff is not fitted by temperament and character for the position. Even though he has been appointed we think you should thoroughly and impartially investigate his ability and character. If you find we are right then either have him resign or at least so limit his power as to lessen the harm he is apt to do.

We know you will take this letter in the friendly spirit in which it is meant, but the appointment is so vital to the whole music world that I felt the urge to let you know the sentiment of most people.

¹¹ “Federal Music Project 3rd Report – 1938,” Central Files, box 383; *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1936, entry 826, box 46; “A Preliminary Report of the Work of the Federal Music Project,” entry 811, box 24, all NARA.

The letter from Mrs. Morgenthau has been routinely cited by previous FMP histories as evidence of the objections spawned by the Sokoloff appointment. Its implications are so vague, however, that the correspondence defies analysis. But a letter sent to Baker by Margaret Klem, a prominent WPA administrator in Colorado, probably better captures the feeling about the appointment of Nikolai Sokoloff as national director of the Federal Music Projects:

I attended the annual banquet of the National Federation of Women's Music Clubs and heard Mr. Sokoloff give a most interesting and inspiring talk on the Federal Music Project. I have never seen a speaker hold the undivided attention of a large group of women as well as he did. I believe he was discouraged with the lack of music standards which had been followed in the old SERA music project in Los Angeles county.

The State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) had previously funded projects in several states that stressed recreational music rather than the professionalism demanded by the FMP national director. In southern California, as other districts, the program early on became rife with charges of both graft and incompetence. The Sokoloff appointment, and his preferences for traditional classical music, no doubt lent a legitimacy and credibility to the Projects in the eyes of many.¹²

Descriptions of Nikolai Sokoloff's personality contrasted dramatically. Viewed by some as snobbish and difficult, by the time of his appointment as national director of the FMP Sokoloff had nonetheless procured an astonishing assemblage of professional contacts and supporters. Many of these advocates commented not only on the conductor's musical professionalism, but also his personal charm. In press accounts,

¹² Mrs. Henry Morgenthau to Harry Hopkins, August 22, 1935, General Files, box 382, NARA; Margaret C. Klem to Bruce McClure, September 14, 1935, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, both NARA.

Sokoloff was routinely described as engaging, knowledgeable and well spoken. Most regional programs directors expressed anticipation and delight with his visits.

The impact of Sokoloff's insistence upon "high art" music in the FMP has been exaggerated. Even a casual survey of FMP program descriptions reveals that the programs supported a variety of musical genres. Indeed, the single most striking aspect of the WPA music projects in the West is the ethnic, religious, and musical diversity evidenced in the performances. And while the national director absolutely expressed an early preference for symphonic music, the stance withered within the first full year of Project operation. Also, his authority proved far less than autocratic. When, for example, state directors Helen Chandler Ryan in New Mexico or Lucile Lyons in Texas challenged Sokoloff's initial rejection of specific Hispanic folksong and Mexican *tipica* performances, the national director soon acquiesced. Director Sokoloff's management style suggested a degree of conflict-avoidance; one close observer described "the patented Sokoloff system of avoiding trouble by methods copied from the ostrich."¹³

In many ways history has been unfair to Nikolai Sokoloff and diminished his substantive contributions as national director of Federal Music. It is largely through his efforts that the Project succeeded in ways unequalled by any other New Deal cultural venture. Despite limited administrative experience prior to his appointment, Sokoloff had many Music Projects "up and running" sooner than any other Federal One program. Articulate in speech and eloquent in the written word, Sokoloff exuded confidence and

¹³ Raish Stoll to Ernst Bacon, April 6, 1938, Bacon (Ernst) Papers, University of California, Berkeley, Music Library; Another example involved the dismissal of western regional director Bruno David Ussher. Though protocol would seem to dictate that Sokoloff engage the situation, instead responsibility fell to WPA administrator Ellen Woodward. Though closely involved with the decision, Sokoloff feigned surprise in later correspondence with Ussher.

commanded respect. And the national director's expressions of and demands for equality and fairness within the Project were not empty platitudes, but sincere personal convictions. As he told reporter Gail Martin in Utah:

WPA music projects are for all sexes, creeds, races and colors. Women play along side of men in the orchestras. We have a number of splendid negro choruses. Thoroughly American in spirit, the Federal Music Project considers only ability to perform and discriminates against no race.

Nothing in the historical record suggests Nikolai Sokoloff betrayed this commitment in word or deed. More than once the national director suspended his preference for "high art" music so as to not to disenfranchise the participation of ethnic minorities. And Sokoloff's support for the participation of women in symphony orchestras finds antecedents prior to his WPA directorship; from 1916 to 1917, as musical director of the San Francisco People's Philharmonic Orchestra, he had insisted upon including women in the orchestra at the same pay scale as men. Later, when a prominent WPA conductor in Southern California sought to prevent women from joining "his" symphony orchestra, Sokoloff and the regional director swiftly and unequivocally overruled the attempt.¹⁴

By January 1936 music programs were being presented in the larger metropolitan areas and by September of 1937 the FMP was operating in forty-two of the forty-eight states. "There aren't any musicians on relief in Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Idaho, or North and South Dakota, so we don't have any organization there," explained director Sokoloff. "There was one unemployed musician in Reno," he continued, "but he got a good job." Eventually Nevada and several of the other states also received WPA funding

¹⁴ Gail Martin, "Federal Project Chief High in Praise of Utah Sinfonietta," Salt Lake City *Deseret News*, April 6, 1937, Press Clippings Relating to Nikolai Sokoloff, box 88, entry 831, NARA.

to provide for music instruction or similar activities. The national FMP director encouraged all states to participate in the annual celebration of “National Music Week.” The administration of the FMP was separated into four geographical sections, each assigned a regional director who reported directly to Sokoloff. The territory in the West included California, Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Idaho, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, later Nevada, and nominally Montana and Wyoming. Texas and Oklahoma remained administratively independent, though the state directors, Lucile Lyons and Dean Richardson, were selected by and worked closely with the regional director of the West.¹⁵

Bruno David Ussher was chosen as the western regional director of the FMP. Born in Germany, Ussher had studied musicology with Arnold Schering and Hugo Riemann and philosophy with Oswald Spengler. He spent some years in England, and then moved to Los Angeles in 1910, receiving a Doctor of Music degree from the University of Southern California in 1934. Ussher was a lecturer in Aesthetics and the Criticism of Music and Symphonic Literature at USC from 1931 to 1944, and also taught at the California Institute of Technology. As production manager of Hollywood Bowl concerts from February 1935 to the summer of 1936, he wrote publicity releases and program notes for the concerts. At the time of his appointment to the FMP Ussher was best known as a music critic for various Los Angeles newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Evening Express*, the *Examiner*, and the *Los Angeles Daily News*. He was also editor of *Who's*

¹⁵ *Hollywood Citizen-News*, September 15, 1937, entry 846, box 49, NARS; “Federal Music Project: Personal Staff,” Central Files: General, box 0371, NARS; “Program Publications and Project Reports,” entry 811, box 24, NARA.

Who in Southern California which he was commissioned to write as a part of a report to the Carnegie Foundation.¹⁶

Despite a solid reputation in music circles of Southern California, the tenure of Bruno David Ussher as a regional director of the FMP would be tempestuous and short-lived. Having spent most of his career in the East, Sokoloff appointed Ussher and other western administrators largely based upon recommendations rather than professional acquaintance; the national director's subsequent interactions and correspondences with many of those in the region reflect this lack of personal familiarity. Evidence of a strain between Sokoloff and Ussher commenced soon after the Project began. Prone to bouts of unbridled verbosity, many of Ussher's lengthy assessments and critiques of events in his region clearly annoyed the national director.¹⁷

Within the first several months of his appointment, WPA officials in Washington were receiving a steady flow of complaints about director Ussher's administration. A letter from the publicity director for the 1936 Democratic campaign in California stated that "the conduct and policies of Dr. Ussher are costing us many more votes than we can afford to lose." Another correspondence pointed to the regional director's "arbitrary favoritism and discrimination," a "condition of general dissatisfaction" in the entire

¹⁶ "Bruno David Ussher Collection," USC Rare Books and Manuscripts, Collection 34, Special Collections, University of Southern California.

¹⁷ Upon receipt of one telegram from Ussher critical of a specific musical production in San Bernardino, Sokoloff ignored the content and instead replied: "I am writing this letter to point out to you that your [lengthy] telegram contained 277 words and that even at the reduced rate extended to Government communications, it was approximately \$10.00. The contents of your wire could easily have been forwarded to me by airmail." Ussher responded with an extended justification of the previous telegram. Sokoloff to Ussher, December 22, 1936, Central Files: State, box 918, NARA; Ussher to Sokoloff, January 7, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 919, NARA.

western region, as well as the “cases of rank injustice emanating from Dr. Ussher’s office” that “are too many to be quoted.” Before the end of the first year of FMP operation, WPA administrator Ellen Woodward released Bruno David Ussher from his position, citing “confusion in administration,” and “unsureness of execution of policies.” Further, the regional staff and state directors “express themselves as entirely dissatisfied with your operations as Regional Director.” There would not be a replacement, and the western region would be the only section of the FMP without such leadership in place.¹⁸

The relationship of the FMP administration and the powerful Musician’s Union – the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) – was an integral aspect of the Music Project’s development. The national AFM administration maintained a strong anti-Communist position, and the Union also kept constant vigil as to the possibility of competition created by the FMP to privately financed music performances. Conflicts occasionally erupted over such concerns. Further, the Musicians’ Union firmly believed the FMP should support a variety of musicians and styles. AFM president Joseph Weber early on wrote Sokoloff:

... the musicians under present economic conditions should be permitted to be examined in ensemble as band or orchestra, dance band, military band, jazz band, and standard or symphony orchestra, as the case may be, and the standard should not be set too high.

Weber would soon write directly to WPA administrator William Mayfarth of what he saw as the undue demands for professionalism made by the FMP national administration: “If I understand the policy of the Music Project (and I have often protested against same)

¹⁸ L.M. Regan to Harry L. Hopkins, May 20, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA; Emerson Cox to Harry L. Hopkins, May 21, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918; Ellen S. Woodward to Bruno Ussher, December 17, 1936, General Files, box 384, all NARA.

it is not as much a question of the relief of unemployed but it has its prime purpose the advancing of the culture of music.” He concluded by pondering rhetorically “what the attitude of the members of Congress would be if they were made aware of the immense sum of money for the white collar element” at the expense of those without the requisite skills. The pressure exerted on the national administration from the Musicians’ Union no doubt served to expand the scope of the musical presentations within the FMP.¹⁹

Yet, the tensions between Sokoloff and the Roosevelt administration intensified and reached an apex by the spring of 1938, a fissure that no doubt hastened the departure of the national director from the entire Project. During a meeting of regional FMP directors in June of that year, Sokoloff acknowledged, “there is a very strong criticism toward our particular project.” Sokoloff, however, only vaguely identified the source of this criticism. “The government” he said, “has felt that we have done many splendid things but we have failed somehow to make it more of a community participation. They feel we have not stressed enough what is known as ‘social music.’” Sokoloff also confirmed that “I am accused by a great many people that my attention has been focused on symphonies.”²⁰

At the meeting, which included both regional and state directors, Sokoloff did offer suggestions for changes in the operation of the FMP. He now emphasized the importance of folk music, both in collecting and performance, as well as making additional efforts toward community participation in the various towns and regions. But, largely, his reaction to the criticism from “the government” was uncharacteristically defensive and

¹⁹ Joseph N. Weber to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 1, 1935; Joseph N. Weber to William Mayfarth, October 16, 1935, both General Files, box 392, NARA.

²⁰ “Minutes of Regional Meeting Federal Music Project held in Boston – June 22nd, 23rd and 24th, 1938,” FMP, box 1, folder 5, LOC.

even antagonistic. “By social music they may mean one thing, thinking another,” he told the directors, and then added, “I do not think it is our business to participate with every Tom, Dick or Harry who has no musical ability.” And though he stressed the importance of placing the works of as many American composers on the musical programs as possible, “I do not want you to feel you must put on a composition simply because it is written by an American.” After all, Sokoloff explained, “the American composer or artist will get no place playing stupid things.”²¹

Nikolai Sokoloff would remain with the WPA for another year, but exhibited a general lack of interest in his administrative duties. The national director spent less and less time at the offices in the East, preferring instead to perform as guest conductor in several West Coast cities. During the same meeting of regional and state directors in June of 1938, however, Sokoloff announced that the government was hoping to soon appoint a new assistant for the FMP to focus on social music as well as locate and engage the finest folk musicians throughout the United States. “The gentleman who will join us in Washington has spent a great many years discovering these people,” the national director assured his audience. And this prospective assistant “will be responsible for activities throughout the country and to cooperate with the state directors.” The man eventually chosen by “the government” remained in the position for a relatively short time before moving to other administrative positions, but nonetheless exerted a considerable influence and stands to the present day as the single most renowned figure involved with the WPA music projects.²²

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Certainly one of the highpoints of the creation of this dissertation came with a telephone call received just after noon on a Sunday in May 2008:

“Peter?”

“Yes.”

“This is Pete Seeger. You have some questions about my father?”

Over the course of five separate telephone conversations totaling more than seven hours the internationally revered singer, composer, activist and banjo player – called “America’s Tuning Fork” by the poet Carl Sandburg – provided substantial detail about the life and beliefs of his father Charles Seeger, who served as the deputy director of the Federal Music Project beginning in the summer of 1938. Though just a teenager at the time of his father’s WPA appointment, Pete Seeger expounded upon a wide range of topics from music to anthropology to politics to religion that have provided important insights for this study.²³

Charles Louis Seeger was born December 14, 1886, in Mexico City; his father “a Yankee businessman.” Seeger’s childhood experiences, during an era of conspicuous entanglements in Latin American affairs by the United States and the events leading up to the Mexican Revolution, profoundly influenced his intellectual development and perspective throughout his life. But Charles Seeger was also the child of traditional New England values and ancestry, and his father’s financial successes allowed his family to split their time between Mexico City and an estate on Staten Island. Charles recalled later in life: “Removal to New York City for two years and then to Mexico City did not

²³ Pete Seeger telephone interview, May 18, 2008.

hamper [my] development but expanded the range of experience and comprehension of the 'great' world – the world outside of American provincialism.”²⁴

Seeger entered the “family college” of Harvard University in 1904, and became interested in music – much to his father’s dismay, as he had expected Charles to study subjects pertaining to a career in business. “At Harvard he got A+ in music courses but only C’s in the others,” recalls son Pete, “he was rather bored with everything else.” Upon graduating cum laude in 1908, Charles Seeger studied and eventually conducted in Germany:

That’s when he found he was going deaf at an early age. He was the guest conductor of the Cologne Opera and found he could not hear the high frequencies of the piccolo or whatever it was but he had the good sense to say “Well, I won’t be the conductor of the symphony, but still I can still compose and teach.” And that is where he met Benjamin Wheeler, the president of the University [of California] who met this very self-confident, brilliant, young man and appointed him. “Build up the music department! I appoint you.”

Thus, at twenty-four, Charles Seeger became the youngest full professor at the University of California at Berkeley. As department head, he expanded the faculty and taught several classes himself.²⁵

Though occupied with his own teaching, scholarship, and administrative duties, Charles Seeger’s restless intellect introduced him to the wider academic community. “He became friends with some of the other professors,” says Pete Seeger, “and they ended up saying ‘Seeger, you may know a lot about music, but you’re an ignoramus when it comes to history and economics.’ And he started monitoring their classes.” The most important

²⁴ “Interview with Charles Seeger conducted by Richard Reuss,” June 8, 1967, Indiana University, Bloomington, Archives of Traditional Music, tape 6 of 8, (no accompanying documentation or transcripts.)

²⁵ Pete Seeger telephone interview, September 26, 2008.

of these was the cultural anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, whose work with Yahi and other Indian tribes of California greatly impacted the young music professor. Seeger's interest in the social sciences intensified, "and pretty soon he was a socialist and reading Marx and other books." In October of 1917, according to Pete Seeger, his father:

...reads the headlines about Lenin's mobs taking over the government in St. Petersburg and he whoops with delight. "Of course Seeger whoops," Robert Minor, [the San Francisco socialist cartoonist] wrote. "He's an artist!" He doesn't just smile and say "that's good." He was excited.

A few years later ... he was making speeches against imperialist war. And my mother said, "Can't you keep your mouth shut? You're not going to be drafted with your two sons and your bad eye sight and your bad hearing."

But he said, "When something is wrong, you speak up about it." His grandfather had been an abolitionist in the 1850s. My father got fired, of course, around 1918.

Before accepting the appointment in California, Charles Seeger had married Constance Edson, an extraordinarily gifted concert violinist and former student of Franz Kneisel. The seven years they spent at Berkeley were happy ones; the young couple had two sons, Charles was quite productive and well received in his professorship, and they had every intention of spending their lives in California. But with his dismissal from Berkeley, Seeger moved his young family back east. Constance was expecting their third son Peter at the time.²⁶

Until his position with the New Deal administration, the family lived mostly in New York City, and Charles and Constance both taught at the Institute for Musical Arts (later Julliard). Charles also taught at the New School of Social Research and, under the pseudonym "Carl Sands," contributed music criticism for the Communist newspaper the

²⁶ Ibid.

Daily Worker. In the early 1930s Seeger also organized a group of socially conscious musicians known as the Composers' Collective of New York. Explains Pete Seeger:

The [1929 stock market] crash came and he decided, "Well, this is surely the end of the free enterprise system." And he joined the Communist Party and wrote articles for the *Daily Worker* and started what he called the Composers' Collective. After all, they had collective farms, why not have a composers' collective? Aaron Copland was a member of it, and several other people who became well known, classical type composers. Well, the proletariat was not interested in their music. Aaron Copland won the prize for a May Day song but it had to be sung by a very skilled tenor and accompanied by a very skilled pianist. Do you really think this is going to catch on?

In addition to Charles Seeger and Aaron Copland, the Collective had about two dozen members including Henry Cowell, Wallingford Riegger, Marc Blitzstein, Lan Adomian, Elie Siegmeister, Norman Cazden, and Earl Robinson; several would eventually be involved in WPA music programs. In his late forties, Charles Seeger served as something of a ballast for the group; most of the other members of the Collective were in their twenties or thirties.²⁷

The membership in the Composers' Collective reads as a veritable "Who's Who" of the most accomplished American composers of the early twentieth century, many having received formal training at Harvard, Columbia, and the Julliard and Eastman schools of music. The Collective originated as a cell of the communist Pierre DeGeyter Club, named after the French composer of the *L'Internationale*, the anthem of world-wide workers' revolution. The goals of the collective were to bring "good" music to the

²⁷ Pete Seeger telephone interview, October 1, 2008. It should be noted that, according to biographer Ann Pescatello, in *Charles Seeger: A Life in American Music*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992) pg. 112, Charles Seeger "never formally joined" the CPUSA. According to Pete, however, "he resigned from the Communist Party in 1937 when he read the transcripts of the Moscow trials. And he said, 'Well, these confessions are obviously tortured confessions. This is no way to run a world revolutionary movement,' and so he got out, in his words, he got out."

proletariat. The official ideology at the time dismissed folk music as “defeatist and melancholy,” exhibiting “morbidly, hysteria, and triviality,” and argued that it did not truly reflect the interests of the working class. As Pete Seeger suggests in the above quote, the Collective experienced limited success in its attempts to instruct workers’ choruses in the performance of revolutionary music. Several musical and personal experiences would profoundly alter Charles Seeger’s perspective and, by the time he joined the Roosevelt administration, he had emerged as the founder of the new study of ethno-musicology and sought to further the then current efforts in folksong collection and performance.²⁸

“The next chapter,” says Pete Seeger of his father’s life, “is when he went down to the New Deal; he kept his Communist Party membership secret.” Charles Seeger first served as technical advisor in the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration, which relocated struggling urban and rural families to planned “greenbelt” communities organized by the federal government. While in this position Sokoloff and Seeger corresponded amicably, as they had been professional acquaintances for many years. While in his position with the Resettlement Administration Seeger stressed the recreational and social aspects of music, and to encourage integration into the new communities focused mostly on regional and folk music. “I would recommend that you write to Mr. Charles Seeger at the Resettlement Administration here in Washington giving him all your qualifications,” Sokoloff responded to one inquiry for employment the national director clearly considered to lack the musical professionalism necessary for

²⁸ Pescatello, 112; see also Carl Sands [Charles Seeger], “A Program for Proletarian Composers,” *Daily Worker*, January 16, 1934, 5; Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93.

the FMP. Late in 1937, however, budget cuts discontinued the division of the Resettlement Administration that Seeger directed and he accepted a position as deputy director of Federal Music. Nikolai Sokoloff was clearly less than enthusiastic about Seeger's appointment to the FMP, and the relationship between the two would remain professional but reserved. It appears that "the government" influence to which Sokoloff had alluded at the 1938 regional director's conference exerted considerable authority in the assignment Charles Seeger to the FMP.²⁹

Seeger would not remember his time on the Music Project with fondness; for him the FMP "didn't have any of the joy" of the Resettlement Administration. He believed Sokoloff a "very competent Russian musician" who nonetheless "thought American music was beneath notice and was rather contemptuous of American musicians." Seeger questioned whether Sokoloff had "ever even heard of the existence of American folksong" and that the national director probably believed "American popular music was pretty bad, too." Seeger recalled: "So the whole orientation of the Music Project was from the Europeophile music viewpoint looking down upon these poor, benighted Americans who needed to be spoon-fed with 'good' music." Because of Charles Seeger's reputation as a scholar and later patriarch of an accomplished family of folk musicians and scholars, this assessment (expressed in numerous oral history interviews and biographies) no doubt influenced eventual historical judgments of both Sokoloff and the Federal Music Project.³⁰

²⁹ Pete Seeger telephone interview, October 1, 2008; Nikolai Sokoloff to Frederick J. Hokin, December 23, 1935, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

³⁰ Charles Seeger, "Reminiscences of an American Musicologist," oral history, 1972, interviewed by Adelaide G. Tusler and Ann M. Briegleb, Music Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 261.

Seeger, however, made many valuable contributions to the Music Project, especially in the new studies of American folklore and music. He brought to approximately 1,000 the number of recordings placed in the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song, and oversaw the publication of the three-volume *Checklist of Recorded Music in the English Language in the Archive of American Folksong*. Seeger also wrote an important volume entitled *Music as Recreation* that was widely distributed amongst regional projects. His reputation preceded him to the FMP, and he was widely requested as a guest speaker. Certainly, his identification with folk music and community participation served him well with the new directives from "the government." Yet, Seeger recalled years later how he had been asked to join the FMP by "an unidentified official" who assured him that he would soon replace Sokoloff as the national director. Since this did not occur, Seeger left after nearly two years with the FMP to serve as coordinator for the Joint Committee of Folk Arts and then, for over a decade, as director of musical culture for the Pan American Exchange program.³¹

All cultural projects sponsored by the Work Projects Administration were terminated on August 31, 1939; on September 1 the Federal Music Project became known as the WPA Music Program. The Relief Act of 1939 legislated that "in administering the funds appropriated in this section not to exceed three fourths of the total cost shall be borne by the United States, and not less than one fourth of such total cost shall be borne by the State and its political subdivisions...." Also mandated was a clause to limit participation in the program for a maximum of 18 months. The new

³¹ "Interview with Charles Seeger conducted by Richard Reuss," June 8, 1967, Indiana University, Bloomington, Archives of Traditional Music, tape 6 of 8, (no accompanying documentation or transcripts.)

requirement for 25% local sponsorship transferred even greater authority for the programs from federal to state control, but the new time limit hampered continuities in the various programs. No doubt frustrated with both the earlier criticism from “the government” and anticipating the changes in policy implied by the restructure, Nikolai Sokoloff resigned shortly before the cessation of the FMP.³²

Dr. Earl Vincent Moore became the national director of the newly organized WPA Music Programs after a short interim following Sokoloff’s resignation. Born in Lansing, Michigan, in 1890, Moore studied organ and theory in Paris, composition and conducting under Gustav Holst and Adrian Bolt in London, as well as under Wilhelm Reger in Vienna. Named to head the Organ Department of the University of Michigan in 1916, he became director of the entire School of Music in 1923. Additionally, Moore headed the Ann Arbor May Music Festivals, and was a past president of both the Music Teachers’ National Association and the National Association of Schools of Music.³³

Bringing with him a background in education, Earl Moore reordered the priorities of the WPA music programs; renewed emphasis was placed upon teaching and the social significance of music. Moore, however, continued to insist upon high quality musical professionalism, rather than seeing the program as simply a relief measure without rigid standards. At the time of his confirmation as national director in August of 1939, a total of 10,023 were employed in the program. Reflecting on his first complete year of his leadership, director Moore spoke of the alterations both in the philosophy and activities of the Program from the previous administration:

³² “The W. P. A. Music Program – Plans and Activites,” FMP, box 3, folder 5, LOC.

³³ “Dr. Moore Story,” FMP press release, n.d., entry 813, box 1, NARA

The Washington office is no longer concerned with the operation of the Projects except as a consultant, in the coordination of information, and in counseling the technical services. Emphasis is now placed on the productivity of the units and the quality of the work, measured in artistic standards of the community served.

Alone among the remaining WPA cultural efforts, the restructuring legislated by Congress did not hamper the music programs. Indeed, according to Moore, “in some states the required 25 per cent in sponsors’ contributions has exceeded the figure.”³⁴

The WPA administration soon determined that the percentage of the requisite local sponsorship be calculated on a statewide basis, rather than by individual unit. In the West and Southwest, the ruling reconfirmed the immense popularity of African American and Hispanic musical presentations; these units were so requested by sponsors that their performances often served to finance other less “in demand” musical groups. This exposure within the WPA Music Programs played a crucial role in the formation of a sensibility of concern for what Jon Cruz calls “culture on the margins”. In California, the production of *Run, Little Chillun*, supporting an all African American cast performing slave spirituals and jazz compositions, continued for 114 performances – the longest running production by *any* Federal One project of *any* ethnic group. In Arizona (as in other southwestern states) the Mexican *tipica* orchestras proved so popular their sponsorship supported the other WPA music units. “The Mexican Tipico String Units,” confirmed a 1940 state narrative report, “have done more to popularize the Arizona Music Project and have brought more favorable recognition to WPA Music than has any

³⁴ “Activities of the WPA Music Program, June 1939 – June 1940,” FMP, box 1, folder 3, LOC.

or all of the other units combined.” Of the Phoenix *tipica* unit, it concluded: “It is utterly impossible for the group to satisfy all demands made upon it for musical service.”³⁵

The active support of both Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt for the artistic expression of the country’s ethnic pluralism and regional sensibilities is beyond question. The involvement of Eleanor Roosevelt in the Federal One programs was indeed quite substantial; her influence and encouragement can be seen at every turn. One recent biographer writes: “the breadth of Roosevelt’s relief concerns, particularly her commitment to folk culture and to the popularization of folk arts, was expressed in her support of the WPA’s art projects.” And the conclusions of William McDonald, whose manuscript was completed soon after the Roosevelt administration ended and garnered primarily from interviews with the administrators and artists of the WPA:

The art program in its entirety, not only in the beginning but also through its duration, depended substantially upon the active support of Eleanor Roosevelt. Again, one depends on hearsay and deduction rather than upon the written word, but it is generally agreed, by those who ought to know that more than once, when the Federal One was in disrepute in the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt interceded on behalf of the prodigal son.

But the engagement of the President himself in the workings of Federal One should not be underestimated. FDR inherited from his family, prep school, and Harvard experiences a sense of *noblesse oblige* about the cultural arts. (More than one scholar has concluded

³⁵ Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). David W. Stowe also uses the expression in *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 95. Cruz uses the expression in reference to the “discovery” of black music by white elites in the nineteenth century and Stowe is referring to the interest in and study of slave spirituals in the 1930s, not the FMP specifically; “Arizona Music Project Narrative Report, July 1940,” Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

that it was this similarity of background that first attracted the Roosevelts to Charles Seeger.) The President remained active in the operations of the cultural projects.³⁶

And Franklin Roosevelt, according to WPA administrator Florence Kerr, expressed a particular interest in the music programs. His concern – according to several sources – was not with the type of music performed, but rather the social aspects of the presentations. Kerr recalled her regular brainstorming sessions with the President, times when “such interesting ideas would be batted up.” On one occasion Roosevelt addressed the FMP specifically:

This Music Project – I don’t think it’s getting out to the people enough. I don’t think it’s being heard of quite enough. There isn’t enough community service in it. I tell you what you ought to do. You ought to see that every town one night a week ropes off a block and gets the local WPA band, or whatever their music is, and have a community dance and have them dance in the streets.

Roosevelt was not interested with the arguments about what constituted “good” music; instead, the President envisioned the music projects as instruments of regional and community expression and cohesion. One promotional film shows FDR on the White House lawn listening intently to the music of a WPA folk music ensemble from Appalachia. Dressed casually with his dog nestled on his lap, the President was adorned in one of the floppy hats that so infuriated those citizens expecting a more dignified presentation from their Chief Executive. Though Roosevelt recognized the value of the cultural projects, when “the prodigal son” – in the form of Federal Theatre – caused

³⁶ James T. Baker, *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), 68. William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 167.

potential political damage in a pre-election year, administration support evaporated, the political capital preserved for other battles. The FMP never caused such problems.³⁷

Each generation, Frederick Jackson Turner emphasized, rewrites its own history; the axiom certainly speaks to the varied and changing assessments of the New Deal legacy. Popular critiques of the Roosevelt presidency have run the gamut from radical to reactionary perspectives, with mainstream politicians both vilifying and glorifying the New Deal's historical impact. Among intellectuals the ideological gap has been much narrower; indeed, most scholars have routinely dismissed the scathing attacks from the far Right. In the post War II period, however, several conservative histories of the New Deal were published, the most notable being Edgar Eugene Robinson's *The Roosevelt Leadership* in 1955. While Roosevelt "was credited by millions with being their savior" Robinson concludes, "on the whole this leadership – in method and result – was injurious to the slow working of democracy as Americans know it." In the end, "Roosevelt's failure lay in his unsuccessful attempt to justify the means or establish the ends he had in view."³⁸

By and large, however, most historians in the years following FDR's passing wrote favorably about his leadership and administration. For Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., the New Deal was in keeping with other reform movements through the cycles of American history. Its antecedents can be traced to the Progressive Era, and prior to this the Age of Jackson. For Schlesinger, FDR emerges as one of the Great Men of history, cut from the same cloth as Old Hickory. "The New Deal took a broken and despairing land,"

³⁷ Florence Kerr, "Oral History Interview with Florence Kerr," interviewed by Harlan Phillips, October 18, 1963, Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art, 87.

³⁸ Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Roosevelt Leadership 1933 – 1945* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1955), 400, 408.

Schlesinger writes, “and gave it new confidence in itself” while inspiring “a revival of the ancient faith in free people which, speaking through Jefferson and Jackson and Lincoln, has been our great source of national strength.” Other historians went even further to extol the New Deal as a watershed in American history; “the third American Revolution,” concludes Carl Degler. And William Leuchtenburg and Richard Hofstadter are no less lauding, seeing the New Deal as bringing about needed and important changes in American society. Hofstadter writes that the Roosevelt reforms constituted a “drastic new departure” while acknowledging that “absolute discontinuities do not exist in history.” Added Leuchtenburg: “it is hard to think of another period in the whole history of the republic that was so fruitful or a crisis that was met with as much imagination.”³⁹

By the late 1960s, precipitated by the political and intellectual upheavals of the period, scholarly critiques of the New Deal proved dramatically less propitious. Historians of the “New Left” dismissed the Roosevelt administration programs as unsuccessful in that they preserved and protected American corporate capitalism. “The New Deal failed to solve the problem of the depression,” concluded Barton Bernstein, “it failed to raise the impoverished, it failed to redistribute income, it failed to extend equality and generally countenanced racial discrimination and segregation.” The 1930s represent for these scholars a decade of vanquished possibilities, when old social orders

³⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960), 113; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Broad Accomplishments of the New Deal,” in *The New Deal: Evolution or Revolution?* edited by Edwin C. Rozwenc, (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1959), 29-34; Carl Degler, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America* (New York: Harper, 1959) 98; Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryant to FDR* (New York: Knopf, 1955) 119; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 9.

and injustices were maintained, even strengthened. “The story of the New Deal is a sad story, the ever recurring story of what might have been,” concluded Paul Conkin.⁴⁰

These assessments of the New Left dismayed the Old Guard. “As it now stands, we have a dialectic that is all antithesis and no thesis” wrote Leuchtenburg for the fiftieth anniversary of the New Deal in 1983. Most historians, “convinced that the Roosevelt experiment was either worthless or pernicious, have assigned it to the dustbin of history.” Though the New Left scholarship began as a challenge to traditional histories, by the age of Reagan it had become orthodoxy. Sarah Deutsch, in her well-received 1987 study *No Separate Refuge*, confronts issues of culture, class and gender in the American Southwest. Deutsch writes that while the “New Deal hoped to restore the regional community to its healthiest state” the programs had just the opposite effect. Deutsch concludes that by “the late 1930s, Hispanic control over both their cultural development and their strategies of resistance and confrontation had been severely if not completely eroded, in part at least, by federal government intrusion at virtually every level of their community. This was, perhaps, the ultimate Anglo conquest.”⁴¹

Amid this continued barrage, lively debate and scholarly synthesis proved untenable. “It is important to regain a sense of achievement of the New Deal,” implored Leuchtenburg. Accordingly, by the dawn of the 21st century, New Deal scholarship has

⁴⁰ Barton Bernstein, “The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform,” in Barton Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 267; Paul Conkin, *The New Deal*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1967), 109.

⁴¹ William E. Leuchtenburg, “The Achievement of the New Deal,” in Harvard Sitkoff, editor, *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 213; Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 208-209.

proven more analytical, less strident. Much of the recent literature addresses the impact of the New Deal on specific groups of individuals, such as African Americans, women, and organized labor. And some of the most illuminating recent studies histories utilize a regionalist perspective. Suzanne Forrest's *The Preservation of the Village: New Mexico's Hispanics and the New Deal*, for example, challenges many of the conclusions drawn by Sarah Deutsch and other scholars concerning the impact of the governmental efforts in the American Southwest during the Depression era. According to Forrest, if not for the programs of the Roosevelt Administration that "channeled federal funds into a unique Hispanic New Deal," the villagers would have been "forced off their lands to become rootless wanderers like the 'Okies' and 'Arkies.'" And the New Deal agricultural planners in New Mexico, Forrest writes, "must certainly be numbered among the more innovative and humanistic thinkers of their time." She concludes that the New Deal actually "helped to preserve the physical existence of many Hispanic villages in northern New Mexico."⁴²

The limited scholarship specifically addressing the Federal Music Project and subsequent WPA Music Projects follows similar generational and partisan alignments. Some early conservative studies bent on proving the "leftist" inclinations of the New Deal regularly pointed to the three other Federal One programs as proof; but here the FMP was largely ignored. Similarly, the later New Left historians who wrote of the "failure" of New Deal policies – its supposed emphasis on consensus, conformity, nationalism, and the "homogenization" of US culture – often saw the Federal One programs as exceptional and singularly successful. The radical sentiments expressed

⁴² Ibid., 215. Suzanne Forrest, *The Preservation of the Village: New Mexico's Hispanics and the New Deal* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 179-80.

within these projects created an allure for these scholars. The Music Project, because of its presumed lack of radicalism, was the lone failure, and again disregarded as a topic of interest.

Three dissertations have been written about the Federal Music Project; two remain unpublished and the third substantially revised for publication. The lone book solely addressing the FMP is in many ways the weakest of the three histories. *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation* by Kenneth J. Bindas was published in 1995 and is a revised and shortened version of the author's 1989 doctoral dissertation. A slight book of just over a hundred pages, Bindas addresses only the period of the Federal Music Project from December of 1935 to June of 1939 while ignoring the WPA Music Program from 1939 to 1943. Bindas spends the lion's share of his study discussing the administrative doings of Nikolai Sokoloff. Curiously, the author devotes an entire chapter to the failed 1938 opera, *Gettysburg*, and accords scant attention to the provocative and well-received San Francisco FMP satiric musical *Take Your Choice*. And the most popular and financially successful of all Federal One ventures – the California production of *Run, Little Chillun* which supported an all African-American cast – fails to receive any mention whatsoever. The Bindas book has been criticized on several fronts for its brevity, its general disregard for the personalities and specific performances of the Music Projects, as well as its primary thesis: the FMP “was a part of a greater social movement toward homogenization in American society” which was “bound closely to consumer capitalism [and] advertising,” and that “the foundation of the post-World War II consensus was laid during the 1930s through the FMP ... and other New Deal programs.” The final Bindas conclusion is that the WPA music projects “effectively muted the diversity of the

American mosaic,” rewarded conformity, and “attempted to meld the country into one vision.”⁴³

In another doctoral dissertation, “Of Tears and Need: The Federal Music Project, 1935-1943,” (1973) Janelle Warren Findley concludes like Bindas that the FMP constitutes a failure and “because of a traditional bias and conservative bent on the part of the National Director ... had very little effect on the musical culture of the United States.” As a result of director Sokoloff’s priorities, the projects “carried a narrow definition of innovation and contributed almost nothing measurable to the musical culture of the United States.” Further, the FMP, “without the originality and excitement which made the Theatre, Art, and Writers Projects such stimulating, albeit controversial, experiences for workers in those projects, the Music Project failed to ... inspire great response from those who knew music well.” Written in a chronological narrative style with each chapter addressing a one to three year time frame, Findley provides a readable and primarily administrative accounting of the FMP. In some ways, her final conclusions concerning the failings of the Projects seem detached from the core of her text. In the end, Findley’s primary thesis reflects the conclusions of the New Deal revisionists of the

⁴³ Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA’s Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 115-116. A possible explanation for Bindas’ undue attention to the failed and inconsequential *Gettysburg* at the expense of other more successful productions can be found in his earlier dissertation [Kenneth J. Bindas, “All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The Federal Music Project of the WPA and American Cultural Nationalism, 1935-1939.” (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Toledo, 1988)] and its conclusion that “the significance of the FMP lies in its promotion of American nationalism through its many performances,” xi; the largely insignificant opera appears to have been selected for extended analysis to support this tenuous argument. The thesis is absent from the subsequent book, but also speaks to the fact as to why Bindas ignored the many ethnic and non-traditional musical activities of the FMP which did not fit the author’s narrow definition of 1930s-era nationalism.

time: because the Federal Music Project was not radical like the rest of Federal One, it was a failure.⁴⁴

Cornelius B. Cannon's 1963 dissertation "The Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration: Music in a Democracy" clearly reflects the Kennedy era idealism and dedication to community service and federal action. The study stands as an advocacy for the government support of the musical arts; in marked contrast to later studies, Canon concludes that the FMP "was the fullest realization of democratic spirit in music in America" and the effect it had "in making music a vital part of American culture could not be overemphasized." Presently, several New Deal bibliographies list the unpublished Canon dissertation as the preferred source.⁴⁵

Yet, the Canon study suffers from a variety of weaknesses. First, the author appears consumed with a question that actually followed the FMP from its inception: Is this European-style government funding for the arts or a Depression-era relief program? All evidence supports the latter, and Canon's insistence on placing the Music Project in a different historical context distorts his thesis. Canon's reliance on the unabashedly laudatory Final Report of the FMP by director George Foster, combined with his lack of critical analysis in many other areas, renders a rather unsatisfying, largely administrative history. Moreover, his lengthy arguments involving FMP impact on post World War II musical culture are tenuous at best. Contemporary historiographical concerns about issues of race, class and gender are, quite naturally, not addressed.

⁴⁴ Janelle Jedd Warren Findley, "Of Tears and Need: The Federal Music Project, 1935-1943" (Ph.D. dissertation, The George Washington University, 1973), 11-12, 323, 325.

⁴⁵ Cornelius B. Canon, "The Federal Music Project of the WPA: Music in a Democracy" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1963), 271.

Despite its faults, the Cannon dissertation remains the only investigation of the FMP to present the program in a positive light; indeed, this very technical study relies heavily upon statistical data that makes it difficult to deny the variety of musical expression and the presentations of original scores within the Project. Most other histories that address the FMP as an aspect of a larger study have taken a less positive view. These include *A History of Musical Americanism* by Barbara Zuck, which devotes a section of one chapter to the FMP. Gleaning most of her analysis from the New York City project, Zuck determined the local FMP to be effective in the short term but produced minimal lasting impact. And Barbara Tischler in *An American Music* concluded the FMP was restricted by the conservative inclinations of the national director.⁴⁶

How did previous histories of the Federal Music Project get it so very wrong? As mentioned, these studies are all products of a quite ideologically driven New Deal historiography; consequently each appears to have placed the metaphorical thesis cart in front of the research horse. Secondly, they tended to analyze the administration of the FMP “from the top down” rather than “from the bottom up.” Many of the specific program achievements of the Project occurred after the National Administration had initially refused them. Bindas confirms that “Nikolai Sokoloff’s ... activities form the core” of his book; this admission speaks for itself. And in his dissertation Bindas criticizes the Canon history for “relying on attendance and performance figures” to prove the impact of the FMP in American life; in actuality, this statistical information clearly demonstrates the musical diversity evident in many regional music projects. Indeed,

⁴⁶ Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism*, (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980); Barbara L. Tischler, *An American Music: The Search for an American Musical Identification*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

perhaps the greatest weakness of all previous histories of the FMP has been the failure to acknowledge the importance of regionalism in their studies; therefore, very few state or local archives were referenced in their construction. No previous study has referenced, for example, the extensive holdings of the FMP director Helen Chandler Ryan in New Mexico and the wonderful musical accomplishments in that state, or the substantial work of the WPA California Folk Music Project led by Sidney Robertson Cowell in the San Francisco Bay area.⁴⁷

To be sure, a few perceptive scholars have recognized the positive significance of the Music Projects. Charles Alexander in *Here the Country Lies* devotes several pages of analysis to the FMP, acknowledging both the vast scope and the constructive aspects of the programs. Of the many original works produced, Alexander writes that “both aspiring and established composers were able to get excited about what the FMP was doing.” And Catherine Parsons Smith, whose final chapter in the recent *Making Music in Los Angeles* is devoted entirely to Federal Music, begins by stating succinctly: “I strongly disagree with Kenneth J. Bindas’s judgment that the FMP was a failure because of Sokoloff’s symphonic bias.” Instead, Smith concludes “the Federal Music Project, even in conservative Los Angeles, overcame the foibles of its administrators to achieve its

⁴⁷ It should also be noted that substantial Library of Congress holdings of FMP and WPA Music Program materials were not available for any of the previous histories. Archivist Wilda M. Heiss began the reorganization of these materials in 1999, some of it having been stored for decades in the Library’s warehouse in Middle River, Baltimore. And the entire George Allen Foster Collection, which consists of approximately 300 items, was not acquired by the Library until September 22, 1992, and unavailable until much later. (Foster served in various administrative capacities in the Project.) The Guide to the Special Collections of the Federal Music Project was not completed until 2005, and many of the materials were not available until that time. (Much of the Library’s material, in actuality, pertains to the later WPA Federal Music Program, whereas most of the Federal Music Project material is stored at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland.)

goals of putting musicians to work, playing a lot of music, and reaching large new audiences.” Unfortunately, these few positive assessments are truly exceptional in the larger historiography of the Federal Music Project.⁴⁸

An overview of the scholarship pertaining to the Federal Theatre, Writers’, and Art Projects in many ways mirrors the conclusions of the wider New Deal historiography. Though older histories tend to emphasize the work of each individual project and present administrative developments in narrative form, current studies have proved more analytical and theoretical. While some of these studies give undue attention to the political controversies surrounding the projects, they also address topics beyond administration. Intellectual concerns and concepts such as regionalism, cosmopolitanism versus provincialism, the growth of a “new nationalism” during the 1930s, racial, ethnic and multicultural awareness, labor history analysis, as well as gender and feminist perspectives, all contribute to this growing body of scholarly literature.

Some of the most effective of the recent histories of the Federal One projects have applied a regionalist perspective, one of the finest being *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers’ Projects in the Midwest* (1995) by Paul Storn. “My fairly long career in the Midwest,” writes Professor Sporn, explaining his emphasis on regionalism, “convinces me that mapping an accurate image of American tastes and cultures requires some careful study of what happened in the industrial flatlands of Michigan and its sister states.” Being set apart from the “dazzling lights of the cosmopolitan center” as well as

⁴⁸ Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 205; Catherine Parsons Smith, *Making Music in Los Angeles: Transforming the Popular* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 220.

the “seductive shadows of agrarian regionalism” have overshadowed the cultural significance of the Midwest’s industrial-urban centers during the New Deal period.⁴⁹

A more recent regionalist study, *The Federal Theatre: A Case Study*, written by Barry B. Witham in 2003, identifies Sporn’s book as a “notable exception” to the majority of histories written about the FTP. Most scholarly accounts have concerned themselves exclusively with the major productions of a few metropolitan areas, as well as the activities of a few “celebrities” such as Orson Welles or John Houseman. “But,” asks Witham, “what of the *thousands* of other productions from Portland, Maine to San Diego? From Miami to San Francisco? How did Federal Theatre operate in the hundreds of communities that were not New York, Chicago or Los Angeles?” And, because of a continued scholarly interest in Federal Theatre’s “leftist” performances (which actually constituted a rather small sampling of the total repertoire) and the subsequent congressional attacks, “almost as much has been written about the *auto-da-fe*’ of the project’s final days as the productions themselves.” Accordingly, Witham’s regional history makes the Seattle theatre project the primary focus of his study; the West Coast performing unit “was important because it survived to the final days and thus illuminated all the tensions and contradictions that were played out across the country.”⁵⁰

The WPA Guides: Mapping America, by Christine Bold, explores the Federal Writers’ Project and the production of the American Guide Series, or, as they are commonly labeled, the state guidebooks. In her study, Bold provides an assessment similar to accounts of the other WPA cultural projects in that “recent scholarly analysis

⁴⁹ Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers’ Projects in the Midwest* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 13, 50, 51.

⁵⁰ Barry B. Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

has paid only cursory attention to the substance of the guidebooks,” while the politics and personalities of the FWP are treated as the main event. At the time, however, the guidebooks were widely celebrated and were instrumental in “the mapping of American identities – national, regional, and local – onto the landscape.” Indeed, so powerful had identification with regionalism been linked with notions of national unity and patriotism that publishers of the guidebooks “appealed to the regional base of project activities to defend it against charges of communism made by the Dies Committee.”⁵¹

Jerrold Hirsch’s *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project* by Jerrold Hirsch focuses “on key individuals, developments, and programs” and demonstrates how the national FWP officials seized the opportunity “to redefine American national identity and culture by embracing the country’s diversity.” Barbara Melosh’s *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater*, takes a decidedly feminist perspective of these WPA projects. Melosh describes how the image of the flapper and the “Feminist – New Style” of the 1920s was replaced by New Deal art and the heightened “concern for family stability and conflict over women’s paid work” which “found cultural expression in a reaffirmation of traditional gender ideology.” And *The National Stage* by Loren Kruger provides thoughtful analysis, emphasizing Federal Theatre’s “deconstruction of any absolute boundary between theatre as autonomous art and theatre as cultural critique and social representation.” Kruger’s theoretical framework of comparing “the national stage” in

⁵¹ Christine Bold, *The WPA Guides: Mapping America* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), xiv, 13.

Europe and the United States vividly illuminates the contradictions, ambiguities and contentions of the art world.⁵²

The “Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment: The Federal Music Project 1935 to 1939; The WPA Music Program 1939 to 1943,” by the final national program director George Foster, was completed in late 1943. The unpublished document details the entire WPA effort in music and catalogues a variety of accomplishments and failures. Referred alternately as the “Final Report” or the “Foster Report” in later studies, the 390-page report provides an overview of the administrative and technical operations of the music programs. The last chapter, “Guide to State Reports,” evaluates the final narrative reports received from most of the state administrators at the close of the WPA Music Program. Highly subjective and laudatory, the “Foster Report” should be viewed with a degree of circumspection.⁵³

Federal Relief Administration and the Arts by William F. McDonald was published in 1969 but written much earlier. Through a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation administered by the American Council of Learned Societies, McDonald from 1942 to 1945 directed the research and wrote the final draft of this study of all the Federal One projects. Most of the information for the section on the FMP comes from the Foster Report, and provides a general survey and administrative background on the origin

⁵² Jerrold Hirsch, *Portrait of America: A Cultural History of the Federal Writers' Project* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 34; Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1; Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 183.

⁵³ Copies of the Foster Report are maintained at both the Library of Congress and the National Archives; curiously, the final “State Reports” have been located only at the Oklahoma State Library in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Project, with some helpful biographical information. Little analytical depth or commentary on specific programs is included. But because of McDonald's firsthand contact with Federal One participants, the publication remains a good "starting point" for research of all the WPA cultural projects.⁵⁴

On March 13 and 14, 2008, the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress presented a public symposium to commemorate the anniversary of the New Deal. Titled *Art, Culture, and Government: The New Deal at 75*, historian Michael Kazin of Georgetown University delivered the keynote address on "The New Deal and the American People." Voicing – albeit decidedly more eloquently – many of the conclusions drawn by this present study, Kazin discussed various political developments during the first terms of the Roosevelt presidency, as well as the growth of a new popular idea of the American people. "The idea that Americans composed a united or nearly-united people, who came together across religious and ethnic boundaries, and that this people formed a bulwark of opposition to economic elites who threatened democracy, was essential to the building of the New Deal coalition," he said. Kazin continued by demonstrating how this popular image of America emerged from the political Left and entered the mainstream. He concluded his address by showing how this image of Americans transcended both the Left and the New Deal, and was subsequently adopted

⁵⁴ Some controversies, which remain unclear, prevented the publication of the manuscript for nearly a quarter century after its completion. Richard D. McKinzie, in "The New Deal for Artists," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1969), 365-66, attributes the delay to a feud that developed between McDonald's staff and some of the WPA Project leaders who believed that the manuscript was too bureaucratic and administratively oriented.

by ‘populist’ politicians across the political spectrum, “most notably Ronald Reagan and other Republican leaders.”⁵⁵

The two-day public event attracted more than two hundred people who heard leading scholars discuss the valuable contributions of an “extensive and multifaceted array of social, cultural and fiscal recovery programs designed to reform and reinvigorate national life at the height of the Great Depression.” Absent, however, was any direct mention of the single most successful of the cultural programs – the Federal Music Project. In addition to the guest speakers, the audience “also had the opportunity to view a display of the Library’s New Deal treasures – some of the most fascinating items the Library has to offer.” For the display, the Music Division of the Library chose notable objects not from the Federal Music Project but from the Federal Theatre archives – including photographs and script material for the famous Orson Welles production of *Macbeth*. Close inspection of the finding aids for the Library’s Federal One collections reveals that the most innovative of FMP productions – such as the musical *Take Your Choice* – as well as the opera *Gettysburg* and all joint ventures such as *An Evening with Dunbar*, *Swing Mikado*, and *Run, Little Chillun* are actually included with the Federal Theatre Project collection rather than the Music Project collection. Federal Music seems destined to remain the least appreciated of the New Deal cultural projects.

It is high time to gain a sense of achievement about the Federal Music Projects and WPA Music Programs. An analytical cultural history of these New Deal initiatives presents a fascinating and illuminating microcosm of American society during the Great

⁵⁵ Michael Kazin, in “Art, Culture, and Government: The New Deal at 75,” by Nancy Groce and Stephen Winik, *Folklife Center News*, vol. 30, nos. 1-2, winter-spring 2008, 9-10.

Depression and early War years – a period of profound political perplexity, ethnic and social realignment, cultural contradiction and regional identification. And the FMP navigated the currents of this turbulent era far more gracefully and effectively than any of the other parts of Federal One. The successes and efforts of its administrators and participants deserve greater recognition.

Despite later assessments of its failures, present day researchers would be hard pressed to locate *any* negative reaction or lack of appreciation from those who actually participated in the New Deal music programs during the 1930s and early 1940s. Asked in an oral history interview many decades later if the Music Project made a lasting contribution, former San Francisco supervisor Ernst Bacon responded:

I've no doubt that it did. First of all, it gave people good heart. People were happy with music. This was the most important thing. Perfection wasn't the end of this thing. People were happy doing this thing. Isn't that a contribution? It isn't advertised. Nobody can say we don't have any record of new works or new soloists or something that had come through. Many, many people got a lift out of it, whether they were in the orchestra, or they were soloists, or wrote music for it, or what not.

The monthly narrative reports from the individual state directors poignantly attest to the “lift” provided by the various music programs across the nation. One such account told of a grandmother and member of a rhythm band in Arizona who had informed her FMP teacher: “‘It makes me feel that life is not yet over for me,’ and she added in Yiddish, ‘I thought my brains had dried up – but now I know that I can still learn new things.’”

Another woman, a professional musician and graduate of the Vienna Conservatory of Music, “had been driven frantic because she had no opportunity to come into any kind of contact with her music and saw slipping away from her the results of years of study.”

The FMP educational department in Los Angeles gave her first the opportunity to work

as a teacher and have access to a variety of musical instruments, and then she secured a position with the WPA symphony. “This woman’s reason, if not her life, was saved and she is one of many,” the report concluded.⁵⁶

In Colorado, the state FMP director “was rather amazed” to discover “an old gentleman, age seventy-six” from Trinidad “enthusiastically studying the intricacies of playing the trumpet and violin” and “a woman age sixty-eight” from Aguilar who was “putting in a great deal of time and energy learning to play piano and guitar”; both told the state director that they found “more pleasure and interest in this work than anything they had attempted during their existence.” In Southern California, “a woman born in slavery with no idea of her age” approached her teacher saying: “Since I have learned to read music, I think I should learn to read reading and writing.” The woman was “encouraged to attend a night school in her locality and actually learned to read and write” in addition to being “a real addition to the chorus.” A WPA music teacher in Oklahoma submitted a report of “how children of share-croppers have taken to the summer roads at six o’clock in the morning to get their music lessons before starting the day’s work on the farm.” Another detailed the activities of a dedicated FMP instructor in a rural section of New Mexico who “rigged up a trailer with a small piano and a phonograph and trundles her motorized music school into isolated districts at the tail of her ancient Ford.” Similar anecdotes are bountiful.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ “Federal Music Project 3rd Report, 1938,” box 383, NARA; “Narrative Report – Educational Department, January 1st, 1938 to November 1st, 1938,” Central Files State: California, box 924, NARA.

⁵⁷ “Colorado WPA Music Project Narrative Report – Month of November, 1940, entry 805, box 9, NARA; “Narrative Report – Educational Department, January 1st, 1938 to November 1st, 1938,” Central Files: California, box 924, NARA; “A Report on the

Izler Solomon, who worked as conductor and supervisor in Chicago and several other cities in the far West, described the “many really tragic and pathetic situations” he witnessed while interviewing prospective workers for the Project. Scores of unemployed musicians, who had years earlier sold or pawned their instruments with the coming of the Depression and had been working in manual labor, rejoiced that they would once again be able to reclaim their beloved instruments and perform in a symphony. Solomon recalled:

I remember one boy came to me, a cellist, and he said, “Mr. Solomon, you’ve got to save me.” I said, “What do you mean?” He says, “Look, I’m in rat excrement. I’m living underground here in Chicago and I’m going to pieces.” Well, it took me about a week but I got him transferred to the orchestra and got this boy back playing cello where he belonged in the first place.

Solomon remembered that “there were many cases like that,” and he would receive as many as three thousand applicants when auditions were announced. “We made human beings again out of these people,” Solomon said.⁵⁸

The New Deal stands as the federal government’s response to the most devastating economic collapse in the nation’s history, and for many Americans the support of the music projects and the other programs were their solitary lifelines to survival. In a particularly harrowing passage from a monthly narrative report of the August 1940 Oklahoma Music Education Unit, state supervisor Merle Montgomery reported:

Three months ago I had occasion to call at the home of one of our teachers. Upon meeting the teacher’s wife, I noticed that she had a bad

Federal Music Project to December 1, 1937, for the Sirovich Committee,” entry 811, box 25, NARA.

⁵⁸ Izler Solomon, “Tape Recorded Interview with Mr. Izler Solomon in Bloomington, Indiana, June 24, 1964,” interview by Richard K. Doud, original recording location Indiana University, Music Library, Bloomington, transcript location Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

case of pellagra and inquired if she realized that her condition was caused by improper diet. She replied, “Oh, yes, I know; two years ago the doctor told me what I should eat, and if Davy can just stay on the WPA he has promised me that he will buy the vegetables I need.” On August 18 this woman died. A proper diet had been delayed too long.

The supervisor’s narrative continued that the teacher, who “courageously tried to rear three children” and “has made the most of every opportunity” was now leading the choir singing, which “is certain to have an inspiring influence in this community.” The report came from a community along the Red River valley in a particularly economically and environmentally devastated section of Oklahoma. Certainly such horrific circumstances go far in explaining the prevalence of radical solutions to the profound societal adversities of the Depression era.⁵⁹

The next chapter of this dissertation explores many of the intellectual developments that competed for the cultural hierarchy of the 1930s. At the forefront of these was the question of what *type* of artistic expression – highbrow, popular, folk – Federal One programs were to represent. Each WPA art project responded to this dilemma differently, but for Federal Music the point proved particularly vexing. At issue for the FMP was the long tradition of what constituted, simply stated, “good music.” For many this meant “cultivated” or “high art” music out of the European tradition, of which the specific forms were symphonic, choral or some structure of chamber music. Others believed that what was identified as “vernacular” music – folk, gospel, popular (in the 1930s this would be the new “swing” music), jazz, and various types of ethnic music – should be performed by the music projects. These conflicting musical schools maintained a regional component, also, that impacted their presentation in the Music

⁵⁹ “Activities of the Oklahoma Music Education Unit: Oklahoma WPA Music Project, August 1, 1940 to August 31, 1940,” entry 805, box 11, NARA.

Projects. No better proponents of the two separate schools can be found than in personages Nikolai Sokoloff and Charles Seeger, and the beliefs of both musicians shall be explored in this chapter.

More than one historian has warned that when an enthusiastic new researcher enters the realm of 1930s cultural history, he or she soon realizes the veritable Mt. Everest of preexisting scholarship. Indeed, beyond the controversies surrounding the legitimacy of the various forms of musical expression were profound aesthetic and philosophical questions that engulfed the entire artistic community during the Depression era and the preceding decade. The effort in this chapter is to address these larger issues as they relate to the music projects. As suggested by Michael Kazin at the Library of Congress symposium referenced above, during the New Deal a new idea emerged about America, and this perception was reflected in the Federal art works of the period. The disillusion of the earlier “lost generation” that came of age during the Great War caused many artists and intellectuals to seek refuge in bohemia or Europe, creating “art for art’s sake,” detesting the provincialism and cultural illiteracy of the American population. The dramatic societal changes that took place with the economic collapse of 1929 turned the alienated, inward looking artist to drastically different visions and purpose.

Replacing “art for art’s sake” was an aesthetic predicated upon a new social consciousness and buttressed by Marxist criticism, often celebrating works of proletarian representations. In the political realm, the rise of Fascism in Europe later in the decade resulted in the unification of a formerly balkanized American Left, lending itself to a Popular Front coalition. This coalition found common cause in the Roosevelt presidency – an administration previously held as anathema by many on the far political Left. The

art of the Popular Front evolved into representations that celebrated the “common man,” and the belief that “people matter,” and stand as testaments to New Deal art. WPA music presentations in the West reflect this Popular Front sensibility, as well as the many tensions and contradictions of the age. These performances sometimes combined the radicalism of the invigorated Marxist aesthetic with powerful nationalistic impulses. Contrary to some analyses, this patriotism was not war inspired, but instead grew out of the Popular Front expressions that would accompany the nation through the Second World War. In the musical realm, this “new nationalism” combined traditional patriotic themes with an awareness of the country’s diverse ethnic musical heritage and vast, but rapidly disappearing, store of folksong and other music of proletarian origin.

The next several chapters of this project analyze how prevailing notions of region, race, radicalism and nationalism influenced the presentations of the WPA music programs. How these conceptualizations played out across time and space during the Depression era had a profound impact on the emergence of the Popular Front coalition. Chapter three, “Out Where the West Begins,” demonstrates the importance of regionalist identification during the 1930s as well as the intellectual trappings of the movement; like the ‘Populism’ of the nineteenth century or the ‘Progressive’ movement of the early twentieth century, the ‘Regionalism’ of the Depression era never represented a single group of adherents seeking specific goals. But, as Robert Dorman points out, the large number of regionalists who “literally went to work for the New Deal” demonstrates the convergence of the regionalist movement with the Roosevelt administration. In the Midwest and especially the far West, ‘regionalism’ sometimes combined with a militant radicalism in reaction to specific economic circumstances. These chapters confront the

administration and musical productions of the FMP throughout the West and the impact on American society.⁶⁰

The sixth chapter, “‘No one sings as convincingly as the Darkies do’: Song and Diversity” takes its title from a review in a prominent newspaper of a performance of the FMP Oakland Colored Choral singing slave spirituals. Here, the music critic enthusiastically applauds the performance while using racist characterizations and stereotypes to make the point. Such was not an atypical white response to the African American performances in the various music projects of the West. (Variations of these ideas were expressed nationally, of course, but with the choice of epithets often changing from region to region.) Yet, casting unqualified moral aspersions upon the actions and attitudes of those who have gone before is the historian’s equivalent of shooting fish in a barrel; the term “racism” had not yet entered the language in the 1930s, and even some progressive thinkers spoke of the “natural” propensities of specific ethnic groups. This chapter explores what poet Paul Laurence Dunbar once called “the myriad subtleties” that characterize ethnic relations as they played out in the Music Projects of the West. Both African American and Hispanic music found unprecedented popularity and acceptance in the regional music programs, but with this exposure came the prejudices and contradictions of the age.

The next chapter “‘Ballad For Americans’: The Music of the Popular Front,” takes its title from a patriotic cantata written for an aborted Federal Theatre Project production, and instead became the signature song of the Negro Choir of the Oakland WPA Music

⁶⁰ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 291-292, 301.

Program. The song achieved unparalleled popularity following its first national performance in late 1939, and some even favored it as the new National Anthem. It remained by far the most requested feature of the WPA music programs on military installations on the Pacific coast after the nation's entry into World War II. Written and first performed nationally by radical artists whose careers and livelihoods would be devastated by the subsequent post-War blacklist, the song opened the National Conventions for both the Communist Party and the Republican Party in 1940. "Ballad For Americans" fell into disfavor following World War II because of its supposed subversive associations.

"Cold War repression," writes Michael Denning, "left a cultural amnesia." Only in recent years have some of the young radical artists of the Depression decade felt comfortable to speak openly about their experiences. "I was a lefty and a member of the Young Communists League from about 1937 to 1941 or 1942 when I formally joined the Communist Party," remembers Pete Seeger, "just before I went into war. Then I resigned – turned in my card – when I was in the Army." Pete Seeger's experiences speak, among other things, to the complexities and continued misunderstandings of the era, as well as to the multifarious components of the Popular Front coalition that shaped American cultural and political life, according to numerous scholars, all the way to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and beyond. This chapter analyzes the blending of specific radical and nationalist impulses expressed in the WPA music performances in the West, and the contributions each made to the formation of the Popular Front.⁶¹

⁶¹ Pete Seeger telephone interview, September 26, 2008.

Chapter eight, “‘The Folk of the Nation’: No Horses Need Apply,” explores what by the 1930s had become commonly known as “folk music.” The term is confusing for a multiplicity of reasons, but during the 1930s folk music usually referred to the songs of “the people” – the proletarian class – which was of ancient origin and had no known author. Traditional folk music came to the United States from all continents of the world, and with respect to both musical and ethnic diversity is unrivaled by any nation except possibly Russia. Public and scholarly interest intensified in the 1930s with the fear that, given the changes wrought by industrialization and urbanization, this musical heritage would soon be lost to the ages if not soon preserved. The Roosevelt administration supported folk music for these reasons and as an authentic expression of America’s pluralistic society.

This music ranged from the African American spirituals of the antebellum South to Appalachian fiddle tunes that found genesis in Ireland, England and the Scottish Highlands, to the indigenous melodies and dances of Native Americans, to the strains of Gregorian chant detected in some of the recordings made by FMP workers of folk music from Latin America. Other New Deal programs hired workers who collected folk songs, most famously Benjamin Botkin in the Writers’ Project and John and Alan Lomax with the Library of Congress. Again, history has over-looked the profound and important contributions of folksong collection and performance in the FMP, most of this taking place in the West or Southwest. Specifically, the description and analysis of the folksong efforts led by three women employed by the Music Project – Helen Chandler Ryan in New Mexico, Sidney Robertson Cowell in northern California, and Bee M. Barry (Pe-ahm-e-squett) in Oklahoma – constitute a substantial portion of this chapter. Perhaps

more than any other musical form, the cultural mosaic illuminated by American folksong typified the essential spirit of the Popular Front movement.

In 1938 the San Francisco FMP presented a series of eight “Everybody’s Symphony Concerts” which became commonly known as the “dime concerts” because of the extremely low admission fee. A local Bay area editorial reported the series with a banner headline announcing the “Music for All the People.” This designation could have been applied to much of the WPA sponsored music throughout the United States, but acquired special significance in the American West. It was here, thousands of miles from the national administration and the politically charged atmospheres of New York City and Washington DC, that Walt Whitman’s “varied carols” found full voice. It was throughout the West that the music proved to be not only *for* the people but was largely created and performed *by* the people.

And it was the music programs of the West that best expressed the powerful Popular Front ideals that enveloped the expanding New Deal coalition. It was in the West that the various projects of the WPA shaped a new national appreciation for the manifold configurations of American musical expression. And this new audience was forged, as Loren Kruger’s writes, “out of diverse and divided regions, classes and ethnicities” and brought alive by a “promiscuous mixing of art and politics, uplift and agitation” and, in the end, even served to “save democracy.” But contrasted to the theatre productions to which Kruger refers, the agitations of the music projects were far more allusive, even cryptic. The WPA music of the West proved less overtly “dangerous,” to use Hallie Flanagan’s favored term. Yet these productions were often simultaneously imbued with expressions of both traditional and “new nationalism” as well as a regional, ethnic and

proletarian radicalism. It is the examination of these varied inspirations and the diverse music created by New Deal music in the West that serves as the primary impetus for this study.⁶²

⁶² Kruger, 183.

CHAPTER 2

“MUSICIANS HAVE GOT TO EAT, TOO”: THE NEW DEAL AND THE FMP

In 1937 a young woman from East Texas sent a letter to the White House. Presumably aware of the WPA music projects active in her state, Lillian McKinney appealed to President and Mrs. Roosevelt to support her ambition of a career in the performing arts. Written in a clear, practiced cursive, the letter arrived in Washington, DC, early in October.

President Roosevelt,
Dear Sir,

This is to ask you would you be kind enough to answer a poor Negro girl's letter and help her to be a good singer. I have the voice for singing if I had a place to used it and get some-thing for my singing I am asking you. Because you are the only one I know to go to but God and you being next to God in this world is why I come to you. You are the greatest man on earth. I no you got love in your heart for Negros to help one.

Talk this over with Mrs. Roosevelt, tell her I am a good Negro ... and have always tried to stay in my place and do rite. I am 21 years old, weight 125. I have never had a chance to use my voice because I never had any help. I am a little crippled in one leg, but no one can tell it. My mother ... has 10 children ... and can not feed all of us any longer, so I am trying to make my own way. I am praying hard tonight that you will hear and answer my prayer with God. If you don't think I am a good honest girl here is the name of some white people, and you can ask any of these three about me....

By the end of the month, Lillian McKinney received a personal letter from Ellen Woodward, assistant WPA administrator, directing her to the local FMP agency in Houston. The swiftness of the response was not unusual. One of the first orders from the newly inaugurated President in 1933 had been that people who wrote or telephoned the White House in distress or seeking assistance should never be ignored. “The intellectual

and spiritual climate was Roosevelt's general attitude that the people mattered," observed Labor Secretary Frances Perkins.⁶³

Throughout the Roosevelt presidency the White House would receive 5000 to 8000 letters daily, over ten times that of the previous administration. And of the inquiries concerning Federal One programs, the Music Project would represent the greatest volume. Many, like Lillian McKinney, sought assistance in realizing musical aspirations and were directed to either local music projects or recreation programs. Countless others, such as Martha Birch Ashby of Turney, Missouri, would send song lyrics to the President with hopes they would be set to music and published:

Triple A helps the farmer stay;
W.P.A. builds broad highway.
Come, then, join Roosevelt's band –
The very best in all the land.

Regardless of merit the White House forwarded all requests to the national director; Nikolai Sokoloff responded personally to Martha Birch Ashby. He informed her that the Music Project had no fund for publishing music, was prohibited from using its resources for the benefit of any private individual, and could not participate in any way for the benefit of any political group. Sokoloff then suggested she communicate with specific private music publishers and present her ideas to them. Requests and submissions to the White House varied greatly in scope and quality, but all were answered.⁶⁴

An understanding of the significance of the New Deal period in American history can only be gained through an appreciation of the extraordinary personalities of both Franklin

⁶³ Lillian McKinney to President Roosevelt, October 1, 1937, General Files, box 380, NARA; Frances Perkins, "Memoirs," as in Schlesinger, *The Politics*, pg. 652.

⁶⁴ Martha Birch Ashby to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 30, 1938; Nikolai Sokoloff to Martha Birch Ashby, October 15, 1938, both General Files, box 375, NARA .

and Eleanor Roosevelt. As suggested in the above letters, millions of Americans maintained an emotional and seemingly personal attachment to the Roosevelts in a manner unequalled in American history. No other presidency has been so entwined with the hopes and dreams of the population. “I never heard of a President like you,” reads a note thanking FDR for “the man you sent” who saved from repossession the small home of a family in Oklahoma. “He was in a very special sense the people’s President,” wrote Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, “because he made them feel that with him in the White House they shared the Presidency. The sense of sharing the Presidency gave even the most humble citizen a lively sense of belonging.”⁶⁵

Yet, more than one scholar has observed that while FDR remains the most devotedly loved President in American history, he also stands as the most intensely despised. An extremely abbreviated list of the often contradictory insults regularly directed at the President of the United States included: “communist,” “fascist,” “nigger lover,” “dictator,” “great betrayer and liar,” “traitor to his class,” “destroyer of capitalism,” “capitalist,” “mad man in the White House,” and perhaps most vicious, “that damned cripple.” Eleanor Roosevelt’s critics were no less scathing. To them, she was an insufferable do-gooder, a busybody, a bleeding heart. Editorial cartoons were particularly cruel. “Eleanor can bite an apple through a picket fence” was a common joke. In 1935 *The Nation* observed: “Never in our history has an attack been so bitter....”

⁶⁵ William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 103.

Another journalist concluded: “No slander is too vile, no canard too preposterous, to find voice among those who regard the President as their mortal enemy.”⁶⁶

Though notably less controversial than the other aspects of Federal One, the FMP did not avoid all political rancor or partisanship that enveloped the other projects; in 1937, a particularly contentious episode occurred in the front of a theater hosting a Federal Music production in New York City. As described in a letter to FMP assistant director William Mayfarth, “representatives of the City Projects Council” staged a demonstration on the morning of August 18th and distributed a pamphlet that “includes a violent attack upon both local and national officials of the Federal Music Project.” Mayfarth responded that he would forward the pamphlet to Dr. Sokoloff “so that he might know what these ‘gentlemen’ are spouting.”⁶⁷

Despite the intense reactions evoked by to his presidency, FDR’s specific policies upon his inauguration in 1933, according to David Kennedy, “remained ill-defined and puzzling.” And it has been argued ever since that there truly was no exacting New Deal ideology; no single person, even the President, who could lay out the administration philosophy. Administration policies could appear irregular and even contradictory, fueled by a pragmatic sensibility that responded to changing circumstances. Kennedy argues convincingly, however, that the New Deal actually *was* rooted in a consistent objective: that the Roosevelt era left in place a set of structural changes derived from a coherent philosophy which can be summarized in one word: Security. Security, certainly, for those hit hardest and left homeless by the depression, but also security “for

⁶⁶ George Wolfskill, *Happy Days Are Here Again!: A Short Interpretive History of the New Deal* (Hinsdale, Illinois, The Dryden Press, 1974), 79-80.

⁶⁷ George Foster to William C. Mayfarth, August 18, 1937; William Casimir Mayfarth to George Foster, August 21, 1937, both General Files, box 377, NARA.

capitalists and consumers, for workers, and employers, for corporations and farms and homeowners and bankers and builders as well.” The New Deal maintained the conviction that all Americans are entitled to a level of protection from the vagaries of life, to a “freedom from fear.” It is also widely acknowledged by scholars that Roosevelt embraced the basic Progressive era belief that government plays a role in the economic sphere, and that the greater public interest supersedes private ambitions.⁶⁸

The goals of Federal One generally and the music projects specifically reflect these broader New Deal objectives. A “Presidential Letter” dated early November of 1935 states the FMP’s purposes: “to rehabilitate musicians, to retrain them for new forms of work in music and allied fields, to establish high standards of musicianship and to educate the public in an appreciation of musical opportunities.” Federal One, and the other programs termed “white-collar relief,” sometimes met with a specific type of antagonism. Where some New Deal opponents tolerated relief for “pick and shovel” workers, a government salary for those who played an oboe or violin was viewed as “boondoggling” of the worst sort.⁶⁹

“Hell, artists got to eat just like other people!” responded Harry Hopkins to a reporter in defense of the cultural programs. Hopkins confronted what he termed “a peculiar

⁶⁸ *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) by Ellis W. Hawley provides perhaps the best description of the intellectual potpourri that constituted the New Deal; David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 365, 372.

⁶⁹ “Presidential Letter no. 5020,” November 4, 1935, Central Files: State, California, box 920, NARA; Catherine Parson Smith astutely observes that the subsequent *Federal Music Project Statement of Information, 1935*, reorders these goals making “to establish high standards of musicianship” the first stated purpose of the project rather than the last, no doubt reflecting the priorities of director Nikolai Sokoloff, *Making Music in Los Angeles: Transforming the Popular* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 219.

psychological attitude” which held that “a destitute person shall be disciplined.” And the discipline most readily imagined was manual labor. “They like the idea of putting a destitute musician down in a sewer or putting a child psychologist at a sewing machine.” A National Report of the Federal Music Project dated August 31, 1939, reprints a newspaper editorial, no doubt in response to the continued animosity toward the white-collar programs:

A good musician is as much a national resource as an oil well. What does the nation “save” when it tells such a man to sit at home to decay on the dole instead of providing him with the means and opportunity to work for all of us? Erosion of the spirit is as dangerous as erosion of the soil, as fit a subject of national concern.

The various WPA white-collar relief programs, including Federal One, remained a favorite target of anti-New Deal forces for the duration of the Roosevelt administration.⁷⁰

Though immediate relief and rehabilitation were unquestionably the primary goals of the Roosevelt administration, there remained for the Federal One projects other unstated objectives; a “quest for cultural democracy” is how one scholar has characterized the goals of Federal One. Harry Hopkins, Jacob Baker and other WPA administrators anticipated profound societal ameliorations from the art projects predicated upon the egalitarian principles of the New Deal administration. Those involved with the Federal Theatre, for example, often described the project as “The People’s Theatre,” the Federal Art Project directors designated a collection of program essays “Art for the Millions.” And a 1935 report from the National headquarters of the FMP concluded: “All the music

⁷⁰ Harry Hopkins, *Federal Aid During the Depression* (Washington: n.p., 1933), pg. 9, Exhibit 1, Exhibits to Accompany the FMP Final Report, Music Division, Library of Congress, as in Warren Findley, 35; “Nation and Special Reports the Federal Music Project, July 1935 – August 1939,” entry 811, box 25, NARA.

belongs to the Nation.” The egalitarian sensibilities permeated from the pinnacle of the New Deal leadership and throughout the various WPA programs.⁷¹

Unquestionably, ordinary Americans responded to the hardships and tragedies brought on by the Great Depression in a variety of manners. Alan Brinkley points out that “no set of categories could describe the full range of these responses,” which might prove to be reactionary or radical, adaptive or rebellious, hopeful or pessimistic. The predominant literary and artistic sentiment of the era, however, involved a renewed appreciation, perhaps even a glorification, of the “Common Man.” Published in 1936, Carl Sandburg’s *The People, Yes!* exalts in celebration of the ordinary citizen, as does John Steinbeck’s 1939 *The Grapes of Wrath*. “We are the people, and the people always go on,” proclaims Ma Joad stoically as her “fambly” and the world around her deteriorate under the weight of the Great Depression. Though short on dogma and doctrine, the New Deal administration whole-heartedly embraced this contemporary popular sentiment.⁷²

In his study of the Writers’ Project Jerrold Hirsch writes that “national FWP officials developed a program that spoke to much larger and long-standing debates over the nature of American identity and culture, over the very definition of who was an American, of who the American people were.” Indeed, the programs “addressed persistent questions about the meaning of American culture and nationality.” Especially in the American West – where ethnic diversity plays such a vital role – this proved especially true. But while historians have had much to say about the culture of 1930s America, they have

⁷¹ Jane De Hart Mathews, “Arts and the People: The New Deal Quest for a Cultural Democracy,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (September, 1975), 316-339; “Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes,” entry 815, box 29, NARA.

⁷² Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 121.

been reluctant until recently to explore the specific relationship between culture and the New Deal. Certainly the Roosevelt administration avoidance of anything that resembled ideology can account for some of this, as well as the fact that many scholars have regarded politics as a *manifestation* of culture rather than its origin. “Audiences snicker,” wrote Warren Susman, “when I argue that Mickey Mouse may in fact be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt.” (Susman acknowledges, however, the significant cultural role Mr. Roosevelt played in the shaping of government.)⁷³

Certainly, an awareness of the importance of *culture* predates the 1930s, but Susman writes that “no fact is more significant than the general and even popular ‘discovery’ of the concept of culture” as it took hold during the Depression era. Particularly in the western region, many FMP administrators, supporters and participants could be viewed as ‘cultural pluralists’ – though they almost certainly would not have described themselves in such a manner. As we shall see later in this study of Federal Music, again and again WPA administrators in the West acknowledged and celebrated the ethnic diversity of the region through the expression of musical culture. The primary inspiration for these programs was this popular “discovery” of culture blending with a fresh awareness of who was an American, of what truly constituted “Americanism,” as well as a new cognizance of the tremendous variation in custom, language, religion and other human difference which characterized the regional West.⁷⁴

⁷³ Hirsch, 4; see Alan Lawson “The Cultural Legacy of the New Deal,” in *Fifty Years Later: The New Deal Evaluated*, edited by Harvard Sitkoff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 155; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 103.

⁷⁴ Susman, 153.

Other dramatic changes were also taking place in Depression-era America in relation to its artistic, theatrical and musical landscape. In the years following the Great War, scores of American artists and intellectuals retreated from what they saw as the banality and hypocrisy of cultural life in the United States. The creation of art became an end in itself; “art for art’s sake” expressed succinctly the estrangement from social and economic considerations. “Art is separate from life,” proclaimed writer and critic Malcolm Cowley, “the artist is independent of the world and superior to lifelings.” Musicians were no less adamant in these attitudes. “I believe that a real composer writes for no other purpose than to please himself,” Arnold Schoenberg wrote in his book *Style and Idea*, explaining: “Those who compose because they want to please others and have audiences in mind are not real artists.”⁷⁵

The collapse of the capitalist economy in 1929 dramatically altered the relationship of the artist to society as well as the wider intellectual milieu; the “Left Movement,” theater director Harold Clurman recalled, was now “the main movement of the American consciousness in the process of its growth.” In actuality, only a rather small minority of American intellectuals and artists during the Depression era became disciples of Marxist radicalism. Yet, in respect to the evolving cultural and artistic sensibilities of society, the impact of the Left – and specifically the role of the Communist Party – exerted considerable sway. In an oft-quoted passage, Lionel Trilling reflects on these changes of the intellectual currents:

⁷⁵ Malcolm Cowley, *Exiles Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's*, 2nd edition (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1951), 144; Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (New York: Philosophical Library, Incorporated, 1950), 24. The article to which the quotation was taken is dated 1926.

In any view of the American cultural situation, the importance of the radical movement of the Thirties cannot be overestimated. It may be said to have created the American intellectual class as we know it in its great size and influence.

Though the impact of the Depression-era Left movement proved enduring culturally, its political influence waned dramatically in the post-War period.⁷⁶

“All of the arts in the Depression period,” Charles Alexander writes, “were affected to some extent by an attraction to Marxism.” Because the economic decline particularly impacted the artistic community, the attraction does not seem at all peculiar. American Communists in the first years of the Depression were nothing if not self-assured; for them, Marxist revolution was inevitable, the impending triumph of scientific socialism a quantifiable truth. Compromise with political liberals and progressives was not necessary. This confidence permeated the entire art community. Depictions of “proletarian” realism dominated the visual arts and written literature, the notions of “art for art’s sake” replaced by an emphasis on the social aspects of artistic representation.⁷⁷

By the mid-1930s, however, the coming worker’s revolution began to appear considerably less imminent, and other concerns occurring far beyond American borders overwhelmed the Left. “Of all the forces bearing down in the later years of the decade,” writes Richard Pells, “none was more intense than the pressure of international events.” Following the rise to power of Adolf Hitler in 1933 “the specter of fascism and war haunted men’s minds and intruded on their political discussions.” In the United States, the urgency of events in Europe and the Far East superseded all domestic considerations.

⁷⁶ Harold Clurman, *The Fervent Years: The Story of Group Theatre and the Thirties*, revised edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1957), 271; Lionel Trilling, “A Novel of the Thirties,” in his *The Last Decade* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 15.

⁷⁷ Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies*, 162.

The Communists now recognized the urgent need to form alliances with democratic socialists, liberals, and other progressive groups. “The danger from the Right,” Pell continues, “made the Center seem more and more attractive.” The resultant unification of these progressive forces became known as the Popular Front.⁷⁸

The art, literature and music produced during the Popular Front remains some of the most original and compelling in American cultural history. The “proletarian literature” of the early 1930s evolved as the decade progressed; though misleading to assume a complete break with earlier radical writings, by mid-decade the American literary community embraced New Deal efforts in the struggle against Fascism abroad and support of industrial unions and relief programs domestically. “The Old Left effort to transplant Soviet-style proletcult onto American soil was a gross miscalculation,” asserts

⁷⁸ Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 293, 296. Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front* offers convincing analysis that: “It is mistaken to see the Popular Front as a marriage of Communists and liberals” as so many scholars have done. Rather, “the periphery was in many cases the center, the ‘fellow travelers’ were the Popular Front,” pg. 5. Denning draws from David Roedinger who writes that “a fixation on the Party” in the work of historians “has left enormous gaps in our knowledge of the radical past.” One way to improve the historiography of American Communism “would be to focus on the tens of thousands of fellow travelers.” This periphery, “far larger than the Party, voted with its feet by supporting some Party activities in some periods and refusing to support other causes at other times,” David Roediger, “Forward,” to Jessie Lloyd O’Connor, Harvey O’Connor, and Susan Bowler, *Harvey and Jessie: A Couple of Radicals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. x. Denning also effectively argues the need for analyzing the Popular Front as a historical bloc, a Gramscian concept involving an alliance between separate social forces and a resultant social formation. The connection forms hegemony, and: “The New Deal was such a historical bloc, at once a particular alliance of political actors and the ruling force of society,” pg. 6.

Walter Kalaidjian, and the literary John Reed Clubs, closely associated with the CPUSA, largely dissolved by the summer of 1934.⁷⁹

Musically, the Popular Front period experienced a remarkable development of new genres and performance. The Jazz saw the rise of Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Charlie Christian, Count Basie, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker; American symphonic composers included Aaron Copland, Marc Blitzstein, Virgil Thomson, and the foreign-born Bela Bartok and Hanns Eisler; the avant-garde composers Henry Cowell, Harry Partch and Conlon Nancarrow; the ascendancy of contemporary gospel and blues in the work of The Golden Gate Quartet, Robert White and Muddy Waters; the popular songwriting of Ira and George Gershwin, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg; and a growing awareness of the nation's folk music, including bluegrass and country, through the performances of Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Merle Travis, Earl Scruggs, Bill Monroe and Hank Williams. Though the national administration of the FMP initially stressed classical symphonic music, the degree to which many of these genres found expression within the New Deal music programs came through local efforts, often with the support of Charles Seeger.⁸⁰

“The Seeger family is without doubt central to Popular Front music and to American music generally,” Michael Denning states categorically. Charles Seeger's development of the study of ethnomusicology included ground breaking scholarship as well as the invention of an electronic device for the transcription of traditional music; Seeger's second wife Ruth Crawford Seeger contributed to the FMP as a composer of

⁷⁹ Walter B. Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 59.

⁸⁰ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 117.

experimental proletarian songs and later transcribed music for several folksong collections; their children Peggy Seeger and Mike Seeger dedicated their lives to the performance and preservation of traditional music; grandson Anthony Seeger is an accomplished anthropologist and a specialist in the music of the Suyá people of Central Brazil. And one noted contemporary folklorist writes that: “we should always recall, as we consider the elder Seeger, the life and career of his son Pete.” Certainly Pete Seeger’s life’s work can be seen as continuation – if not a culmination – of his father’s efforts to bring music to the people, towards the ideals of inclusion, involvement, cooperation and patriotism found at the very core of the entire Popular Front movement.⁸¹

Prior to his pioneering scholarship in the then new field of ethnomusicology and his later enthusiasm for folksong, however, Charles Seeger largely embraced the prevailing attitudes concerning music and society that evolved during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “When he was a teenager he felt, became convinced,” Pete Seeger says in reference to his father, “that great classical music would save the world; that the genius of these European composers would show the entire world how to behave intelligently. And to a certain extent he was right.” These ideas reflect conceptions about musical expression that emerged during the Progressive era; specifically, that classically composed symphonic or “fine art” music should serve not to simply entertain,

⁸¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 284; Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 93. In several conversations Pete Seeger expressed dissatisfaction with the “about 500 mistakes” in the original edition of his own biography, *How Can I Keep From Singing: Pete Seeger* (De Capo Press, Inc., 1981) by David King Dunaway. Seeger took particular exception with the suggestion that he made calculated career moves during his life: “I didn’t give a shit about my career,” he said. At one point Pete Seeger denied having a career at all, but added that if he did have a “small c” career it only involved working toward building “a nation without racism or sexism,” Pete Seeger telephone interviews, May 18, 2008 and October 1, 2008.

but to instill good taste, refinement and improved morals – particularly for the “lower orders” of society.⁸²

National director Nikolai Sokoloff certainly viewed the performances of symphonic music within the Music Projects with such societal purposefulness and class awareness, as did many of the regional FMP administrators. West Virginia state director Verna Blackburn, for example, described in an article “Music For the Underprivileged” that the projects under her supervision “serve a clientele” whose “tastes do not, as a rule, run toward concert music” and if they “should happen to tune in a symphonic group” on the radio “they usually shun it and turn to ‘hillbilly’ or jazz programs exclusively.” Those from more affluent backgrounds and “living in communities where good music is a matter of course” may have difficulty understanding this situation, so director Blackburn provided several anecdotes:

To really appreciate the growth of interest in the Federal Music Program in West Virginia, one would have to be here and have seen the indifference and often hostility that characterized the public’s reaction when the Projects were begun. At one of the community centers, where one of the units played, the police were forced to arrest some young men, fully grown, who were creating a disturbance during the concert. They were absolutely sincere when they resented the orchestra’s music; they were also sincere when, before that center closed for summer, they were among the “regulars” in attendance and applauded our programs vociferously. They were educated to a liking of better music.

Because of performance of “good music” – classical symphonic music – via the West Virginia FMP “those who would have scorned anything more serious than ‘Comin’

⁸² Pete Seeger telephone interview, September 26, 2008.

Round the Mountain' now listen to and like Herbert, Friml, and even Haydn, Schubert and Mendelssohn."⁸³

By the time of his appointment, Seeger's musical perspective and philosophy had transformed dramatically from the youthful attitudes articulated above by son Pete. One of the first orders of business for Charles Louis Seeger upon his assignment as deputy director for the FMP in 1938 was to write a thirty-page government bulletin entitled *Music as Recreation*. Widely distributed and influential within the music programs, the extended essay was "intended for the use of administration and supervisory personnel of the Works Projects Administration and music workers and recreation leaders whose respective fields impinge." The text acknowledges the "wide variety of concepts" within the music projects "as to the role of music in community life." It was the goal of *Music as Recreation* to suggest means "by which differences of viewpoint, method, and aim be reconciled without loss of the essential values gained from the diverse music practices we have developed."⁸⁴

Clearly, the document represents Charles Seeger's efforts (no doubt with the support of the "the government" which was responsible for bringing him on to the Music Projects in the first place) to supplant the rather limiting philosophies about music and society stemming from ideas that emerged during the Progressive Era. "What the professional

⁸³ Verna Blackburn, "Music For The Underprivileged," *The Baton*, June 1937, vol. 2, no. 6, pg. 7.

⁸⁴ "Music As Recreation," Work Projects Administration, Division of Professional and Service Projects, Washington, D.C., May 29, 1940, pg. 1, located in the Music Library, University of California, Berkeley. Though Charles Seeger is not credited for authorship on the document, numerous other references, including the final Foster Report, identify Seeger as the author. Somewhat curiously George Foster concluded, on page 230, that "'Music As Recreation' was not well received by the State Music Supervisors." Numerous references in various the FMP State Reports suggest just the opposite.

musician actually fears,” the bulletin continues, “is that other types of music than fine art (‘good’) music may enter into the situation. These, he usually does not understand and often dislikes.” Here, Seeger lays out strategies for an “adjustment of the traditional viewpoints” to allow for “the broadening of interests and of social and cultural contacts” and the “intensive cultivation of music skills.”⁸⁵

The various sections of *Music as Recreation* include instruction for project administrators on how to survey the musical resources and the individual needs of each community, and adjust federal music activities accordingly; the various idioms of popular, folk, and fine art music are all significant. Indeed:

In attempting to “type” music activities, we are in no way trying to identify “good” or the “bad” in music, nor are we trying to dissociate music of any group from that of any other or from the whole collection of groups. Rather, we are advancing a few suggestions regarding what kind of music may be “good for” each kind of group which the Recreation and Music Programs have customarily found actually existent in the average community.

Seeger here applauds the accomplishments of federal music, as prior to its development most Americans had been persuaded that “music (meaning fine art music) was an esoteric mystery” that was assessable only to a privileged few. “Fortunately,” the report concludes,

... the radio, sound-film and phonograph, the emergence of the “blues” and of modern swing, and the re-assertion of the good old manly arts of banjo, guitar and harmonica-playing, and of ballad-singing have corrected this earlier trend. America is music-conscious as never before.

Music as Recreation was apparently well received by the music programs; it was quite often referenced in correspondence from state and local administrators, and its

⁸⁵ Ibid., 4.

implementation is clearly evident, especially as the Federal Music Projects became the WPA Music Programs in the summer of 1939.⁸⁶

In fact many of the ideas articulated within *Music as Recreation* extended beyond the Roosevelt era and impacted subsequent paradigms that emerged involving music and society during the post-War period. Though Charles Seeger's tenure with the WPA music programs in the United States was relatively brief, his memory of specific events not always favorable, and many of his administrative dealings apparently less than amicable, his influence proved profound and enduring. "Thus we can see," Pete Seeger recalls his father saying, "the question is not 'is it good music?' but 'what is the music good for?'" Such sentiment succinctly characterizes the elder Seeger's philosophy and subsequent impact on the various New Deal music programs across the country.⁸⁷

Also in 1939 the Federal Music Project administration released a short "background" essay detailing the development of music history in America. For "a period of a century and a half," it concluded, "America had its own healthy tradition of music." This musical legacy – practiced largely as a community activity – was lost shortly after the Civil War. "In our change from an agricultural to an industrial nation," the report continued, "the old singing school, the singing convention, the 'singing' gatherin'" dropped out of favor." While the "reconstruction days were too feverishly occupied with material advancement to take time for the making of music in friendly assembly," music became a vicarious

⁸⁶ Ibid., 14, 29.

⁸⁷ Pete Seeger telephone interview, September 26, 2008. Charles Seeger's single most enduring contribution to musicology is his formulation of dissonant counterpoint. "Seeger played a unique and central role," maintains ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettel, "in tying musicology to other disciplines and domains of culture." See Charles Seeger "On Dissonant Counterpoint," *Modern Music* 7, no. 4 (June-July 1930): 25-26.

experience, “with the means to reward handsomely the greatest artists of Europe on visits to America.” The appreciation of music became a pursuit only for the wealthy, who “had little part except as listeners” and “the ‘average person’ of little means had almost no part in music at all.”⁸⁸

The essay also substantiates historian Lawrence Levine’s later assertion that Americans, long after they declared their political independence, “retained a colonial mentality in matters of culture and intellect.” The FMP report ends by informing that:

With the great movement to the West, the filling of the frontiers, with the attendant physical dangers and the economic insecurity, the restlessness and tension which had always marked American life was intensified. The emotions were absorbed in politics, industry, business, evangelical religion. From out of this period there arose in the cities, however, small coteries, that looked to Europe for their music, and until the World War America remained for almost five decades under the tonal domination of Europeans.

In actuality, this “domination” of native musical culture continued largely unabated until the development of Federal Music, when scores of American composers found a creative outlet for their productions for the first time. And the reference to the West in the above quotation suggests another pertinent aspect of American musical culture; specifically, that the region was *never* as ensconced in the notions of a European musical hierarchy as the industrial cities of the East. At the time of the beginning of the WPA music programs John Lomax’s 1907 *Cowboy Songs* stood as the musical publication most widely associated with the American West. And as we shall see in later chapters, both the Los Angeles musical pioneer L. E. Behymer as well as Charles Seeger encouraged and

⁸⁸ “Background,” July 1939, Activities Report of Federal Music Project, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

inspired Project activities in the West and Southwest beyond the performance of “high art” music.⁸⁹

Yet, perceiving the music programs as effective conduits of improved social behaviors – as demonstrated in the West Virginia report above – was not unique to the FMP administrations in the East. A monthly educational report from California, for example, maintained a regular section headed “Prevention of Delinquency” that detailed the music project’s efforts in that direction. But unlike the eastern programs, the activities did not necessarily revolve solely around the presentation of classical music. In addition, students received instruction in Hispanic music and other folksongs, including the playing of banjo and harmonica. Reported one narrative:

At other places, music is being used as a prevention of delinquency. At the All Nations Boys’ Club, about 30 boys gather once a week for serious study under two of our teachers and their work has borne excellent results. These boys are between the ages of 11 and 15, all homeless and most of them wards of the Juvenile Court. They all sell papers and shine shoes after school and our teachers go to them in the early evening. They no longer spend their time in the streets and alleys of the neighborhood.

Similar involvement of the music projects in the lives of children proved especially well received in Texas and Oklahoma, and the most of the instruction revolved around the learning of folk instruments.⁹⁰

And the utilization of regional folksong motifs – including and especially African American spirituals and Native American Indian songs – dominated the theme and variations of the scores of original symphonic compositions written by Music Project employees. In 1893 – the same year Frederick Jackson Turner provided the “frontier”

⁸⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 2; “Background,” July 1939, Activities Report of Federal Music Project, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

⁹⁰ “Monthly Educational Reports,” California, October 1938, entry 807, box 17, NARA.

alternative to the European “germ theory” of American development – the Czech composer Antonin Dvorak arrived in the United States and encouraged native musicians to create new “nationalistic” symphonic scores. The expression of nationalist impulses through music had, since the late nineteenth century, dominated in European musical circles and had been influential in Latin America too. But in the United States, the composition of nationalistic symphonies proved more controversial; as Aaron Copland maintained: “Nationalism in music is a rather dangerous subject to talk about with musicians because they tend to fight about it.”⁹¹

The nationalistic musical creations of Europe and Latin America (particularly Mexico) nearly always incorporated folksong themes; Dvorak had done this with the folksongs of his native Bohemia and the subsequent *From the New World* symphony (1893), which was clearly predicated upon American antebellum slave spirituals and indigenous melodies. But the American composer should not be limited to these melodies, Dvorak argued, writing that:

It matters little whether the inspiration for the coming folk songs of America is derived from the Negro melodies, the songs of the creoles, the redman’s chant, or the plaintive ditties of the homesick German or Norwegian. Undoubtedly the germs of the best of music lies hidden among all the races that are co-mingled in this great country. The music of the people is like a rare and lovely flower amidst encroaching weeds.

Dvorak’s influence took hold in the 1930s with the development of Federal Music; the performance of his symphonies by the various FMP orchestras, particularly in the West,

⁹¹ Aaron Copland, “Music in the Star-Spangled Manner,” *Music and Musicians*, VIII (August, 1960), 8. Upon arriving in the United States Dvorak said: “I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies. These can be the foundation of a serious and original school of composition, to be developed in the United States. The beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are the folk songs of America and your composers must turn to them.”

surpassed that of any other European composer. And it was a rare public appearance of the federal orchestras that did not include at least one – if not exclusively – the performances of the work of contemporary American composers.⁹²

Though few of these compositions would be performed in the post WWII period (notable exceptions would be William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* and several regional examples) they presented during the Depression era contemporary musical expressions of the “new” nationalist impulses of the Popular Front movement. And unlike the nationalist music of the various repressive regimes abroad, the symphonic compositions of the New Deal strove to present themes that encompassed the breadth and depth of the entire American experience. As Dvorak advised aspiring American composers in the same article quoted above:

Nothing must be too low or too insignificant for the musician. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or blind organ grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away, for every now and then I catch a strain or hear the fragment of a recurring melodic scheme that sounds like the voice of the people.

By and large, the symphonic compositions produced by the employees of the New Deal music projects endeavored to capture this “voice of the people” and were inspired by a presidential administration that clearly believed that the people mattered. And, as the following chapters illuminate, both the compositions of Dvorak and his directives for American composers found particular strong reception in the American West.⁹³

⁹² “Music in America,” *Harpers Magazine*, XC (February, 1895), 433.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 3

“OUT WHERE THE WEST BEGINS”: ARIZONA, NEW MEXICO AND NEVADA

Beginning in 1936 employees of the Federal Music Project engaged in the collection and transcription of songs performed by residents of migratory labor camps in the California Valley. The subject matter of these compositions varied dramatically, ranging from commonplace events of daily camp life to expressions of profound frustration prompted by the migrant's abject existence in the pit of Depression-era America. In *American Exodus* James Gregory writes: “Victims of drought and depression, they had headed west by the tens of thousands, hoping for a brighter future in California, only to find, it seemed, more misery.” The emigrants traveled toward the setting sun in the dozen years following the crash of 1929 seeking an escape from the economic and environmental devastation of their home states. Derided as “Okies,” migrants arrived from not just Oklahoma but all of the southern plains states, including Texas, Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri. Goaded by the lure of employment and inspired by an enduring pioneer mythology, they soon discovered, as David Wrobel astutely writes, “that the frontier had lost its transience and the promised Eden was more akin to a hell on earth.”⁹⁴

Many of the songs collected by the FMP workers had traveled with the migrants from their home states, and others were created upon arrival or during their journey. Some of the most compelling of these express a distinct sense of place and region, both celebratory and nostalgic. “The McAllister [Oklahoma] Blues” also known as “Nighttime

⁹⁴ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xiv; David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 125.

in Nevada” was performed at the Arvin Migratory Labor Camp in Bakersfield, California, on September 5, 1936:

When it's night time in Nevada, I'm dreaming
Of the old days on the prairie with you
How I miss you when the campfires are gleaming
And wonder if you miss me too

I can see the Great Divide
And the trails we used to ride
It was the only bit of heaven I knew

While many of the songs declare a similar longing for places and people left behind, others celebrate the migrant's new surroundings. “Out Where the West Begins” was transcribed in 1936 at the Kern Labor Camp in Kern County, California:

Out where the world is in the making,
Where fewer hearts in despair are aching,
That's Where the West begins....

Where there's more giving and less buying
And a man makes friends without half trying,
That's where the West begins....

James Gregory describes how both “old and new perceptions about regional character” came into play during this Depression migration. For the Dust Bowl migrants, regional connections became both a means of personal self-identification as well as a justification for others to ridicule and discriminate against the new arrivals.⁹⁵

Though contemporary historians may question the usefulness of regionalism as a category for scholarly pursuit, during the years of operation of the New Deal music projects no such debate existed. “Regionalism seemed to become an American

⁹⁵ “Songs of migratory farm laborers collected by Mr. Tom Collins (camp manager) at the Migratory Labor Camp, Arvin, California, (1936), Part XIV: Migratory labor camp songs, Carton 5, item 201, California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS11 v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley; Gregory, 104.

preoccupation during the great depression of the 1930s,” writes Michael C. Steiner; indeed, during that decade “regionalism was widely and urgently discussed by artists, folklorists, social scientists, planners, architects, and engineers.” Countless conferences and commissions addressed the topic, and scores of journals were specifically devoted to regionalist concerns. It was during the Depression decade that the finest and most enduring regionalist histories were published, including *The Great Plains* by Walter Prescott Webb in 1931, “The Significance of Sections in American History,” Frederick Jackson Turner’s posthumous collection a year later, and in 1938 came both *American Regionalism* by Howard Odum and Harry E. Moore as well as *The Culture of Cities* by Lewis Mumford.⁹⁶

“During the two decades between the world wars,” writes Robert Dorman, “artists and intellectuals across the United States awakened to cultural and possibilities that they believed to be inherent in the regional diversity of America.” Indeed, creating an accurate portrait of American culture and values during the 1930s can *only* be accomplished through an awareness of regions. Recent scholars such as Dorman, Michael Denning and Richard Lowitt have emphasized the relevance of regionalism as the prevailing *zeitgeist* of the Depression-era. Denning writes that regionalism was “a multi-accented slogan” during the Depression years that encompassed the white supremacist nostalgia of the southern Agrarians as well as the proletarian and radical regionalisms of the Middle and Far West. With *The New Deal and the West* (1984) Lowitt provides a primarily political analysis of the Roosevelt presidency in the western region. Herein is demonstrated that while FDR “carried every Western state” in his first election, most

⁹⁶ Michael C. Steiner, “Regionalism in the Great Depression,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 73, No. 4 (October, 1983), pp. 430-446.

historical discussions have been “very general, devoid of place.” Subsequently, the most recent New Deal historiography reveals a consistent concern with specific sections of the country.⁹⁷

And regionalism took on a special significance in the West in relation to the various New Deal music projects. As discussed in the previous chapter, the regional West was historically less encumbered than other sections of the country by notions of a musical hierarchy that ranked European symphonic music above other genres. Neither geography nor the “frontier experience” truly defined or determined the region; rather, as Richard White explains: “The American West is a product of conquest and of the mixing of diverse groups of people.” It is this reality that best differentiates the region within a historical and geographical context. By the 1930s, the West remained the most ethnically diverse, transient, and least culturally entrenched region of the United States. It is the musical expression of these varied groups – people of Native American, European, African and Asian ancestry – that most distinguish the FMP in the West.⁹⁸

Each of the divisions of Federal One approached the regionalist dimension of their Projects in different manners. The Art Projects created murals and other depictions drawn largely from local themes, while the various state guides of the Writers’ Projects clearly addressed regionalist concerns. And Hallie Flanagan, national director of Federal Theatre, stressed that “whenever possible regional theatre developing native plays and original methods of production shall be encouraged.” And as she later wrote in *Arena*,

⁹⁷ Robert L. Dorman, *Revolt of the Provinces: The Regionalist Movement in America, 1920-1945*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), xi; Denning, 133; Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), xi.

⁹⁸ Richard White, “*It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own*”: *A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 4.

“university or civic theatres in each of the regions would work with these government theatres in developing playwrights who build up a body of dramatic literature each for his own region.” After all, Federal Theatre in the United States was not like “Russia where the leaders of the state told the theatre directors what plays to do and what not to do.”⁹⁹

And the enthusiasm of Hallie Flanagan’s for regionalist theatre no doubt influenced, to an indeterminate degree, the operation of Federal Music. The FMP national director, wedded to the belief that European classical music forms should dominate the programs, initially accorded limited consideration to the regionalist implications of his Project.

(This changed dramatically with the coming of the WPA Music Programs in 1939 and the directorship of Earl Moore who made the keynote of his first National Music Week Committee: “Support Local Group Activities,” which stressed an awareness of regional music.) But even under the administration of Nikolai Sokoloff, music unique to specific locale enveloped the programs throughout the country. As will be demonstrated in this and later chapters, various vernacular and regionalist music of the West, such as the Mexican *Tipica Orquestas*, proved to be among of the Music Project’s most popular productions.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ *Theatre Project for Works Progress Administration*, by Hallie Flanagan. Enclosed in letter to Bruce McClure, August 17, 1935 (WPA Federal Theatre Records, Washington, DC, as in *Arena*, 21-22, 29, 91.

¹⁰⁰ “I had a heartening but rather foreshortened talk with Mrs. Flanagan on the regional implications within our programs,” FMP supervisor Harry Hewes wrote in 1938 to Mary McFarland, assistant to the FTP director. And Hewes also confirmed to Herbert Halpert, director of music for the FTP, that he wished “to resume the very interesting conversation with you ... about vernacular and regional music.” He assured Halpert that “when Dr. Sokoloff returns from the West I will take up with him the suggestion that we merge our manuscripts.” Harry Hewes to Mary McFarland, April 11, 1938, entry 816, box 32; Harry L. Hewes to Herbert Halpert, April 13, 1938, Central Files: General, box 375, both NARA.

And specific FMP music festivals and gatherings in the West regularly involved entertainment of regional significance and appeal. In Long Beach, California, for example, an annual western themed music project event brought together former residents of Utah, Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona who remembered when “roundups, cattle drives, rustlers and Indians gave that section of the country the name of ‘Wild West.’” Steeped in western nostalgia and mythology, those in attendance “lived again the exciting days of the past.” The program opened each of several years with a concert by a Federal Music Project Orchestra and an FMP Coral group of ten women and ten men who performed compositions of the Old West. A similar “Golden Jubilee” annual festival in Oklahoma with the Federal Music Project furnishing all musical entertainment remained quite popular for its duration. The celebration was “carried out in typical Western fashion – barn dances, round-ups, banquets, [and] public reception.” Outside of the West, FMP regionalist activities proved no less evident; in January 1937 in South Carolina, for example, “Four large patriotic programs were given on Robert E. Lee’s Birthday,” and later in the month music for the birthday celebrations of both Lee and Stonewall Jackson was arranged for various patriotic and civic organizations.¹⁰¹

The performance of symphonic music written by American composers found much approval within the western music programs. Most these symphonies were Dvorak-inspired in that they derived from or synthesized Native, African, Anglo or Asian American folksong melodies. A well-known contemporary music scholar and composer, Dr. Sigmund Spaeth, applauded these development within the Federal Music Projects; in

¹⁰¹ “Tales of Wild West Told at Picnic,” July 12, 1936, Long Beach *Press-Telegram*, entry 826, box 46; “Festivals – Oklahoma,” entry 820, box 35, “Records Relating to Music Festivals, 1935-1940; “Narrative Report for January, 1937, Federal Music Project, South Carolina,” entry 805, box 3, all NARA.

numerous speeches and letters he spoke of the “dawn of a music culture, identifiably America’s own” that found “expression, form, eloquence and cadence in our vernacular and idioms, and stemming from our own ideals, history and folk habits.” On more than one occasion Spaeth identified a distinctly regional aspect to the reception of these American compositions; indeed, they proved much more popular in the Middle and Far West than on the East coast. These native themed compositions met with much larger audience response and enthusiasm in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago, he maintained, “a fact which may be due either to the polyglot population of the Metropolis, or, perhaps it is another sign of New York’s essential parochialism.” Regardless, the performance of symphonic music by American composers based upon regional folksong or ethnic themes remained quite popular throughout the West – and not only in California, but also in Utah and Oregon, as well as several other trans-Mississippi state Music Projects.¹⁰²

Somewhat ironically, the FMP-sponsored “Composers’ Forums” proved far less successful in the West than in the East. These programs brought the audience into intimate relation with the composers’ works through an informal talk by the composer followed by questions. The Forums were scheduled regularly in New York, Milwaukee, Detroit, Philadelphia and Boston. The lack of public interest and support for these forums in the West has several possible explanations. Firstly, regional director Bruno David Ussher appeared rather antagonistic to the idea in Southern California as well as the rest of the western region. “May I say here ... that I violently oppose any possible attempt at having a Composers’ Forum in Los Angeles,” Ussher wrote to FMP supervisor

¹⁰² Harry Hewes to Mr. Asch, “Material about music for Dr. Sigmund Spaeth,” February 10, 1939, pg. 4, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

Harry Hewes. “With exceedingly few exceptions,” he argued, “ the only skillful composers work in the movies and they rarely compose anything except Hollywood music.”¹⁰³

Further, several efforts at presenting the Forums in Los Angeles and San Francisco attracted rather contentious audiences that sometimes assailed the composers for a perceived lack of originality or quality in their compositions. One specific program arranged in the Bay area, for example, concluded quite unceremoniously. An older composer, who had reached his prime sometime during the administration of *Theodore Roosevelt*, was not willing to accept the pointed questions of the attendant musicians and other audience members. The Forum ended abruptly with his declaration: “I would like to have you people know that I believe in God. I believe in the sanctity of the home. I believe in the Constitution of the United States. And By Thunder, I believe in the C Major Triad!”¹⁰⁴

By and large, however, the various FMP presentations in the West reflected the rich ethnic and religious diversity of the region. The individual project performances, as well as their supervision, often varied dramatically state by state. Yet, there existed several unifying threads that distinguished all of these Music Projects from their counterparts in other regions. An understanding of the administration and performance of the specific programs in each state illuminates the effectiveness and specific challenges of these New

¹⁰³ “Work Progress Administration, Federal Music Project, Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Director, May 29, 1936, pg. 4, entry 811, box 23; Bruno David Ussher to Harry L. Hewes, September 25, 1936, Central Files: General, box 371, both in NARA.

¹⁰⁴ George Foster, “Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment the Federal Music Project 1935 to 1939 The WPA Music Program 1939 to 1943,” June 30, 1943, pg. 324, Library of Congress, Music Library, Washington, DC.

Deal efforts. The remainder of this chapter and the following two chapters are dedicated to these matters.

In Arizona the Federal Music Projects proved quite popular and original. Though small in comparison to other states, the programs emphasized the diversity of this southwestern region, and the various Mexican *Tipica Orquestas* remained far and away the most highly demanded of all performing units. Beginning in late 1935 and continuing well into the War years, the Arizona Music Project eventually ended in 1943. In September of 1938 acting state director Rowland Norris wrote to national director Sokoloff regarding his state's plans for the ensuing months. He included a four-point program, which was "meeting with public approval." The acting director could not discern which programs were most successful as "they represent four distinct types of program and serve four distinct classes of people."¹⁰⁵

The first of the four-point programs described by the Arizona director was the public band concerts in the city parks that were usually attended by thousands of people each month. The Arizona FMP also presented a popular educational series of band concerts in the public schools. Norris expected this service to be significantly expanded for the coming school year. Thirdly, the Project Concert Band performed regularly for radio broadcasts intended for the thousands of "shut-ins" throughout the state. Lastly, director Norris detailed the state's productions of the "Mexican Orchestra's typical Spanish and Mexican concerts" which he described as "traditional of the old Southwest." He wrote that these concerts were "heavily attended by the Mexican population and our Eastern winter visitors." In actuality, the *Tipica Orquestas* were – as in other states of the region

¹⁰⁵ Rowland Norris to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 14, 1938, Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

– the single most popular feature of all the WPA musical productions in Arizona. And their appeal extended beyond the Hispanic community; a greater variety of civic, community, and religious organizations sponsored appearances of the Mexican Orchestras than all other performing unit put together.¹⁰⁶

Yet, at the advent of the music programs in Arizona the “Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra of Tucson” became the center of a musical storm. The immensely popular unit had been performing under the previously established ERA and, according to one supporter, by the time of the inauguration of the FMP in late 1935, had “already become a part of the community life of the City.” The Orchestra consisted of twenty-eight members and was directed by a Mr. Quintero who had formerly served as leader of the band at the Mexican Military College in Mexico City. Their programs were nearly entirely composed of orchestrated arrangement of Spanish and Mexican folk airs.

Despite the popularity and musical talents and capabilities of the unit, regional director Bruno David Ussher’s initial reaction was tepid at best. “We went to hear Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra of Tucson (sic) in outdoor concert of Mexican tunes,” Ussher wrote to Alma Munsell. “This is a border line ... case, but of sufficient music folklore value to be include in the Fed. Music Project if improvements are made.” Ussher recommended a better leader and individual training in order for him to approve the orchestra for FMP funding. (Inexplicably, similar *tipica* groups with far less experience than the Tucson unit had already met with the regional director’s approval in both Texas and Southern California.) With this administrative reluctance to approve the orchestra came a rush of letters from a variety of Arizonans to Sokoloff, Ellen Woodward, Harry

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Hopkins and other WPA officials in Washington in support the *tipica* group. “This was one of the most interesting Projects under the ERA in Arizona,” wrote WPA administrator Margaret Klem of the group, “and I hope that it may be approved...”¹⁰⁷

Ussher reacted to the situation with near obsessive obstinacy, sending defensive memos and long grandiose, letters to Nikolai Sokoloff, Alma Munsell and Bruce McClure, now rejecting FMP support of the Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra entirely. The group would never have been part of the ERA to begin with, Ussher argued, if “some cowardly, dumb university professors had not ‘auditioned’ (on their own) – on the air – this band and approved it.” Though he was encountering “pressure from innumerable sources” who were attempting to “get this musical ‘pet’ of certain persons of importance ... on to our pay-roll,” he resisted approval of “an orchestra, obviously only of what we might call a mediocre standard.” At issue, Ussher believed, was the matter of the “professionalism” demanded of FMP employees. “It is the old question of whether a musician should be classified in the qualitative meaning of the term professional and whether the mere fact of his tootling or sawing for monetary gain entitles him to such classification.” Director Sokoloff initially supported the judgment of his regional director, and the *tipica* unit was denied FMP support and directed instead to the substantially less well-funded Recreation Project.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Bruno David Ussher to Alma S. Munsell, November 24, 1935; Margaret C. Klem to Mr. McClure, November 14, 1935; both in Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

¹⁰⁸ Bruno David Ussher to Alma S. Munsell, January 20, 1936; Bruno David Ussher to Alma S. Munsell, February 7, 1936; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, February 7, 1936; Bruno David Ussher to William McClure, February 19, 1936; all in Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

But the issue of the Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra of Tucson did not fade. In June of 1936 Bruce McClure forwarded a letter from Jane H. Rider, the director of Women's and Professional Projects in Arizona, to director Sokoloff. She pointed out that while the orchestra "did not meet the qualifications of Dr. Ussher for a musicians' project," they "are giving a splendid ... service to Tucson." The previous Sunday night, for example, she attended a concert in the Plaza Militaire, and judged that between 1,800 and 2,000 persons were there, the major portion of the audience being Spanish speaking laborers' families. The orchestra had given concerts on Friday afternoons at the rural schools in Pima County, and on special occasions performed Friday evening concerts, which both the children and their parents attended. "I believe this is one of our most worth-while projects, and is certainly giving pleasure to a large number of persons." Though the Pima County Welfare Board and other sources paid their transportation on trips out of Tucson, director Rider expressed concern about the limited funding for such a meaningful project.¹⁰⁹

In early 1937 Clayton E. Triggs, regional director of the Women's and Professional Projects wrote directly to Ellen Woodward concerning the *Tipica Orquesta* in Tucson. Triggs informed Woodward that for many months the local division in Arizona had recommended that, since the unit was clearly "professional" in musical ability and experience, it should be included as part of the state FMP:

However, Dr. Ussher, while in the region, was somewhat loathe to approve these people on the Music Program even though all of them show a professional music background. The Regional Recreation people, as well as the State Recreation Division, feel that very definitely this Relief

¹⁰⁹ Mr. McClure to Dr. Sokoloff, June 9, 1936, Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

Unit should be charged to the Federal Music Program, and I am in accord with their feeling....

Triggs informed Woodward that the Recreation Project could fund the Orchestra for thirty days, but would be financially restricted in doing so beyond this period. All local and state Music Directors were in accord with his Division's recommendation that the unit should be added to the FMP quota for Arizona, and in conclusion Triggs stressed: "This is a matter that should not be delayed for any length of time inasmuch as I fear that Recreation will drop these people and this would create a bad local situation."¹¹⁰

But such high level support of the Tucson *tipica* only provoked Ussher to further resistance. As lack of recreation funds threatened the very existence of what was by all accounts an integral cultural aspect of the city, Ussher held that even its imminent demise did not "form sufficient reason ... for putting this group on the Federal Music Project." The regional director's objections to the orchestra became irrational and contradictory. "Some of them" he complained, "still are unable to read a note of music." Yet in the same rambling correspondence Ussher expressed utter disbelief when "this group was featured at a luncheon in honor of Mr. Harry Hopkins" and the musicians could not perform a request "because they had not brought the music for this piece." Ussher repeated the same two anecdotes for several weeks in letters to national director. In March of 1937 Sokoloff overruled the regional director and approved the unit. A quite appreciative Fred Goerner expressed relief that "a very bad local situation" had been avoided. "While the quality of performance of the Old Pueblo Orchestra can not be

¹¹⁰ C. E. Triggs to Ellen S. Woodward, February 19, 1937, Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

judged by eastern standards” they “fulfill a very definite need in the community life of Tucson which incidentally is composed of sixty per cent Mexicans.”¹¹¹

The controversies surrounding the Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra of Tucson serve to illuminate several important aspects of the Federal Music Projects in the West. Clearly, the situation showcased the unceasing pomposity and obstinacy of the regional director; similar circumstances involving the production of the musical *Take Your Choice* in the Bay Area and a presentation of *Faust* in San Bernardino hastened Dr. Bruno David Ussher’s termination from the FMP. But the struggle for administrative acceptance of the *Arizona Tipica Orquesta* also evidences the “grassroots” efforts, which played out again and again in the western music projects, toward the inclusion and presentation of ethnic and regional musical forms. Also demonstrated was the fact that the national administration, whose preference for European classical music remained, was not unbending; certainly director Sokoloff appreciated the New Deal directive that the diversity of the nation be expressed through the Federal One projects. But the fact that Nikolai Sokoloff did not move far enough in supporting various forms of “social” music eventually led to his own departure from the Music Projects.

The approval of FMP support for the Old Pueblo Mexican Orchestra of Tucson, however, did not end the controversy the unit would attract. Within a month of Sokoloff’s decision, Ernie Lewis, secretary of the Local No. 771 of the American Federation of Musicians, wrote to AFM president Joseph Weber of the great injustice which was “being created against our men” in Tucson. Lewis complained that the new

¹¹¹ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 20, 1936; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 28, 1936; Fred F. Goerner to Nikolai Sokoloff, March 20, 1937; all in Central Files States: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

WPA unit “is composed of all Mexicans” and with the biggest percentage working at other jobs while also drawing the WPA band check. Because the band, according to Lewis, played nothing but Mexican music the AFM members were in effect disenfranchised from playing in the unit. Further, it had become “a common gossip” in Tucson that some of the WPA orchestra members were not citizens of the United States. A subsequent investigation by state director Goerner found that ten musicians on the Tucson project were aliens and therefore deemed it necessary to cancel the project. The Tucson Orchestra would eventually be rejuvenated through the Interstate Loan of Personnel, an operating procedure of the WPA that allowed for transfer of workers as dictated by necessity.¹¹²

As the most populous city in the state, Phoenix received the largest portion of Music Project funding in Arizona. But even prior to the administrative changes in 1939 which required shared sponsorship, FMP productions in Phoenix were nearly always met with local financial support. Beginning in the summer of 1936, the city of Phoenix, “in recognition of the benefits which accrue to our community” from the programs presented by the several units of the Federal Music Project, announced a contribution in cash and services to the amount of two hundred dollars per month in order that the Music Project would “continue to provide this high type of entertainment for the enjoyment of the public.” Evan S. Stallup, Phoenix city manager, pointed out that the reaction of the citizenry to these musical presentations had been highly favorable and the project had his full endorsement. The FMP provided “the ultimate in fine musical entertainment” for the “enjoyment and general cultural advancement of the community.” And Phoenician

¹¹² Ernie Lewis to Joe N. Weber, April 8, 1937; Fred F. Goerner to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 18, 1937; both Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA. .

audiences were fortunate enough to enjoy many of the music programs at the orchestra shell in Encanto Park, which according to a field trip report by George Foster was erected by the Arizona WPA and was “one of the finest of its type which I have observed throughout the country.”¹¹³

The four primary musical units of the Arizona FMP (and subsequent WPA Arizona Music Program) were the Concert Band, the Dance Band, the Filipino String Ensemble, and the *Tipica* Orchestra. The Concert Band, as with the other units, traveled extensively to give performances throughout the state. Many requests also came from hospitals and sanitariums to broadcast over the radio for those people unable to personally attend the concerts; subsequently, Phoenix station KOY broadcast performances each Sunday as a regular feature of its programming.

Though symphonic in structure, the Concert Band consistently presented musically eclectic programs. Performances routinely included works of Wagner, Dvorak, Mendelssohn and especially Verdi selections from the opera “Aida.” But also included in these programs would be selections from American composers whose compositions were often based upon traditional or folk motifs. “Bandana Sketches: Four Negro Spirituals,” a Suite in four movements by composer Clarence Cameron White, was regularly performed just prior to intermissions. Composed in 1922, “Bandana Sketches” is an example of the neo-Romantic pieces that were common for the period. African American spirituals and folksong served as the inspirational source for the four movements of the composition:

¹¹³ Evan S. Stallcup to Bruno David Ussher, August 11, 1936, Central Files State: Arizona, box 833; George Foster, “Report of Field Trip: Arizona – March 23-25, 1941,” box 386; both NARA.

1. Chant (Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen)
2. Lament (I'm Troubled in Mind)
3. Slave Song (Many Thousand Gone)
4. Negro Dance (Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child)

Following intermission the concerts would often include a John Philip Sousa march, such as “Semper Fideles.” A Hispanic selection usually followed, such as “Castilla Bolero” by Holmes or “Zacatecas March” that was composed in 1891 by Genaro Codina as a Mexican patriotic song and by the 1930s was often regarded as an unofficial national anthem of Mexico. Performances of the Concert Band nearly always concluded with a rendition of the “Star Spangled Banner.” The Concert Band furnished weekly programs for three of the Phoenix City Parks, the Civic Center Park in Glendale, Arizona, and public parks in Mesa and Chandler, Arizona.¹¹⁴

Often, programs of the Concert Band were dedicated exclusively to the presentation of American compositions. On February 21, 22 and 23, 1938, for example, the Federal Music Project Concert Band, assisted by several distinguished guest artists, performed a “Three Day Festival of American Music,” featuring work exclusively by American composers. The concerts were open to the public and free of charge. The three-day affair presented compositions by Henry Kimball Hadley, John Philip Sousa, Karl L. King, Edward Alexander MacDowell, Arthur Pryor, and Stephen Foster. Several of the compositions emphasized an awareness of the diverse ethnicities of the United States; on opening night Hadley’s *Silhouettes, a Characteristic Suite* formed the center-piece, with six separate movements entitled “Spanish,” “French,” “Italian,” “American,” “Egyptian,” and “Irish.” The final evening including a performance of Sousa’s *The Western World*,

¹¹⁴ Composite of articles from various sources found in “{Federal Music Project} Press Clippings, 1936-40,” entry 826, box 46, NARA.

Suite, in three movements: “The Red Man,” “The White Man,” and “The Black Man.”¹¹⁵

Musicians of the Concert Band also made themselves available for appearances at specific religious celebrations and civic events throughout the state. In July of 1940, the “outstanding performance of the unit” was a program co-sponsored by the Latter Day Saints Church of Mesa, Arizona. According to a monthly report, music was played in commemoration of the arrival of the first Mormon pioneers in Arizona. Approximately seven thousand persons attended this extraordinarily large affair, which included a full day of sports activities, picnics, speeches, and dancing. The Concert Band also performed on various occasions for celebrations held at the Jewish Visitors Club, even prior to the sponsorship requirement. One particular engagement in 1938 was for a Purim masquerade party, which included a recitation by Amy Futterman in English and a humorous Yiddish reading by Leon Kovin. And the Concert Band regularly performed at civic ceremonies such as a Navy Day event in Phoenix in October of 1938 which was simultaneously broadcast over radio station KOY.¹¹⁶

The Dance Band was actually a sub-unit of the Concert Band, but remained a popular aspect of the Arizona music projects throughout their duration. Regular dances were furnished to the Arizona State Hospital, the Phoenix YWCA, the Phoenix Trinity Cathedral, Latter Day Saints Church of Phoenix, the Tolleson Lions Club, the

¹¹⁵ “The Phoenix Musicians Club Presents Federal Music Project Concert Band Three Day Festival of American Music,” entry 825, “Programs and Schedules 1936-1940,” box 35, NARA.

¹¹⁶ “Arizona Music Project Narrative Report,” August 19, 1940, entry 805, box 9; “Jewish Visitors Club Sets Masquerade Fete,” March 16, 1938, *Phoenix Republic*, entry 826, box 46; “Naval Hero To Lead Parade In Phoenix Navy Day Event,” October 26, 1938, *Phoenix Republic*, entry 821, “Records Relating To Music Festivals,” box 35; all NARA.

Territorial Sons and Daughters of Arizona, and others. The Filipino String Ensemble maintained a varied repertoire of classic selections as well as popular numbers. Public schools and Parent Teacher Associations, according to a narrative report, were “using this Unit for a very fine purpose,” with the school teachers giving a brief explanation of the selections played and calling attention to the parts played by the different instruments. And, prior to FMP approval of the *tipica* orchestras in Arizona, the Filipino String Ensemble stood as the most popular musical unit and maintained the greatest number of booking. Compared to the Concert Band, the Filipino String Ensemble proved much more flexible as no piano was used; this mobility led to many more requests in rural communities of the state.¹¹⁷

Without question, however, the most “in demand” aspect of the music projects in Arizona remained the *Tipica Orquestas* in Phoenix, Tucson and other cities in the state. One state report identified these musicians as having “done more to popularize the Arizona Music Project and brought more favorable recognition to WPA Music than has any or all of the other units combined.” The narrative, speaking specifically of the Phoenix unit, continued:

It is utterly impossible for the group to satisfy all demands made upon it for musical service.... Mexican music is extremely popular, even here in Arizona where it is more common than in other places. The Mexican Tipico String Unit of the Arizona Music Project is cited as the best performance group of this nature ever developed in the State.

And the appeal of the *Tipica Orquestas* extended well beyond the predominantly Hispanic communities of the state. In addition to the public parks, the units also performed regularly at the U.S. Veteran’s, Comstock, and St. Luke’s Hospitals, and the

¹¹⁷ Arizona Narrative Report, August 1937, Central Files State: box 833; “Arizona Narrative, Dec.15/36,” entry 804, box 1; both NARA.

School for the Blind and Deaf. Public performances often attracted audiences in excess of several thousand.¹¹⁸

When the WPA Music Programs of Arizona replaced the FMP in 1939, the new stipulation necessitating local sponsorship only increased the popularity of the *tipica* orchestras. Organizations eager to supply the needed financial support for a performance of Mexican and Spanish music far exceeded requests for any other musical presentation. And sponsorship for the *Tipica Orquestas* came from a variety of sources. Beginning in 1939, and for the duration of the Program, the Latter-Day Saints Mutual Improvement Association sponsored the group to appear weekly at the LDS Church. Each performance attracted 200-300 in attendance.

A similar sponsorship arrangement was made with Temple Beth Israel for the *Tipica Orquesta* to perform weekly concerts at the Jewish Visitors Club, also with an average attendance of several hundred. Other sponsors included the U.S. Indian School for performances at the Phoenix Indian Sanatorium; the Roosevelt Community House for the Roosevelt Junior Woman's Club; the Junior Chamber of Commerce for the Phoenix Visitors Club; the State Welfare Board for the Arizona Conference of Social Workers. The American Legion Auxiliary and the Scottsdale American Legion also sponsored the group. The unrivaled enthusiasm for the Mexican *Tipica Orquestas* of the WPA Music Programs in Arizona reflects, again, the continued interest in the region's diverse ethnic and folk cultures during the Depression era.

In late 1939, as the FMP of Arizona became the WPA Arizona Music Program, the newly formed Advisory Committee submitted a plan to "insure an improved music

¹¹⁸ Agnes Hunt Parke to Florence Kerr, August 19, 1940, "Arizona Music Project Narrative Report," Central Files State: Arizona, box 844, NARA.

program in Arizona.” Of the half dozen operations or adjustments that the committee recommended, one suggestion constituted an entirely new program for Arizona: “That group music teaching be carried on among low income workers where private incomes of regularly employed music teachers would not be effected.” Subsequently, music instruction was offered free of charge in various locations of the state.¹¹⁹

With the annual National Music Week celebration each May the activities of the Mexican String Orchestras of the Arizona Music Projects increased still further. Largely through the efforts of WPA employees and musicians, the Music Week celebrations of Arizona had grown each year. In 1940 the *tipica* group gave a concert at the University Park, a large municipally owned area in Phoenix. It was estimated that approximately three thousand people attended the performance. The same National Music Week celebration also highlighted programs in honor of Arizona composers, with the Music Project Concert Band furnishing the instrumentation. On May 8, 1940, an enthusiastically received Accordion Band from Central Arizona, organized by WPA Music Project leadership, played a program at the Encanto Municipal Park in Phoenix. The following day crowds enjoyed the performances of the combined glee clubs of many Central Arizona schools that totaled over one thousand voices. The group was organized and brought together by employees of the WPA Music Project. According to a report: “Fifteen private and semi-public organizations ... offered complete cooperation and assistance in Central Arizona in order to make Music Week a success.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Agnes Hunt Parke to Florence Kerr, October 25, 1939, “Arizona Narrative Report,” entry 805, box 6, NARA.

¹²⁰ “National Music Week Activities of the Arizona Music Project,” May 5, 1940, Central Files State: Arizona, box 833, NARA.

The following year for National Music Week the WPA Music Project of Arizona presented a highly successful folk dance festival titled “Uncle Sam’s Children.” The event was staged at the Encanto Park Band Shell during the week of May 14, 1941. The Concert Band, the Mexican String Band and a newly organized Old Time Orchestra – that performed a diverse repertoire of American folksong – took part. Approximately 3000 people attended each performance of the festival, which included 280 dancers in the cast. Additional new activities during the same month included a weekly dance in Tucson for African American soldiers stationed at Fort Huachuca, as well as the entire African American community of Tucson. Also organized was an all-African American Concert Band, mostly composed of ex-service men.

Defense activities of the WPA Music Projects in Arizona increased as the nation was drawn into World War II. In the month prior to America’s entrance in the War, the Concert Band was requisitioned to play for a memorial service sponsored by the fifteen American Legion Posts of the Salt River Valley to honor two British flying cadets who were killed while training at Falcon Field near Mesa, Arizona. The event was attended by the members of the American Legion Posts, flying cadets from Falcon Field, various state and county officials, and an estimated crowd of 500 spectators and participants. The band play the “Star Spangled Banner” for the opening number of the program, followed by Chopin’s “Funeral March” as those in attendance paraded between the two graves and deposited flowers from their own gardens, and “God Save the King” for the concluding number.¹²¹

¹²¹ “Arizona Narrative Report November, 1941,” Central Files State: Arizona, box 844, NARA.

By the summer of 1942 the activities of the WPA Arizona Music Projects revolved largely around the War effort. By June of that year the Projects maintained a total of fifty employees; ten in Tucson and forty in Phoenix. The workers were divided into six performing units: The Concert Band, the Dance Orchestra, the Mexican *Tipica Orquesta*, the Folk Dance Orchestra, the Salon Orchestra, and the Stage Band. The activities in connection with the War efforts consisted of concerts for local defense councils, stage shows for soldiers, dance orchestras for soldier dances and other soldier activities which included providing music and entertainment for departing selectees.

The *Tipica*, Folk Dance, and Salon Orchestras provided music for various civic organizations occupied with aiding the War effort by the promotion of citizenship classes, the sale of Defense Bonds and allied activities. The many stage shows were well organized and proved quite popular, using the WPA Stage Band and volunteer workers, both professional and amateur. The volunteer workers were mostly young women between the ages of 18 and 25 who sang, danced, performed skits, readings, comedy monologues, and the like. It was estimated that the various activities of the WPA Music Project of Arizona by the summer of 1942 reached approximately 3500 persons connected with the War effort weekly.¹²²

Administratively, the Federal Music Project of Arizona and subsequent WPA Arizona Music Programs remained relatively free of the discord that sometimes marked neighboring states in the West. Fred F. Goerner served as the original State Director for the Projects. Educated at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and in Dresden, Germany, under several well-known conductors, he had performed in various capacities with the

¹²² Jesse A. Sedberry to Sidney Kartus, June 17, 1942, "Music Project Activities," Central Files State: Arizona, box 844, NARA.

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra prior to moving to Arizona on account of the health of his son. Rowland Norris served as Assistant State Director. In late 1938 Carl C. Hoyer, following the resignation of Goerner, filled the State Directorship. Jesse A. Sedberry occupied the position for the last few years during the war effort.

The Arizona Final Report of the Music Projects is quite brief, mentioning that the programs “furnished employment for musicians” and “provided musical entertainment for all people.” It also acknowledges the efforts of “presenting radio programs” for shut-ins and, in conjunction with the War effort, performing “on the military posts and in the hospitality centers for dances” which “served to help keep up the civilian morale.” The subsequent “Record of Operation and Accomplishment” by the final national program director George Foster accurately concluded that this final state report “does not adequately reflect the activities of a small but very active and colorful project.”¹²³

Arizona’s bordering “four-corner” state of New Mexico can credit much of its eventual success to the efforts of a single individual. In his final report, George Foster rightly concluded that a “book could be written on the New Mexico Music Project which was the most colorful of the smaller State music projects.” Further, “Mrs. Helen Chandler Ryan, State Supervisor, was one of the most able, resourceful supervisors in the Music Program.” Whereas the primary FMP emphasis in most states was the

¹²³ “Final Reports Arizona,” January 27, 1943, Archives of the Works Projects Administration and Predecessors, 1933-1943, reel 8, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Historical Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; George Foster, “Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment: The Federal Music Project 1935 to 1939, The WPA Music Program 1939 to 1943,” June 30, 1943, pg. 366. .

engagement of professional musicians, in New Mexico the priority was placed on education and the performing units that grew out of these varied efforts.¹²⁴

Appointed on January 1, 1936, Helen Chandler Ryan served as head of the Federal Music Project in New Mexico, as well as the subsequent WPA New Mexico Music Project, beginning in May of 1939. In September of 1942 the program became known as the War Services Program – Music Phase, and Ryan directed this program until its termination in 1943. From her administrative headquarters at 322 West Gold Avenue in Albuquerque Ryan oversaw a music project which received the attention and accolades of many admirers (including Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles Seeger) not only in New Mexico, but from across the nation and throughout the hemisphere. The diverse New Mexico project focused on music education, performance, and preserving local musical heritage, especially Hispanic folk music.¹²⁵

During the 1930s New Mexico stood as the fourth largest state in the Union in terms of size, with a sparse but well distributed population of little more than a half million people. According to director Ryan her state was made up of “three distinct cultures” and was “faced with unique social problems throughout its history.” The Hispanic population of New Mexico during the New Deal period exceeded 55% and, as will be discussed in a later chapter, the collection and presentation of Spanish, Mexican, and Mexican-

¹²⁴ Foster Report, 369.

¹²⁵ A letter from Seeger in 1941, while serving as Chief of the Music Division of the Inter-American Music Center of the Pan American Union, acknowledged and offered appreciation for the “dog-eared” copy of Spanish American Folk Songs forwarded to him from director Ryan.

American folk music resulted in creating more publicity, interest and demand for the creations of the New Mexico music projects than any other single FMP endeavor.¹²⁶

Yet, national director Sokoloff was clearly resistant to a state Music Project premised largely around the collection, education and presentation of folksong. Regional director Bruno David Ussher, though unsupportive of the Arizona *tipica*, recognized both the significance of the Hispanic music in New Mexico as well as the extraordinary talents of Helen Chandler Ryan and the overall potential of the programs. “Urgently plead your immediate effort obtaining two thousand seven hundred ninety one dollars fifty cents to continue ... New Mexico Projects,” Ussher wired Sokoloff in May of 1936. “Cessation or even interruption greatly affect public opinion especially as projects provide leisure time study and constructive recreation work for nearly two thousand persons in a state severely needing such activity.”¹²⁷

Several months later he would again appeal to Sokoloff for an expanded project in New Mexico, as well as an assistant for the state director. Ussher felt justified in recommendation because of the steadily “increasing and important work demanded from Mrs. Helen Chandler Ryan.” He wrote of the singular obligations and opportunities peculiar to this work in New Mexico that were “certain to benefit the entire country by way of folk lore.” Ussher assured the National Director that individual and community

¹²⁶ “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

¹²⁷ Bruno David Ussher to Alma Sandra Munsell, May 11, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

group training would “answer a crying need in this musically underprivileged state. This in turn, will likewise enrich the country as a whole.”¹²⁸

The initial relationship between Helen Chandler Ryan and Nikolai Sokoloff appears strained. “I am bitterly disappointed that our quota has been set so low,” Ryan wrote to the national director during the first year of the FMP in her state. “I had planned some very interesting work in the folklore and badly needed an increase in that direction.” There were some very fine musicians in New Mexico, she asserted, who could be brought on to the Music Project and whose contributions in transcribing and arranging old folk songs would be incalculable. These melodies and lyrics had never been written down and “would be a very valuable contribution to American music, I am convinced.” Ryan had been stressing Spanish folklore and folksong, she continued, but Indian music and Cowboy music would also be considered. “Don’t you think it would be possible to have this quota raised and allow us to do so much bigger and better things for New Mexico?”¹²⁹

Sokoloff was not convinced. “I do not ... see the need for continuing the work of collecting the various folk songs in your State,” he wrote to Director Ryan. The Federal Music Project “...funds should not be expended for a research project of this kind” and “I regret that it is not possible ... to comply with your request for an increase in quota in New Mexico.” Both Ryan and Ussher requested tape recorders from the national administration, and this funding was also denied. “In connection with folk song collecting, it seems to me quite necessary, and in fact, indispensable for the sake of

¹²⁸ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 13, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

¹²⁹ Helen Chandler Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 4, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

accuracy,” Ussher argued, “that at least two recording machines be furnished to these field workers who go out into isolated districts and collect these Mexican-Spanish tunes, particularly indigenous to New Mexico.” Sokoloff responded to Ussher that he did “not think it wise to expend our funds for this purpose,” and to Ryan that he did “not know of any way by which a recording machine such as you describe can be secured.”¹³⁰

The lack of support at the national level did not hinder the goals and accomplishments of the New Mexico music programs; the determination and resourcefulness of Helen Chandler Ryan fermented an interest in her project that extended not only throughout the Southwest region but around the world. Requests for the Hispanic folk music collected by the state’s FMP workers increased each year of the Music Project’s development. Director Ryan was equally as persistent and successful in securing sponsorship when federal funding disappeared.

Director Sokoloff’s eventual acceptance of the folk music programs in New Mexico was likely the result of at least two developments. First, the undeniable public support and enthusiasm the efforts garnered in the state and beyond. “In the interests of both preservation and use of native folk music collected by units of the Federal Music Project,” Sokoloff wrote to Ryan in the summer of 1937, “I will appreciate your sending copies of your collections to date, and all you may secure from now on, to the Federal Music Project ... New York City, in care of Mrs. Frances McFarland, Educational Division.” Requests for the folksongs of the Southwest had begun to flood the national administration offices, from schools, libraries, individual citizens, and even from Latin

¹³⁰ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 3, 1936; Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

America; McFarland was given the responsibility for the distribution of these materials.¹³¹

The second likely explanation for this dramatic policy change resulted from the “strong criticism” the national director acknowledged receiving from “the government” that the FMP had not stressed enough “social music” in the summer of 1938. Sokoloff gave a somewhat grudging acknowledgement of the varied successes of the New Mexico folk music efforts in “collecting the western songs and Indian melodies.” Indeed, “some of it quite good and some of it not so good,” he said. For the remainder of his tenure with the Federal Music Project, however, Nikolai Sokoloff expressed a consistent support of the New Mexico projects and the efforts of director Ryan. “I am interested to have another set of the booklets published by the University of New Mexico of the Federal Music Project’s collection of folk tunes,” he would request of Ryan. And in summer of 1938 Director Sokoloff recommended a salary increase for Ryan from \$2000 to \$2300 per annum. “In view of the excellent work which Mrs. Ryan has accomplished, during the two and one-half years she has been with the Project,” he wrote to Ellen Woodward, “in organizing a fine rural music program in the state, I feel that a change in her salary is amply justified.”¹³²

The arrival of Dr. Earl Vincent Moore as the director of the WPA Music Program in the summer 1939 only intensified the support from the national administration for Helen Chandler Ryan and her New Mexico projects. “I wish to commend you for the creative

¹³¹ Nikolai Sokoloff to Helen Chandler Ryan, July 24, 1937, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

¹³² “Minutes of Regional Meeting Federal Music Project, Held in Boston – June 22nd, 23rd and 24th, 1938,” box 1, folder 5, The U.S. Works Projects Administration Federal Music Division, Library of Congress; Nikolai Sokoloff to Ellen S. Woodward, June 20, 1938, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

imagination you have displayed in developing projects so appropriate to your conditions,” he wrote Director Ryan soon after his appointment. “I hope,” he continued, “that you can extend the sphere of your influence and organizing ability to neighboring states in the immediate future.” Like Ryan, the new national director came to his position from a background in Music Education; consequently this aspect of the various state programs received primary attention. “Is anything being done by the school districts in your region,” Moore inquired, “to integrate into the curriculum the instruction offered under the WPA Music Program?” As with other state directors, Moore also requested from Ryan information concerning the qualifications for teachers accepted for assignment to the teaching units.¹³³

From the beginning of the Federal Music Project, New Mexico’s situation proved very different from that of most other states. There existed no large number of professional musicians on relief rolls. Consequently, the economic problems the New Deal strove to alleviate could not be solved, as in other states, by establishing symphony orchestras, choruses, or opera groups wherein the performers would be paid for their time and labor and be given expert direction from a qualified conductor. Instead, the programs in New Mexico provided leadership and instruction for choruses, orchestras, study groups, appreciation classes and other musical expressions.

Though Hispanic music was the most performed, other musical traditions also found expression in the New Mexico Music Projects. As in other states, African American spirituals proved quite popular. “In reply to your inquiry about instruction being given to Negroes under Federal Music,” Ryan wrote to Sokoloff, “I should like to say that we

¹³³ Earl Vincent Moore to Helen Chandler Ryan, August 22, 1939, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

have thirty-five young colored men and women who are singing together in weekly rehearsals and who from time to time present programs which are open to the general public.” The group would perform a variety of genres in addition to the spirituals.¹³⁴

The presentation of African American musical traditions under the auspices of the WPA projects occurred throughout the state of New Mexico. Leader and conductor Arthur F. Walker was loaned to the WPA Music Project of New Mexico by the state of California and was roundly credited with developing an outstanding chorus in Las Cruces. Sometimes, however, the accolades were tinged with the racial condescension and stereotypes common to the era. “Southerners in the audience,” reported one newspaper, “needed only to close their eyes and vision cotton fields with the sound of the negro workers coming sweetly over the hoary fields.”¹³⁵

Mr. Walker returned to Los Angeles in August of 1938, but the music program he developed continued to garner much public support and interest. In 1939 a musical program was given in Las Cruces at the Booker T. Washington School that stressed “the folk songs of the Colored race.” There was no admission fee, and the event was well publicized with an announcement sent throughout the community that invited: “You and your many friends.” The lengthy program included choral singing of “Sundown,” “The Old Folks at Home,” “Lil’ Lize” and several other pieces. Numerous Paul Lawrence Dunbar poems were recited, including “Jilted,” and “In the Morning.” The WPA Chorus

¹³⁴ Helen Chandler Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 7, 1937, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

¹³⁵ “Colored Community Singers Give Open Air Concert Monday,” August 11, 1938, Las Cruces *News*; “Swan Song of Colored Chorus Last Night,” August 16, 1938, Las Cruces *Sun*, both entry 826, box 65, NARA.

ended with a selection of Spirituals including “I Know the Lord Laid His Hands on Me,” “Go Down Moses,” and “Deep River.”¹³⁶

Through the initiative of Helen Chandler Ryan another transfer arrangement developed in Roswell, New Mexico. Carrie Daniels, a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music and a renowned soprano vocalist, transferred from the Los Angeles FMP to New Mexico to serve as director and conductor in Roswell. While in Southern California she had directed an African American chorus of 300 voices at the San Diego Fair that had “made a tremendous hit with singing negro spirituals.” Soon after arriving in Roswell Mrs. Daniels enrolled 112 adults and children in her classes at the Second Baptist Church, which were conducted free of charge. “As soon as possible,” one local paper assured, “the chorus will sing negro spirituals in some place large enough for the white people to attend.”¹³⁷

Another African American FMP chorus was organized in Albuquerque and performed throughout the greater metropolitan area. Known as the “WPA Negro Glee Club,” a local newspaper announced a coming performance: “Forty Negro voices will sing a program of spiritual and folk songs at the U. S. Veterans’ Hospital Wednesday night in the first public appearance of the Federal Glee Club, a WPA project sponsored by the Y.W.C.A. and directed by Mrs. Grace K. Allen.” Both men and women comprised the chorus, which sang both in ensemble and solo. The night’s program included Stephen Foster’s “Swanee River” and “Old Kentucky Home,” Oley Speakes “Morning,” Anton Dvorak’s “Going Home,” as well several African American spirituals

¹³⁶ “Negro Folk Song Stressed At School Program,” December 1938, Las Cruces *News*, entry 826, box 65, NARA.

¹³⁷ “WPA Federal Music Projects, Roswell, Fine Stringed Instruments, Negro Spirituals,” June 13, 1938, Roswell *Record*, entry 826, box 65, NARA.

and other folk songs. The Glee Club visited Socorro, New Mexico, later that month to participate in the convention of the New Mexico Federation of Music Clubs that held a three-day session.¹³⁸

Participation in the New Mexico music projects included all age groups (from the very young to senior citizens) who sought instruction in singing or playing a musical instrument, but whose financial situations made it impossible to receive private lessons. Not all of those who enrolled in the programs were receiving financial relief; according to director Ryan, the benefits of the Music Projects extended to “borderline families who are able to keep off the relief rolls but whose purse strings cannot by any conceivable plan be stretched far enough to provide music instruction for their children.”¹³⁹

Because the New Mexico music projects did not support a professional symphony, the Colorado WPA Symphony Orchestra traveled to and performed in the state on several occasions. Newspaper reports suggest an enthusiastic reception. “Raton music lovers gorged themselves yesterday afternoon and last night on music produced by what is believed to be the first professional symphony orchestra ever to appear in Raton,” reported the Raton *Daily Range*. The 70-piece Colorado orchestra arrived in New Mexico on November 4, 1938 and played an afternoon concert for the school children of Raton, Cimarron, and Maxwell as well as the CCC camps. The orchestra performed for a wider public audience that night. Prices for the evening concert were 50 cents for the lower floor and 35 cents in the balcony. An estimated 500 school children attended the

¹³⁸ “Negro Glee Club To Give Program At Veterans Hospital,” March 31, 1937, Albuquerque *News Journal*, entry 826, box 65, NARA.

¹³⁹ “The Development of Music in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

afternoon concert of lighter and more melodic symphony music and an estimated 400 adults from the city and county attended the night concert of somewhat heavier content. “We’ve received better treatment in Raton than any other city on the tour and we want you to know we appreciate it,” the Colorado FMP conductor Fred Schmitt acknowledged prior to the performance of the orchestra’s final selection.¹⁴⁰

The teaching units of the New Mexico music program began soon after the introduction of the FMP in the state. Early in 1936 several juvenile bands comprised of over 65 participants began receiving instruction in two separate groups under the directorship of Mr. Joseph Ruvolo in Albuquerque. Most of these young people were beginners and were taught the rudiments of playing the various instruments. The children in the community who were more musically advanced tended to play with school bands, but during the summer months joined the WPA group, thus creating a substantially expanded community juvenile band. “The second group,” director Ryan reported, “is a Colored people’s band which pleases me greatly, and Mr. Ruvolo reports that they are doing some very fine work.” In Santa Fe, under the direction of Mr. Daniel McKenzie, 35 children received direction in band and orchestra work.¹⁴¹

In Espanola, New Mexico, the music project demonstrated remarkable accomplishment and growth during its first year of activity. Starting in September of 1937 with only two instruments, by that summer the community boasted a band of twenty-four pieces, and an orchestra of sixteen pieces. In addition, Federal Music

¹⁴⁰ “Orchestra Arrives Here For Concert,” November 4, 1938; “Large Audience Appreciates WPA Symphony Program; Porter Heaps Captures Hearers With Organ,” November 5, 1938, both in Raton *Daily Range*; entry 826, box 65, NARA.

¹⁴¹ Helen Chandler Ryan to Bruno David Ussher, April 30, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

supported a glee club of forty voices. Although practically all of these players were beginners at the time, by that spring they were giving concerts for the community and presented a series of open-air community programs during the summer months.¹⁴²

Those employed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) also enjoyed the benefits of Federal Music. In both rural and urban areas, CCC workers received the various aspects of musical instruction. These included notation and fundamentals of music, appreciation, piano, band and orchestral instruments, including mandolin, guitar, and others. The teachers at the rural CCC camps provided classes for boys who had gathered from hundreds of small communities across the state where no music instruction had ever been available. Here the boys were given an opportunity to sing, read music, play a variety of instruments and to “know the joy of being in an orchestra or band which can give enjoyment to others.” Group singing also proved quite popular and successful with the CCC workers. In Tularosa, Louise Goebel provided instruction in various orchestral instruments and piano, as well as music notation and fundamentals for both the community and the young men in the CCC camp. In April of 1936 Mrs. Goebel reported that 126 people were receiving instruction.¹⁴³

Special aspects of the New Mexico teaching projects included an emphasis on rural music education. “Our rural districts have never had music instruction and they are particularly hungry for it,” acknowledged a monthly narrative report. Very few of the county schools had – prior to the WPA – developed a music program through a teacher employed by County Boards of Education. The Music Project received “almost

¹⁴² “Narrative Report May 1937 Federal Music Project New Mexico,” Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

¹⁴³ Helen Chandler Ryan to Bruno David Ussher, April 30, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

unbelievably fine cooperation” from County Superintendents that facilitated a statewide adoption of free music texts; in the previous years teachers had been greatly hampered by the lack of material. The New Mexico State Department of Education evidently recognized the quality of the instruction provided by the New Deal employees, as the involvement of Federal Music was routinely granted primary consideration; often, only those rural schools with FMP teachers would be supplied with music texts.¹⁴⁴

In several of the rural districts surrounding Albuquerque Mr. William Emery provided instruction to over 250 children in band and orchestral instruments, as well as providing harmonicas to those children who were unable to afford instruments. Mr. Emery was described as “an excellent instructor and the children are most enthusiastic.” Mrs. Helen Allen, also working in rural schools adjacent to Albuquerque, provided instruction in sight-singing and notation, as well as general singing in school rooms. She would have over 800 students at several different locations during any given month. Particular emphasis of the rural education programs was given to native traditional music, both Spanish and indigenous. The units employed “some very strong teachers” who would often arrange Indian, Hispanic and other music to be played in small orchestras. The services of the FMP teachers proved so popular principals throughout the state requested them; enthusiasm remained so high that children gladly relinquished their after-school leisure time for musical instruction.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.; Helen Chandler Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 20, 1938, Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

¹⁴⁵ Helen Chandler Ryan to Bruno David Ussher, April 30, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA; Helen Chandler Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 20, 1938, Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project

The results of the music project efforts in rural education proved “so gratifying and the interest aroused has been so keen” that the demands far exceeded available instructors. Requests from these communities usually came through the County Superintendent of Schools; prior to Federal Music only one county in the entire state could afford to provide a music teacher through its Board of Education. “The hunger for these people for music is very touching,” concluded one supervisory report, “and the eagerness of the response when a teacher is provided from WPA is amazing.” In one district, where three different rural communities were served, the supervisor watched with astonishment while children of Indian families “living off the reservation” were singing “Bronze Lullaby” and “The Little Dust Man” in two parts, and another group of boys played enthusiastically in a harmonica band while the girls joined them in a rhythm band.¹⁴⁶

The continuation of Federal Music programs in rural New Mexico often necessitated both ingenuity and determination because of the limited available funds. One rural program, for example, was being used exclusively for experimental and demonstration work. The pupils would gather bottles, glasses, cylindrical oatmeal boxes, and other items to make their own instruments for a rhythm band. At the same school “an old victrola” was loaned and Federal Music provided records which were used for appreciation classes. Rural teachers often overcame tremendous obstacles to provide instruction. In one community there existed no telephones, no telegraph, mail service

Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

¹⁴⁶ “The Development of Music in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

only twice a week, and the nearest Notary Public to sign the music teacher's travel voucher sixty miles away. Another WPA music unit served an equally remote community where the roads more nearly resembled cow trails. Here the teacher "was so enthusiastic in her work" that she reported 800 miles of travel per month in connection with her music instruction.¹⁴⁷

A variety of state institutions also utilized the services of Federal Music that had previously lacked the funds in their budgets to allow for a teacher. Among these institutions was the Girls Welfare Home in Albuquerque where instruction included training in voice, sight singing, piano class instruction and appreciation. "What music is doing for those girls cannot be over-estimated," concluded a report. Indeed, "it has permeated their lives in an amazingly happy way." Similarly, a boy's orphanage that "begged" instruments from service groups and other sponsors also received musical instruction. "Can't you just imagine," the report asked rhetorically, "what it would mean to these boys to learn to play a horn or a set of drums?"¹⁴⁸

The same report described a wide variety of organizations in New Mexico that benefited from the WPA music programs, among these included: a group of African American singers, a juvenile band, open to any child in the community and instruction was provided "to those children ... unable to have it otherwise"; another recipient, a "twelve year old colored boy" who after four or five months of instruction was able to earn \$1.50 by playing in an orchestra at a CCC camp "and the delight at his accomplishment knew no bounds."; a small community in the "dust bowl" of eastern New Mexico offered piano class instruction with 150 in attendance each month; the Girls

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Camp, which was given piano class instruction, singing, and music appreciation; the Spanish-American Normal School through FMP support offered chorus work, glee clubs, elements of music, and orchestra work; various Christmas celebrations in small predominantly Hispanic villages were arranged by WPA music teachers. The report relates also how band leadership in other small towns and villages across New Mexico had been provided and were directed by Federal Music teachers and gave “many hours of entertainment in the plazas for the public.”¹⁴⁹

As with other states, the New Mexico projects participated each February in the Festival of American Music. The festivals had been initiated in 1938 by the national administration of the FMP. Director Ryan reported that in 1939 many programs of American music were presented on February 21, 22 and 23 and in the rural school teaching units particular emphasis was placed upon the performance of patriotic songs. Information about each of the songs and their composers was sent out from the State Office with the request that students be required to memorize “America,” “Star Spangled Banner,” and “America, The Beautiful.” Many of the individual school music programs also performed these and other songs as part of the patriotic celebrations surrounding George Washington’s birthday.¹⁵⁰

The musical presentations of the Festival of American Music were not limited to Albuquerque or larger towns in New Mexico. In Las Cruces, the Washington School students presented a program under the direction of Harry Williams, a WPA music teacher. The performance included student body presentations of “Darling Nellie Gray,”

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ “Narrative Report New Mexico February 1939,” Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

“Star Spangled Banner,” and the “Pledge of Allegiance.” The Washington School Band, under the tutelage of members of the local WPA Federal Music Project performed “Autumn Leaves,” “Old Fashioned Roses,” “America,” and other selections. In 1940, Las Vegas also participated in the three-day national celebration. Taking place at the South Pacific School in West Las Vegas, Ernest Coccoart, music instructor under the WPA-federal therapy project at the New Mexico State Hospital, directed school children and State Hospital band in twelve separate musical offerings. The program included a variety of marches, including “Snappy,” “You’re the Only Star,” “When They Played the Polka,” “Cielito Lindo,” “Penny Serenade,” “Cowboy’s Dream,” “Beer Barrel Polka,” “Santa Lucia,” “When the Work’s All Done This Fall,” and “Claudine.” Presented in the form of concert waltz marches were “Progress” and “America.”¹⁵¹

When the Project was converted into the War Services Program – Music Phase in September of 1942, activity groups under its direction co-operated with community organizations to provide countless entertainments for the armed forces and music instruction for their families. In Albuquerque, a “small performing group of native men played Spanish music in costume for troop trains that stopped for meals, thus giving them relaxation and pleasure, and at the same time a flavor of our colorful Southwest and of our Latin American neighbors across the Rio Grande.” Scores of reports and letters from soldiers attest to the appreciation of these musical presentations.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ “Washington School To Give Concert; Will Present Program Thursday Evening Under WPA Music Project,” February 21, 1939, *Las Cruces News*; “Festival Of Music To Be Observed In Las Vegas,” February, 1940, *Las Vegas Optic*, both entry 826, box 65, NARA

¹⁵² “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico January 1943,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

The efforts following the reorganization of the WPA Music activities for the War Program yielded diverse and considerable results. In Albuquerque, where the largest Army Air Base was located, a newly organized *Tipica Orquesta* performed regularly. Sponsorship for the group was a composite one, with the League of United Latin-American Citizens assuming a major part. Other community activity groups which organized to offer musical entertainment for both the Army and the general public in and around Albuquerque included a children's *tipica*, augmented by Spanish folk-singing and dancing groups, and a chorus of African American singers.

In addition to Albuquerque the city of Roswell, New Mexico, also had an Army base and the musical programs of the War Services Program there were quite active. Even prior to the War effort the WPA employed more people in Bernalillo County than any other region of the state, and the restructuring contributed substantially to soldier entertainment through community activity groups. Chavez County followed next in number of WPA employees and arrangements were made for musical productions for the benefit of the soldiers as soon as a military base was established. Programs there included a city band as well as smaller entertainment groups of a vaudevillian nature. A string quartette and Hawaiian guitar ensemble also performed as an aspect of the WPA War Services Program. The director of all these units was a "band-master overseas in World War I and knows well what entertainment soldiers like."¹⁵³

Other contributions of the War Services Programs – Music Phase included programs at the US Veterans Hospital which cared for wounded and sick soldiers recently

¹⁵³ "Narrative Report to State Director, Service Division, W. P. A. of New Mexico Month of February, 1942," Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

evacuated from war zones. The WPA music activities extended to the Defense Housing Project, adjacent to the Air Base, where families of non-commissioned officers lived. The WPA music presentations augmented programs prepared by various agencies of the cities and state intended for soldier entertainment.¹⁵⁴

Civilian morale was not neglected by the presentations of the War Services Programs – Music Phase. Many community activities provided vehicles for music participation of civilians, especially the development of various Tipica Orchestras. Two of these formed the nucleus for strong community music gatherings at the newly completed Barelás Community Center, sponsored by the League of United Latin-American Citizens. According to one report: “Hundreds of our Spanish-American boys have been with the fighting forces in the Pacific since the outset and their families at home are in need of diversion.” The report concluded that one soldier “said he had never known the morale of the Spanish speaking people in New Mexico to be at such low ebb as now and that music for them is an essential need.”¹⁵⁵

In Farmington, New Mexico, a new WPA community group of male singers organized known as “The Victory Chorus.” A women’s “Victory Chorus” began in Roswell. With the large number of younger band directors gone into military service, the older men of the Music Project not capable of military duty, but not qualified scholastically for public school employment, were utilized to direct community bands in which the young people played. “We have an obligation,” according to one narrative report, “to keep the children of America living normal a life as possible at this time and to

¹⁵⁴ “Narrative Report to State Director, Service Division W.P.A. of New Mexico, March 1942,” Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

keep them happy, and unafraid.” How could this be better accomplished than by “keeping bands and orchestras functioning, in which they may play – thus keeping their leisure time occupied wholesomely and also giving them a concrete way in which to contribute to civilian morale, by presenting concerts for the general public.”¹⁵⁶

By the summer of 1942 WPA music units in New Mexico operated only in places where there were military establishments and only for the War effort. The musical units reflect a consistent awareness of the state’s ethnic and cultural diversity; community activity groups included *Tipica Orquestas*, “The Negro Spiritual Singers,” various Hawaiian Orchestras, as well as the Albuquerque Junior Band, Los Mariachitos, “a group of six little Spanish-American boys whose average age is eleven years.” The WPA War Services Programs – Music Phase also assisted in variety of War effort activities. One was a Victory Bond Parade for which the WPA music prepared a float titled “United Americas,” decorated in red, white and blue with a Children’s *tipica* performing Hispanic music. Another example was during a statewide Price Control Meeting conducting by a regional government representative. Here the Men’s *tipica* played a half hour’s program while the audience of 800 gathered. The state director led the group and the assemblage in the singing of “Star Spangled Banner.”¹⁵⁷

As the WPA music programs came to an end in 1943, a report from the War Services Program in New Mexico concluded that the state “Music Project, through seven years of service, planted seeds of music culture that have taken firm root and have blossomed and re-seeded in ground that yet has been only scratched.” The report pointed to the many

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ “Narrative Report to State Director, Service Division W.P.A. May 1942,” Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

concrete proofs that these seeds would “continue to grow and flourish” as the WPA prepared to close its work. The record of the these programs, under the skilled leadership of Helen Chandler Ryan and enthusiastic work of the WPA employees, “can but substantiate the vital and lasting social value of the Music Project in New Mexico.”¹⁵⁸

In the state of Nevada, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was victorious in each of his four campaigns for presidency; in his first two elections, FDR won the Silver State by a larger margin than any state in the far West. In 1932 nearly 70% of Nevadans who cast a ballot did so for the future president, and by 1936 the percentage had risen to over 72. Yet, judging from newspaper editorials and state documents, the lone state in the union that expressed a consistent early disapproval of the Federal Music Project was Nevada. “Nevadans have never displayed any general tendency to burst into spontaneous song,” explains *The WPA Guide to 1930s Nevada*, written and published by the Nevada Writers’ Project of the Works Project Administration.¹⁵⁹

Since the early WPA did not fund a music project in the state, Nevada newspapers would look to neighboring states in order to ridicule *their* FMPs. “Uncle Sam has been pretty lenient with WPA musicians,” editorialized the Reno *Gazette*, and when “he could find no fiddling” to be done in Los Angeles he ordered fifty of them to report for work in a vegetable field, prepared to handle shovel and hoe. The article contends that rather than the stipulated tools, the musicians instead brought their instruments, and for an hour serenaded the workers there. They then locked up their cases and went back to

¹⁵⁸ “Evaluation Report Of Music Project In New Mexico January 1943,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

¹⁵⁹ Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Nevada, *Nevada: A Guide to the Silver State* (Portland, Oregon: Binfords & Mort, 1940), 104.

headquarters to think it all over. Fearing physical labor would cause aching backs and stiff necks not to mention callouses on the hands, the musicians resisted the assigned duty. The *Gazette* suggested that rather than stand on their professional dignity the musicians “throw away their horns or drums” and contribute to the war on unemployment. This would make productive taxpayers, “who are supporting them and other idle groups” feel better about it.¹⁶⁰

Early in 1936 the national administration of the FMP requested each state to submit tentative plans for the celebration of National Music Week that May. Enthusiastic responses arrived from even those states which did not maintain music projects, such as Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, and South Dakota. “You will be interested to know that the now generally observed Music Week originated in BOISE,” proclaimed the Chamber of Commerce of that city proudly. A variety of regional musical affairs would be performed throughout Idaho, and Lewistown would be “holding an elaborate Centennial celebration.”¹⁶¹

Montanans would present a variety of musical performances in Helena, Butte, and Missoula. Great Falls planned a “twelve piano ensemble concert” which shared the program with the “Phantom Chorus,” and the performances ranged from Beethoven Symphony No. 8 to a choral presentation of the works of Mendelssohn to a symphonic arrangement of “Arkansas Traveler.” Included in the Dillon, Montana, National Music Week presentation would be “a program of Indian music ... given by the Progressive School of Music, Miles City.” Numbers were to include “the Orem Indian Rhapsody

¹⁶⁰ “The Shovel and the Hoe,” Reno *Gazette*, July 13, 1937, entry 826, box 67, NARA.

¹⁶¹ “Idaho: The Chamber of Commerce * Boise, March 18, 1936, in “Research notes describing current Music Festivals” file, entry 822, box 37, NARA.

suite of ten episodes, Troyer's Lullaby of the Zuni Indians, and the MacDowell Indian Suite arranged for two pianos." And the South Dakota High School Music Association held the "Triangular Musical Conference" in Sioux Falls where "over 4000 High School musicians are expected to attend."¹⁶²

In contrast, the response from the Las Vegas, Nevada, Chamber of Commerce was quite terse and abbreviated. There is the "Annual community celebration here ... called 'Helldorado'" but this "can not be classified as a music festival." Albeit there may be some "Camp Fire Singing." The short paragraph concluded with a non sequitur informing the WPA administration that: "The State of Nevada is proud of being free of taxes of every kind."¹⁶³

Curiously, the various Nevadan newspapers and city leaders did not maintain such antagonisms toward the other New Deal cultural programs; soon after the initiation of Federal One, Nevada WPA director Harriet Spann wrote to regional director Ussher: "We are at present operating the Writers project for the American Guide and also the Art project and have had visits from the regional directors of both of these departments." By all accounts, the public reception to these programs was positive and enthusiastic. "Our most difficult problem at present," Spann continued, "is that we have no money allotted for the music part of federal project No. 1." Spann further maintained that fifteen to twenty musicians on the relief rolls of labor projects who would prefer to perform the work for which they were trained. The musicians gave as their primary instruments violin, guitar, piano, clarinet, drums, saxophone, harmonica and voice. Director Spann

¹⁶² Ibid. "Montana," April 2, 1936, and "South Dakota Sioux Falls, March 24, 1936.

¹⁶³ Ibid. "Nevada 1936 Las Vegas by Oliver Goerman, Secretary of Chamber a Commerce.

believed that a small orchestra, a vocal quartet, as well teaching units and music appreciation instruction could all be formed from the ranks of the unemployed.¹⁶⁴

As early as December of 1935 national WPA director Bruce McClure had authorized Ussher to approve the Nevada FMP. By the next month the regional director completed the necessary disposition for an initial three-month allotment of \$3000, and he received confirmation from Nikolai Sokoloff and assistant Alma Munsell that the requested monies had been sent to the state of Nevada. Bruno David Ussher anticipated that the project would be underway way not later than March of 1936, with one supervisor at \$300 a month, one assistant supervisor \$270, six “A” musicians at \$69, five “B” musicians at \$63, and one librarian at \$50. Further, “about fourteen more musicians are reported on relief, but three fourth of them are jazz” musicians, who may begin with the Project “IF they qualify.” (It should be noted that approval of jazz musicians at this early juncture represents an exceptional circumstance within the FMP.) Regional director Ussher recommended Mr. Sol Simons as district supervisor of the Project. By early February, Harriet Spann acknowledged the funds sent to Nevada for the new Music Project, stating the twenty plus musicians were “to play for state hospitals, Orphans Home and other state institutions, also for schools, etc., where no charge is made.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Harriet G. Spann to Bruno David Ussher, January 8, 1936, Central Files State: Nevada, box 1842, NARA.

¹⁶⁵ Bruce McClure to Gilbert Ross, December 13, 1935; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, January 21, 1936; Alma S. Munsell to Bruno David Ussher, January 21, 1936; Harriet G. Spann to Bruce McClure, February 4, 1936 Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, February 12, 1936, all in Central Files State: Nevada, box 1842, NARA. Though Sol Simons “got his training in London from Francelli and from Schreus of Chicago Symphony,” had been “professionally active for about thirty years” and was considered “the best musician in the State of Nevada,” regional director Ussher nonetheless felt compelled to “wire Mr. Petrillo of Chicago Local for

The programs, however, did not commence in early March of 1936 as Dr. Ussher had anticipated; it remains unclear as to the circumstances. Indeed, the situation in Nevada begs several questions: Why were these music projects, first approved in late 1935, never engaged? What became of the fifteen musicians, and possibly an additional fourteen jazz musicians, who were to be hired by the FMP? What became of the \$3000 apparently sent to Nevada for Federal Music Project purposes in January of 1936? There is some suggestion that both regional director Ussher and assistant to national director Alma Munsell felt the musicians would be better absorbed into the state's Recreation program in order to conserve funds for other Music Projects. Most likely, the less than enthusiastic response to federally funded music from Nevada newspapers and Chambers of Commerce influenced this decision.¹⁶⁶

Regardless, the editors and other opinion-makers in the Silver State eventually softened their initial opposition to Federal Music. A 1937 editorial in the *Reno Gazette* acknowledged that the FMP may constitute a form of boondoggling, and "many a taxpayer groans because he has to support a horde of jobless musicians who give free concerts to other jobless persons." However, "no one can blame the music enthusiast for making the most of their opportunity for getting the general public music-minded." The article includes a laudatory short biography of Director Nikolai Sokoloff, and argues that the FMP is undeniably beneficial to the large audiences in attendance in other states. The primary question queried the editorial was whether or not the taxpayer ought to be assessed for it. The *Gazette* provided its own answer: "given a corps of orchestra leaders

endorsement" – attesting again to the considerable sway the AFM leader held in the western Music Projects.

¹⁶⁶ Alma S. Munsell to Bruno David Ussher, December 7, 1936, Central Files State: Nevada, box 1842, NARA.

with the vision and enthusiasm of Sokoloff, music is bound to advance in this country.”

The article continued:

The only way in which the people are going to become educated in music is to hear it, and Sokoloff’s motto has been to make it possible for them to hear it. Music lovers who have been wondering how America can ever approach Germany and other European nations in the appreciation of music now have their answer. Make popular concerts available to great masses of the people, and you will have great masses attending them whenever they are given.

The editorial concluded that “there isn’t any question that popular music should be encouraged on a nation-wide scale.”¹⁶⁷

This dramatic change of heart on the part of the editorial staff of the *Reno Gazette* appears to have permeated other areas of the state. A letter dated January 9, 1938, (over two years since the original project had been approved) and sent to Dr. Sokoloff from assistant director William Mayfarth, informed the national director at the end of a lengthy correspondence that he had a request for a music project in Nevada, as recommended by regional director Ussher. The initial funding of \$105 would cover the salary for a music instructor and sheet music. By April of 1938 Nevada would for the first time be included among the “Monthly Educational Reports” sent to the national administration which detailed the previous two month’s activities in the state.¹⁶⁸

In February the FMP began to employ another teacher in Reno to instruct twelve students on a weekly basis. The appended narrative described “A class of three clarinets, two saxophones, two trumpets, and one tuba” which “formed a small band and plan[s] to play for inmates of the County Hospital and for the Parent-Teacher Associations of the

¹⁶⁷ *Reno Gazette*, April 27, 1937, in “National and Special Reports Prepared for September 15 for President’s Advisory,” entry 811, box 24, NARA.

¹⁶⁸ William C. Mayfarth to Nikolai Sokoloff, January 9, 1937, box 383, NARA; “Monthly Educational Reports: Nevada,” March 1939, entry 827, box 17, NARA.

Reno Schools.” Additionally, “two persons receiving instruction secured private employment last month and are now playing in the orchestra of a night club in Reno,” thus achieving a primary goal of the FMP. Also, “Music appreciation is being taught, and the standard of music has been appreciably raised as a result of this teaching.”¹⁶⁹

Gilbert C. Ross, Nevada State Administrator of the WPA, became an enthusiastic supporter of the Music Project in his state. Enclosed with the narrative reports of February and March of 1939 was a letter from Ross to director Sokoloff which recounted how the Reno supervisor “had planned to take them [the Reno band] to Carson City to perform at the orphanage and the State Prison, but due to epidemics in that town, groups were not encouraged to appear there during the past two months.” However, “the situation has cleared up and this band will go over to Carson next week and play before these organizations.” Sol Simons had been hired as project supervisor, according to another letter, and was busy “training his class of wind instruments for public appearance, i.e., at the County Hospital.”¹⁷⁰

A July 5, 1939, letter from Ross to assistant director Mayfarth told of the students on the Music Project who had played in the municipal band during the 4-day Fourth of July celebration. He confirmed the many favorable comments about the positive contributions of the clarinet and trumpet players. The instrumentalists also formed a six piece brass band and on several evening performed as part of a larger presentation showing the many New Deal accomplishments in the state of Nevada. Motion pictures of the various projects were shown and the WPA band was part of the activities to demonstrate the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Gilbert C. Ross to Nikolai Sokoloff, April 17, 1939; Harriett G. Spann to Wm. Casimir Mayfarth, June 6, 1939 both entry 804, box 7, NARA.

value of the programs. In the summer of 1939 the Federal Music Project was replaced by the WPA Music Program, through which federal funding of 75% would be available to match state sponsorship. A letter from the national administration to the Nevada director noted “that no cooperating sponsors’ contributions are indicated” on a recently received Project Proposal form; within a short time, WPA music in Nevada ceased entirely. Yet, the decade of the 1930s represents something of a renaissance in Nevada’s musical development. The *WPA Guide to 1930s Nevada* tells us that while “[i]n the early days music was taught only in private schools,” by the 1930s it became “included in the curriculum of all public schools, and in the larger towns each school has one or more bands, with some members not yet nine years old, and also choral societies.” This intensive teaching “is showing results all over the state.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Gilbert C. Ross to William Casimir Mayfarth, July 5, 1939, entry 814, box 27, NARA; *Nevada WPA Guide*, 104.

CHAPTER 4

THE CAROLS CONTINUE: COLORADO, UTAH, OREGON AND WASHINGTON

The state of Colorado maintained several successful music programs, though close evaluation reveals a persistence of discord throughout their existence. The first public concert of the Federal Music Project in Colorado was presented December 5, 1935 in the Denver City Auditorium to an estimated audience of more than seven thousand persons, and the FMP productions continued to attract large audiences throughout the state. Numerous radio broadcasts were also given. The Colorado Symphony Orchestra of the FMP also performed in neighboring states – such as Montana and Wyoming – which did not maintain music projects. When full federal sponsorship was withdrawn in the fall of 1938 the project became known as the Colorado WPA Music Program, and continued largely under the same supervision as during the previous FMP structure.

From the period August 20, 1941 to January 22, 1943 the Music Project became known as the Music Phase of the State-wide War Services Project and was designed to further and help the war effort. Also, the Colorado Music Education Program remained very active throughout the life of the WPA, especially during the last several years of operation. And the Recreation Project of the WPA in Colorado proved quite effective in presenting a variety of musical and folkloric productions throughout the state. Colorado state director Fred Schmitt's final report asserted that the effect of a W.P.A. Music Program on community standards to be "decidedly uplifting" as tens of thousands of persons unable to afford the price charged "to enter the halls of our professional Symphony Orchestras, Artist recitals etc. were able to enjoy and have the opportunity of

listening to and learning more about good music than ever before in the history of the United States.”¹⁷²

The state director’s final report rightly acknowledges the many successes achieved within the state of Colorado, yet fails to mention the continued operational contentions the music programs were forced to confront. The sources of these conflicts were of both a political and administrative nature, and continued throughout the existence of the WPA projects in the state. Further, the state FMP proved a battle in the 1930s-era debates over the legitimacy of musical forms, of popular and folk versus classical symphonic music. Because of these debates, Colorado FMP programs often tended to be more conservative and displayed less ethnic or musical diversity than projects in other western states. The state’s WPA Recreation Projects, however, often served to fill this void, and these programs often worked closely with FMP activities. Perhaps more so than in other states, public approval of the Colorado music programs often rose and fell in direct relation to the current political popularity of the New Deal.

Roosevelt won the Colorado popular vote in 1932 and 1936, but lost in 1940 and 1944 – the only state west of the Rockies where FDR was defeated twice. The first FMP-related article from the high-circulation and staunchly conservative *Denver Post* on September 12, 1935, provides a quite optimistic assessment of the FMP and national director Sokoloff, who had recently spoken in the city. The newspaper concluded that no better administrator could have been selected for the position and that the work to be done by the Project to “expand interest in music and give work to idle musicians is

¹⁷² “Colorado Record of Program Operations and Accomplishments,” January 27, 1943, Archives of the Works Projects Administration and Predecessors, 1933-1943, reel 8, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Historical Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

worthy of consideration from the economic and social viewpoint.” By the mid-point of FDR’s second term, however, the *Post* as well as other Republican newspapers maintained a steady editorial attack upon WPA programs. No music project controversy, whether actual or fabricated, escaped journalistic scrutiny. No FMP transgression was too trivial to escape media attention. Conservative action groups would also join in the chorus.

A particularly significant brouhaha, nearly three years after its initial performances, involved the perceived competition created by the FMP in Denver. Civic leaders “interested in the cultural welfare” of the city doubted “whether the Denver Symphony society, with an annual budget of \$25,000, raised by popular subscription and memberships,” could “survive in the face of competition with the WPA symphony orchestra,” which was “supported by approximately \$90, 000 a year.” The Denver *Post* ran the front-page story beneath a banner headline announcing the “BIG PROBLEM” raised by having two symphony organizations in the city.¹⁷³

A *Post* editorial later in the month decried “the socialization of music in Denver” and applauded the “100 per cent American ...super snub” of “Uncle Samuel’s subsidized Colorado Symphony orchestra” by those who went running as customers or protestors to buy tickets to the Civic Symphony orchestra concerts which depended entirely upon local private support. The earlier *Post* article about FMP competition had much the same impact as shot at Concord following Paul Revere’s historic ride. And the same editor who had applauded Sokoloff’s efforts in 1935 now described how the FMP’s national

¹⁷³ “Denver Symphony Organizations Raise Problem; Two Symphony Organizations In Denver Raise Big Problem,” August 31, 1938, Denver *Post*, entry 826, box 55, NARA.

director had at that time “disdainfully rejected the proposal” of the president of the Civic Symphony society when she “tactfully ... urged him to consider recommending an allocation of WPA funds to the organizations in existence.”¹⁷⁴

By late 1938, partially in response to allegations of competition with preexisting city Orchestras, the Colorado FMP began performing in rural areas. Many of these regions had never before been exposed to classical or other forms of orchestrated music. WPA musicians routinely sought to defray travel expenses in order to provide entertainment to a greater number and to more distant communities. In the rural town La Junta, however, according to a local newspaper, these efforts released a wave of resentment following an appearance of the WPA Colorado symphony orchestra. The reaction, it was reported, was instigated by FMP musicians who went to private homes to ask for free lodging, and had representatives go to individuals and organizations of the city to solicit funds to pay for their meals. Though most of the musicians stayed at private homes, “where they paid nothing for the privilege,” one orchestra member was not as fortunate; instead he spent the night at the city jail, where patrolman Fred Wright booked him for drunkenness. A prominent La Junta resident expressed dismay at having to repeatedly fund the WPA music project – first through taxes, then through admission to hear the concert, and then having to “go out of my way to pay for them a third time by providing a room or meals for the group.”¹⁷⁵

The La Junta episode notwithstanding, the over-whelming response to the musical presentations of the FMP in the rural regions of Colorado was one of unqualified

¹⁷⁴ Frances Wayne, “Notes on Music,” September 18 and 25 1938, *Denver Post*, entry 826, box 55, NARA.

¹⁷⁵ La Juntans Protest Action Of WPA Orchestra Members Seeking Funds,” November 3, 1938, *Pueblo Star-Journal*, entry 826, box 55, NARA.

gratitude and appreciation. In October of 1938 the WPA symphony orchestra began a two-week tour of smaller towns in Colorado, New Mexico and Wyoming. The opening performance in Fort Morgan, Colorado was held in the high school auditorium before a “highly-appreciative” audience of 250. Under the “able direction” of conductor Fred Schmitt and “composed of 70 of Colorado’s most talented musicians” the organization played a concert of familiar classical numbers which proved extremely popular. Performing pieces by Schubert, Wagner and Liszt, the orchestra left the audience with a “vast respect for the talent and workmanship of the entire organization.” The next afternoon, the orchestra played a concert of popular, semi-classical and musical comedy selections for the students of the Fort Morgan schools. The performances were sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, which, according to the *Morgan County Times*, “expressed its appreciation to those persons who housed and fed the members of the orchestra during their stay.”¹⁷⁶

Though the various Colorado projects remained on stable footing for the last several years of their existence, the initial administration of the state’s FMP produced substantial confusion that necessitated an eventual reshuffling of personnel. In early January 1936 – as other western states began organization and sending lists of administrative and employee payrolls to Washington, DC – Federal Music Project assistant Alma Munsell was “quite puzzled to find Colorado included.” Indeed, the national administration had no record of projects in Colorado or any appointment of even a state supervisor. “I do not understand,” wrote Munsell to regional director Bruno David Ussher in Los Angeles, “how we have a complete supervisory staff and no projects.” A month earlier, it turned

¹⁷⁶ “Colorado Symphony Orchestra Gives Finished Performances,” October ?, 1938, *Morgan County Times*, entry 826, box 55, NARA.

out, in answer to a telegram from Harry Hopkins' telegram, the Colorado administration had forwarded to the central WPA office (rather than to the national FMP administration) the appointments and project payrolls. The confusion would lead to an early strain in the relationship between Nikolai Sokoloff and Ussher that was no doubt a contributing factor in the latter's termination from the program.¹⁷⁷

On November 20, 1935, Ivan Miller had been appointed state director of the Colorado FMP at the salary of \$130 per month, to increase to \$150 by March. His responsibilities included: the technical approval and inspection of all projects in state; auditioning personnel, employment and public relations; arranging programs and performances; and special direction of symphonic bands, and general administrative supervision. Horace E. Turman, director and conductor of the private Denver and Civic Symphony Orchestras, was named the district supervisor and served part-time as technical advisor at \$10 per day up to 10 days per month. Fred Schmitt was named music director of the Denver Project at a salary of \$130 per month. Classification of musicians would allow for salaries of \$60, \$75, or \$85 a month, contingent upon level of skill. From the beginning of the Federal One projects, music hired the largest number of employees, and this would remain the true for the duration of the programs. In March of 1936 the Federal Music Project employed 104, the Art Project 29, the Theatre Project 25, and the Writers' Project 73.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ Alma S. Munsell to Bruno David Ussher, January 29, 1936, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

¹⁷⁸ Paul D. Shriver to Jacob Baker, December 24, 1935; "Colorado Administrative Payrolls – Four National Projects in the Arts,"; Charles Schwieso to Jacob Baker, March 17, 1936; "Statement of Functions Music Project,"; all Central File State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

By September of 1936 the Colorado FMP experienced administrative restructure, including the replacement of Ivan Miller with Horace Tureman as state director. National director Sokoloff was made aware of this change only through a rather oblique reference in a letter from regional director Ussher. Sokoloff pointedly informed Ussher that he had not approved the removal of Miller or the appointment of Tureman, and that “Mr. Miller is the State Director ... until I approve his removal.” Sokoloff then reiterated the procedure for making an appointment, which involved the national director’s making a recommendation to Mrs. Ellen Woodward, who then advises the state administrator of her approval, asking his concurrence. Ussher’s apologetic response – “I am more sorry than I can tell you in formal letter that the Colorado situation does not satisfy you” – explained that Miller had severed himself from the Music Project, and had subsequently been offered various appoints following his departure from the FMP. Though Ussher claimed no knowledge of the whereabouts of Mr. Miller, the regional director wrote that Miller had alienated those working under him to the degree that the situation threatened to break out into scandal. Eventually Tureman also left the Colorado music project under rather contentious circumstances, and Fred Schmitt served as the state director for the remainder of the New Deal sponsorship.¹⁷⁹

The Colorado projects would early on become embroiled in the musical “culture wars” involving questions of classical symphonic versus popular vernacular forms, professional versus amateur, and “good” music versus “bad” music. In a 1936 report to the FMP national administration describing the Denver music project, state supervisor

¹⁷⁹ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, “Re: State Director Situation in Colorado,” November 10, 1936; Nikolai Sokoloff to Bruno David Ussher, October 27, 1936: both in Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

Ivan Miller attached a number of programs with selections that had been recently performed by units in that city. Nikolai Sokoloff did not reply directly but assistant Alma S. Munsell – who was not given to the pulling of punches – responded that the national director “was very distressed” upon reading through the program given at the City Auditorium on December 31. Dr. Sokoloff, she continued, felt that the program was “extremely trivial for a concert orchestra.” Specifically, Munsell informed Miller:

The Federal Music Project maintains a high musical standard and it is entirely contrary to this standard to have such numbers on the program as the selection from “My Maryland”, for instance; also such novelties as “Mr. Krevas and his Musical Bottles”; Miss Matlick in a “Whistling Novelty”; and the skits of the John Reed Club are something which do not belong under the sponsorship of the Federal Music Project.

Director Miller responded that he was “very happy” with the “insistence of high musical standards” and assured the national office of “our most hearty cooperation.”¹⁸⁰

From this point forward, more than any western state, the Colorado FMP strove to hire only symphonic musicians who had previously been professionally employed. And, when in early 1937 Ivan Miller was replaced by Fred Schmitt, Ussher wrote Sokoloff that: “One of the elements to which I ... objected under the Miller regime” was the “pseudo professional standing” of some of the musicians hired by the state’s FMP.

¹⁸⁰ Alma S. Munsell to Ivan E. Miller, February 26, 1936, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA. The reference to the “skits of the John Reed Club” in this rather obscure correspondence has been cited by Findley, Bindas, and others as evidence of director Sokoloff’s antagonism toward the political Left. (The John Reed Clubs, active in over 30 cities and named after the well-known journalist, encouraged young artists of the 1930s and were closely associated with the Communist Party USA). Most recently, Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front*, pg. 79, also apocryphally attributes the statement directly to Sokoloff, with the implication that the FMP director used the reference figuratively to express his disapproval of leftist productions. The full context suggests, however, that the skits were indeed performed in Denver, and that assistant director Munsell was displeased more by the perceived frivolity of the programs than any political implications.

Specifically, he disapproved of a choral group of twelve men who were quite popular with park concert audiences. Though the singers had tried to study serious classical music, the effort was “to no great advantage.” Ussher had originally intended to transfer the musicians to the Recreational Project, but instead they were taken over by the Theatre Project. “In any case,” he concluded, “the Federal Music Project got rid of twelve persons who did not deserve membership and whose places have since been taken by deserving and well qualified instrumentalists.”¹⁸¹

The directorship of Fred Schmitt continued through the life of the Federal Music Project, the Colorado WPA Music Program and the Music Phase of the War Services Project. Performing groups during the years consisted of a “Symphony Orchestra” of 80 musicians, a large “Symphonic Concert Band” of 50, a String Quartette, a Choral group, and several Dance Orchestras. Also included on the employment rolls were various types of copyists, arrangers, and musical technicians. During the Wars Services phase the main activity consisted of services to the Military Camps, public groups interested in “Music as Morale Builder”, War Bond drives and in fact any type of music service designed to further and help the war effort.¹⁸²

The Colorado FMP did not support *Tipica Orquestas*, Negro Choirs, or other ethnic music ensembles that proved so popular in other western states. Most of the programs presented well-known classical pieces by Brahms, Strauss, Verdi, and Wagner. Interspersed with these would be compositions by contemporary American composers,

¹⁸¹ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 25, 1936, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

¹⁸² “Colorado Record of Program Operations and Accomplishments,” January 27, 1943, Archives of the Works Projects Administration and Predecessors, 1933-1943, reel 8, Oklahoma Department of Libraries, Historical Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

some based on classical European motifs, others of a popular American format. These included performances of Jerome Kern's popular "Ol' Man River," an orchestrated arrangement of "My Old Kentucky Home" by Otto Langey, and a presentation of Arthur Penn's "Smilin' Through." Coloradoan M. L. Lake, an employee of the music projects, saw several of his compositions performed, including "The Evolution of Yankee Doodle," and a march entitled "Lakesonian."

The Dance Orchestra was administered in Colorado through the recreational leg of the Federal Music Project, and remained the most popular of all the programs. "It would be difficult for me to describe adequately the contribution which the use of your dance orchestras is making to the recreation program in Denver," wrote C.S. Holcombe, general supervisor of the WPA Recreational Project, to FMP state director Ivan Miller. "The attendance at these dances averages about 250 per evening and will increase in most of the centers as time goes on." Miller forwarded the letter to director Sokoloff in Washington, no doubt in an effort to defend the programs against criticism from the regional director Ussher. Though these performances of popular "swing" music created a schism between Miller and Ussher, which led partially to Miller's early departure, they continued throughout the life of the WPA music programs in Colorado.¹⁸³

The Colorado WPA Music Project also administered the Recreation and Education Projects, and both remained active and vital throughout the life of the New Deal. Because of the Music Project's insistence upon employing only professional symphonic musicians, the Recreation Project played a major role in performing other forms of music for a wide audience. Demand increased significantly with the country's entrance into the

¹⁸³ C. S. Holcombe to Ivan Miller, April 8, 1936, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

Second World War. According to a monthly report titled The Relation of the Colorado Recreation Project to National Defense, the Recreation Project provided “almost innumerable opportunities for release through such avenues as these: - dramatics, community singing, folk song and dancing, festivals, crafts of all kinds, athletics, sports, etc, etc.” Organized to help “keep the home fires burning,” WPA recreation in Colorado remained an important part in National Defense.”¹⁸⁴

The Recreation Project also played a primary role in the production of the Denver Annual Folk Festival. Each year the affair grew in popularity, and was intended to present opportunities for the “various nationalities to meet together,” and for “each to learn to respect and admire the other.” At the annual festival in 1942 plans were being made for the presentation of a veritable United Nations of performances by a vast variety of musicians including: “Germans, Greeks, English, French, Swedes, Czechs, Russians, Italians, Persians, Turks, Rumanians, Mexicans, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Japanese, Negroes, Finns, Norwegians, Dutch, Irish, and others.” The report correctly noted that these folk musicians would cooperate “in the production of a spectacle” the likes of which could be seen “in no other country than America.” Through its activities that facilitated both the morale for National Defense and the production of the Annual Folk Festival, Recreation cooperated with the Music Project to “contribute to the making of loyal Americans.”¹⁸⁵

The Education aspect of the Colorado WPA Music Project increased in scope and enthusiasm each year of its existence. During an extensive trip through to survey musical

¹⁸⁴ “The Relation of the Colorado Recreation Project to National Defense,” March 1, 1942, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004, NARA.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

education being carried on in Colorado in late 1940, the state supervisor reported how the tour brought to light several new and interesting human elements in connection with this phase of music activity in the rural districts. Mrs. Pauline Martinez, a teacher on the Education Project in Alamosa, taught from a wheel chair, her lower limbs paralyzed as result of an automobile accident four years prior. Yet, she was able to “manage her classes which number a total of approximately eighty-five pupils of all ages, according to reports, quite effectively. A prior trip through southern Colorado included stops in Trinidad, Aguilar, Walsenburg, La Junta, Pueblo and Colorado Springs. In the course of this “extremely interesting trip” were encountered “some rather unusual human interest situations.” In Trinidad the state director expressed amazement to discover “an old gentleman, age seventy-six, enrolled in one of the music classes, enthusiastically studying the intricacies of playing the trumpet and violin.” In Aguilar he encountered “a woman, age sixty-eight, ... putting in a great deal of time and energy learning to play the piano and guitar.” The subsequent narrative report relates how both of these older students claimed to have “found more pleasure and interest in this work than anything they had attempted during their existence.” Such assessments were not uncommon in narrative reports of the educational units. Combined with the efforts of the various recreational programs and the performances of the WPA symphony orchestra in rural regions never before exposed to live classical music, the Colorado projects should be remembered as successful and innovative.¹⁸⁶

Federal One and specifically the FMP constitute a vitally important aspect of the cultural development of Utah. Music had played an important role in the history of the

¹⁸⁶ “Narrative Report – Month of November 1940, Colorado Music Project (State-Wide),” December 3, 1940, entry 805, box 9, NARA.

state, as the early Mormon settlers in the Salt Lake Valley brought with them instruments from the East and constructed others from materials they collected in their new home in the Great Basin territory. Folksongs have been collected and preserved which attest to the courage, conviction and perseverance of the early LDS pioneers. Yet, the state had much difficulty in maintaining a permanent orchestra. In 1892, Salt Lake City residents witnessed a single performance of the Salt Lake Symphony. A decade later the Salt Lake Symphony Orchestra Association was formed, and lasted for nine years until financial and other considerations forced its discontinuance. In 1913 a group of local musicians took the initiative to form the Salt Lake Philharmonic. This organization continued until 1925 when it met the same fate as the earlier efforts. But the seeds planted by the WPA Federal Music programs in Utah continue to grow uninterrupted to the present-day.

The state of Utah voted solidly for FDR through all four of his presidential bids. While in other parts of the country support for Roosevelt began waning near the end of his administration, in Utah the President's electoral victories grew with each campaign. And there is no state in the West where the Music Projects met with more appreciation, enthusiasm and support. Additionally, the benefits of the WPA programs continued beyond the life of the New Deal; the Utah State Symphony Orchestra originated as a cooperative partner of the FMP, expanding and flourishing after the War years and the termination of the Works Projects Administration. Utah would thus become the only state to transfer the Federal Music Project Symphony to a State Symphony.

Certainly no state music program benefited more from the efforts of a single individual – a person, in fact, never actually employed by the WPA. Gail Martin, Music Editor of the *Deseret News* in Salt Lake City and later Chairman of the Utah State

Institution of Fine Arts, proved a tireless champion of both the WPA music and art projects in his state. In 1937 FMP Supervisor Harry Hewes reminded Nikolai Sokoloff as to the importance of paying a visit to Martin while the national director toured the region. Hewes lauded the journalist as one of most consistently supporters of the Project and regarded him as “one of the most valuable ... contacts in the West.” Hewes also wrote to regional director Ussher that Martin had been extremely helpful “to the whole cause of Federal music” and from his many articles, letters and other contacts Martin was taken as a “singularly sensitive and informed commentator on the arts.” Nikolai Sokoloff thanked Gail Martin on numerous occasions for all his untiring efforts in the cause of the FMP and the art projects in Utah.¹⁸⁷

Sokoloff became aware early in the development of the FMP of the influence and knowledge Gail Martin wielded in Utah, and sought his advice on the prospects of developing music projects in the state. Ironically, Martin’s initial reaction to the suggestion of WPA funded music in Utah was not promising. From a personal study of conditions in the state, Martin concluded that it would be near impossible to carry on a worthwhile project with the relief musicians there. Further, from inquiries he conducted with the Federated Musicians Union officials, as well as relief officials, Martin came to believe that there was very few qualified musicians on relief, though many existed “on the ragged edge.” He pointed out that while there was plenty of quantity, what the state

¹⁸⁷ Harry L. Hewes to Nikolai Sokoloff, April 3, 1937, box 373; Harry L. Hewes to Bruno David Ussher, August 28, 1936, box 371; Nikolai Sokoloff to Gail Martin, May 26, 1938, box 384; all Central Files: General, NARA.

lacked was more quality musicians. Anything done to increase the quantity and not raise the standard of performance “would be harmful rather than helpful.”¹⁸⁸

But through Martin’s efforts a Utah State Sinfonietta with a core of five players was formed by late 1935. What soon developed in Utah through the resources of the WPA, the musicians of state, and particularly the persistence of Gail Martin himself would contradict the rather dismal initial prognosis the journalist had related to national director Sokoloff. By May of 1936, Martin enthusiastically described the marked successes of the Utah WPA Orchestra which he had witnessed on several occasions at the Assembly Hall in Salt Lake City. For the first time in its history, Martin pointed out, “Utah had proof of how public initiative can sponsor music projects and bring them to rich fruition.” An editorial by Martin in the *Deseret News* would be reprinted numerous times for inclusion in FMP National and Special Reports:

All other branches of activity – farming, mining, highway construction, manufacturing – receive substantial assistance from the government, why not music? Surely, a nation that can set aside \$1,100,000,000 for the subsidization of the army and navy ought to be able to sponsor a symphony orchestra in each good-sized city. If such activity be “boondoggling,” then let there be more of it.

Martin expressed the feelings of many that the activities of the Federal Music Projects were laying in many communities the foundation for permanent orchestras similar to those existing in “other civilized and less wealthy countries.” In less than five years the orchestra grew and traveled thousands of miles, performing 1012 concerts to 348,000

¹⁸⁸ Gail Martin to Nicolai Sokoloff, October 10, 1935, Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

music lovers in every section of the state, having given programs in 22 communities. Reginald Beales, state director of the FMP in Utah, shared Martin's optimism.¹⁸⁹

Throughout its duration, Gail Martin remained an avid supporter of the FMP and persistent advocate for the required government funding; traveling widely throughout the state he remained a committed disciple of Federal Music. In Nephi, Utah, for example, he told a Kiwanis Club that "America's artistic talent constitutes a potential resource capable under development of producing millions of dollars annually and millions of horsepower in spiritual uplift." As funding cuts threatened all Federal One programs in late 1937, Martin continued making fervent pleas for greater support of the music and art projects both in Utah and across the country. "Talented men and women are employed on these projects. They have no other means of livelihood," he wrote to Ellen Woodward. He pointed out that the Federal Music Project had played to more than 80,000 people in the State, and many citizens and school children had for the first time heard living music. And in a strongly worded letter to President Roosevelt following the ending of the Theatre Project in 1939, as well as cuts in the other cultural projects, Martin urged the President to rectify the "ghastly mistake" made by Congress if there was any way to so. He also supported taking immediate steps to set up a permanent Federal Arts Project so that the "progress of culture in this great democracy may be continuous and unbroken."¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Gail Martin, "Concert By WPA Brings Query On Aid," May 12, 1936, *Deseret News*, reprinted in "Special Reports Prepared September 15 for President's Advisory," entry 811, box 24 and "Records of the Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project Correspondence with Representatives of the Professional and Service Division, 1936-1937," entry 816, box 32; both NARA.

¹⁹⁰ Gail Martin quoted in "More Support Urged For Utah Art Endeavors," source unknown, Nephi, Utah, June 15, 1937; Gail Martin to Ellen S. Woodward, June 17, 1937; Gail Martin to Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 15, 1939; all in Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

Perhaps the one of Martin's many articles that best captured the importance of the music projects in Utah was printed in late 1938; here he devotes his entire page to the consideration of the future of art in America. The article headlined "Government has Become Arts' Greatest Patron" read in part:

A new dignity has come to the artists. After years of discussion and agitation for a subsidization of the arts, the United States Government has become the world's greatest patron. A new audience of millions now finds itself able to participate in the better things of life – opera, symphony concerts, art exhibits, classes, lectures, drama. For the first time, art is being sponsored in the belief that the arts are a necessary part of daily life for all the people, not just a few.

The article included a five-column picture of the violin section of the WPA orchestra and an additional article in which Martin pointed to the vital role being play by musicians of the Federal Music Project in the renaissance of art in Utah. The *Deseret News* maintained a substantial readership throughout the New Deal era, and Martin's consistent support through his articles and personal appearances unquestionably expanded the popularity of the FMP in his state.¹⁹¹

During the Roosevelt presidency the state of Utah possessed a more culturally and ethnically homogeneous population than any other western state served by the Federal Music Projects. In a form letter posted to all State Directors of the FMP in late 1937, for example, Nikolai Sokoloff requested "data on and photographs of Negro project workers" to be used by the Information Service for the preparation of news releases and the like. State director Reginald Beales responded that there were no black workers connected with the Federal Music Project in Utah. The previous summer, however, the FMP had

¹⁹¹ Gail Martin, "Government Has Become Arts' Greatest Patron," December 17, 1938, *Deseret News*, reprinted in "Report on Federal Music Project Activities 1938-1939," entry 803, box 1, NARA.

“presented a program of Negro music, in which we were assisted by Mrs. Fred Stanley, local colored soprano,” who was in no way connected personally with the WPA. The African American population of Utah was very small, Beales explained, “and I have not yet seen any Negro connected with WPA activities, though of course there may be one here or there.”¹⁹²

Though not as ethnically and culturally diverse as others states in the western region, both press and administration acknowledged regularly the participation of women in the WPA orchestra. And the employment of female musicians increased significantly following the country’s entrance into the War. “Women Make Debut in Ranks of Symphony,” ran a headline in the Salt Lake *Telegram* of September 1942, reporting the beginning of new concert season. The accompanying article informed that the drain of men from the Utah State symphony orchestra would soon be noticed when women appeared in the chairs of violinists, cellists and viola players at the first concert of the new season. The WPA orchestra of Utah had employed numerous women even before the War, such as Grace Christ, who had been a member since 1936. She welcomed other women to the Utah State Symphony, though she acknowledged she hated to see the men being drafted. A new member of the orchestra, Lucile Ackridge, played viola in evening rehearsals and performances while remaining a defense worker in the daytime. Another member, Frances Johnson, played and described how being part of the symphony orchestra was one of the “most thrilling experiences of my life.” The influx of women

¹⁹² Nikolai Sokoloff to Reginald Beales, November 18, 1937; Reginald Beales to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 6, 1937; both Central Files State: Utah, box 267, NARA.

into the WPA orchestra during the War years preserved the very existence of the Utah State Symphony for future generations.¹⁹³

The majority of the presentations of the Utah music programs featured classical works of traditional European composers. However, as with all other states, special emphasis was placed on regional and ethnic-themed presentations. During one performance by the Utah State Sinfonietta in Salt Lake City in 1937, for example, the program included music from “Bryce Canyon Suite” by Utahan Seldon Heaps. The two movements performed were “Along the Navajo Trail” and “Inspiration Point,” two vista points within Bryce Canyon National Park. During the same program the Chorus and Orchestra performed an arrangement of the spiritual “Go Down Moses.” Several compositions of director Reginald Beales were also performed.

Though the Federal Music Project of Utah proved quite successful and an impetus for a permanent Utah State Symphony Orchestra, as with all human endeavors, occasional disruptions developed along the way. The administration of the Utah music projects maintained what would in contemporary parlance be a “zero tolerance policy” toward the consumption of alcoholic beverages prior to practice or performance; on more than one occasion, action was taken for infractions of this rule. Sylvia L. Kernah, instrumentalist for the Federal Orchestra of the state of Utah, appealed directly to President Roosevelt after her dismissal from the WPA program. “Because I took two glasses of Beer before a concert” she wrote, “I was accused of intoxication, which was not true.” Ms. Kernah maintained the Supervisor of the program had “born a petty dislike” toward her, and the charges of intoxication specious. “In the face of this unfairness I am asking you to

¹⁹³ Betty Waugh, “Women Make Debut In Ranks of Symphony,” September 19, 1942, The Salt Lake *Telegram*, Central Files State: Utah, box 266, NARA.

intercede in my behalf, and enable me to be placed so that I may earn an honorable living,” Kernah requested of the Chief Executive.¹⁹⁴

A development of wider import involving the “Chief Booster” of the Utah FMP – Gail Martin – arose in the spring of 1940. “You will be glad to know that the first concert of the Utah State Symphony Orchestra in cooperation with the W.P.A. Music Program was a success that completely surpassed our fondest expectations,” Martin proudly wrote to the new director, Earl Vincent Moore. “The concert,” he continued, “is unanimously pronounced by music lovers as being the finest thing ever done here by local musicians.” On the success of this first concert, “we hope to found a permanent orchestra next Fall.” Near the end of the lengthy correspondence, Martin mentions almost casually and rather cryptically that “as my reward for making a success of the concert and cooperating with the W.P.A. I was fired.” Director Moore responded immediately that he was very much disturbed by your statement that “activities in behalf of the project resulted in your being dismissed from your position on the paper.” Moore requested more information, as “it doesn’t seem to me a fair treatment of a loyal servant.”¹⁹⁵

Martin’s response to Moore illuminates, among other things, the contempt held in some quarters of Depression-era Utah for the New Deal. There was but one answer for his dismissal, contended Martin: “Chauvinism, prejudice and provincialism of the grossest type.” Prior to his involvement with the WPA Martin had promoted several

¹⁹⁴ Sylvia L. Kernah to Franklin D. Roosevelt, August 23, 1938, Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA. The letter was “respectfully referred for acknowledgment and consideration” from the Secretary to the President to the Utah FMP administration, but no evidence as to the adjudication appears to exist.

¹⁹⁵ Gail Martin to Earl Vincent Moore, May 13, 1940; Earl V. Moore to Gail Martin, May 25, 1940; both in Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA.

concerts performed at the Tabernacle, including two appearances by the Philadelphia Orchestra. As long as he promoted the work and interests of the outside artist his efforts were accepted and appreciated. But, when he started to promote the Utah artist through cooperation with the WPA, “antipathy outside the paper grew.” Martin was well aware that the leadership of the LDS Church bitterly opposed the WPA, but assumed an exception had been made for the Federal One cultural programs; indeed, even Church President Heber J. Grant took out a \$100 membership in the WPA Art Center. Gail Martin, it appears, became a victim of the accomplishments of the Utah FMP:

The success of the orchestra project ... was too much for the Tories. I rightly conjecture that I was charged with being a Communist – because I cooperated with the WPA; with being a Mormon-baiter – and scores of devout Church-members are my staunchest friends; with being all that was undesirable, although my business and moral reputation is unblemished.

Martin informed Moore that he was summarily discharged from the *Deseret News* without one specific criticism of his past or present activities or work. The general manager of the newspaper, who Martin believed to be his friend, “evidently acted or was forced to act.” Earl Moore was clearly empathetic with Martin’s plight and astounded at the circumstances surrounding his dismissal. The national director responded: “It is indeed a curious commentary on the basic principles which govern the activities of a newspaper supposedly published in the interests of the general public to realize that actions of the sort taken against you can happen in this country.”¹⁹⁶

But Gail Martin’s contributions to the WPA Music Program did not end with his separation from the *Deseret News*. For several years prior to his dismissal, he had served as Chair and State Supervisor of the Utah State Institute of Fine Arts. The organization,

¹⁹⁶ Gail Martin to Earl Vincent Moore, June 10, 1940; Earl V. Moore to Gail Martin, June 21, 1940; both in Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA.

which originated in the late nineteenth century, consisted of an unsalaried Board appointed by the Governor, and was authorized by the State Legislature to co-operate with the Federal Government or any other agency for the sponsorship of the arts. Through the efforts of this sponsorship, on April 4, 1940, the first meeting of the Utah State Symphony Orchestra Association was held, and Fred Smith was elected president. Martin played a vital role in this development.

Only a month later, on May 8, 1940, the Utah State Symphony Orchestra performed its first concert under the conductorship of Hans Heniot, who would remain in this position until he entered the Army following the beginning of the War. Musicians of the WPA Music Project, augmented by professional instrumentalists chosen from a dozen or more Utah communities, made up the personnel of the orchestra. The effort, thus, represents a cooperative effort between the New Deal administration and the Utah State Symphony Orchestra Association. The presentation was an unqualified success. A local editorial would recall how Heniot had “developed an orchestra with a fine repertoire, without being high-brow and unapproachable.”¹⁹⁷

In November of 1940 Utah WPA Administrator Darrell Greenwell wrote directly to Florence Kerr to tell of the progress of the programs. “It is a pleasure to report to you,” he proudly informed the national administrator, “the success of the November 2nd concert of the Utah State Symphony Orchestra in cooperation with the Utah W. P. A. Music Project.” He related that both musicians and concertgoers unanimously agreed that local artists of the State Orchestra had reached the “pinnacle of music attainment” and that “this high mark could not have been attained without W. P. A. cooperation.” Greenwell

¹⁹⁷ “State Symphony Plans Series; Director Heniot, Is Now in Army Air Forces,” October 4, 1942, Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

acknowledged the splendid work of State Supervisor Gail Martin, and efforts were underway for the orchestra to tour outlying districts of Utah.¹⁹⁸

A lengthy report from the Utah State Institute of Fine Arts also enthusiastically lauded the success of the cooperation: “No more brilliant proof of the manner in which the state’s cultural resources can be mobilized for the inspiration of the community exists than the growth of the Utah State Symphony Orchestra from the WPA Music Project.” Many doubted the plausibility of the programs and the joint effort, but “those who came to scoff, went away to praise.” Indeed: “No more thrilling victory for Utah music has ever been scored.” In August, a membership campaign had been launched, and “in spite of the Hitler blitzkrieg, and the most intense competition of counter-attractions, an audience of 1400 persons and a budget of nearly \$10,000 was assured.” The success of the musical presentations was “the most outstanding accomplishment on behalf of local musicians in the history of Utah.” The report concluded that the success of the larger orchestra had unquestionably been based upon the nucleus of the WPA Orchestra. Since its first performance in January 1935 the FMP Orchestra had given well over a thousand concerts to nearly 350,000 listeners; the Music Projects laid the foundation for the future Utah Symphony Orchestra. Darrell Greenwell wrote to Florence Kerr a year later: “The WPA is responding efficiently to the need of a permanent state orchestra here.” As a result of the orchestra’s success, throughout the entire state “the outlook for the cultural projects has brightened materially....”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Darrell J. Greenwell to Florence Kerr, November 8, 1940, Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA.

¹⁹⁹ “Twenty First Biennial Utah State Institute of Fine Arts Reports,”; Darrell J. Greenwell to Florence Kerr, March 27, 1941; both Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA.

With the nation's entry into World War II, the Music Projects became an aspect of the WPA War Services, and Gail Martin served as manager of the Music Section. Many presentations were for the benefit of service men stationed near Salt Lake City. An article in the *Bomb Bay Messenger* in 1942 announced that on "Monday night, October 12, at 8:30 in the Jewish Community Center the WPA War Service program will sponsor the appearance of the String Quarter of the Utah State Symphony Orchestra." The program for the event included selections from Beethoven, Haydn, Bach, Mozart, and Handel. The following Wednesday Beethoven's 9th Symphony was presented at the Jewish Community Center, and: "All soldiers are eagerly invited to attend both of the ... events."²⁰⁰

On Tuesday, July 14, 1942, the WPA War Services Program "had the honor of pioneering another field in Utah music." For the first time in the history of the state, a large-scale symphonic program was given in the open air and admission charged. Through the cooperation of the WPA and the Utah State Symphony Orchestra Association, a "soldiers-welcome" sunset concert was given at the University of Utah football field, designed as an official welcome to the thousands of soldiers, sailors and marines stationed in the area. Over 3000 service men attended the performance and a total of 5,004 persons paid admission, ranging from twenty-five cents to one dollar. State administrator Darrell Greenwell recalled the "most stirring spectacle" of seeing these young men, led by a bugle and drum corps, circle the track and line up for a performance of the national anthem. The audience of over 8,000 was the largest attending any event ever given at the stadium. Newspaper editorials congratulated the sponsors and the Utah War

²⁰⁰ Pvt. Bill Brust, "Salt Lake Music," *Bomb Bay Messenger*, Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

Services Program “on the spectacular event, which dramatized so colorfully and eloquently America’s part in the war.”²⁰¹

In Salt Lake City in the middle of August 1942, the existing WPA-constructed Art Center changed its name to War Services Center “and immediately fell in line with the state of emergency.” Realizing the soldiers’ need for both diversion and comfort the War Services Center began “a program with only one purpose in view – service and recreation for service men.” Marsha Ballif was placed in charge of the new organization. Regular dances were held at the Center, and the entire programs were sponsored by the Utah State Institute for Fine Arts and the Works Projects Administration. According to a newspaper account, “The dances ... have been unusually successful with many of Salt Lake’s most beautiful and talented debutantes and career girls giving their time and effort to carry on this fine work.”²⁰²

Gail Martin, as director of the WPA War Service Music Programs, strove to bring to Utah a diversity of guest conductors to lead the Symphony orchestra. One of the most accomplished of these was the Cuban maestro Jose Echaniz. One narrative report quoted Martin as lauding Echaniz and the remarkable work he had performed with the orchestra, and “predicted as successful a concert as the initial program which featured Sir Thomas Beacham as guest conductor.” Born in Guanabacca, a suburb of Havana, Echaniz had made his debut in the United States in 1927 and he achieved world-renowned status prior to his guest work with WPA Utah State Symphony Orchestra. Local accounts described

²⁰¹ Darrell J. Greenwell to Florence Kerr, July 20, 1942, Central Files State: Utah, box 2667, NARA.

²⁰² Pvt. Robert H. Weston, “S.L.C. War Services Center Plans Soldier Rec. Program,” October 11, 1942, *Bomb-Bay Messenger*, Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

his conductorship in Salt Lake City as “brilliant” and “electrifying,” and Echamiz returned to Utah to conduct several times that season.

Through the duration of the War, Utah experienced a vibrant presentation of musical programs. Though the primary conductors had resigned to join the Army, the various sponsors arranged for guest conductors to appear for each concert. The partnership would continue until the dissolution of the Works Projects Administration in 1943; the board changed the name of the operation to the Utah Symphony in 1946, as it would remain.²⁰³

The present-day Utah Symphony takes justifiable pride in its continued and varied achievements, both in the quality of its performances as well as the distinctive regional character it brings to its musical programs. The Symphony employs a larger proportion of native musicians and is recognized for keeping the busiest concert schedule of any orchestra in the United States today. Yet, several recent histories accord scant attention to the role the WPA Federal Music Projects played in this development; nowhere is the name of Gail Martin mentioned. It is the symphony orchestra created by the New Deal Music Project in Utah that has endured and flourished where all previous efforts eventually failed. Its legacy is uninterrupted. The early task of developing the Symphony was accomplished, according to one participant, through “spit, baling wire, and mirrors.” But supporters of today’s Utah Symphony should also pay tribute to its roots in the efforts of the WPA musicians of the 1930s, and in what director George

²⁰³ “Latin Maestro Arrives for Utah Concert; Rehearses With State Orchestra,” October 19, 1942, *The Salt Lake Tribune*; “State Symphony Plans Series,” *Bomb Bay Messenger*, October 4, 1942, both Central Files State: Utah, box 2666, NARA.

Foster described in his final FMP report as “a great pioneering enterprise in music which has bore fruit due to the tireless efforts of Gail Martin.”²⁰⁴

The Federal Music Projects of Oregon proved lively, popular, wide-ranging, and generally free of administrative or political rancor. The core of the performance aspect of the project centered around symphony orchestra presentations, chamber music ensembles, dance bands and choral groups. Music instruction was provided in both urban and remote areas for those desiring musical training but could not afford a private teacher. The Project also developed and built up a substantial library of musical compositions that included classical, popular, and folk scores; special emphasis was placed upon the collection of American works and the country’s ethnic and cultural pluralism. The Oregon FMP also cooperated with the Federal Theatre Project in a number of successful productions. And for most of the life of the projects, one of the various orchestras of the Oregon FMP would perform a weekly radio broadcast out of Portland. Certainly, the lion’s share of credit for the over-all accomplishments of the Oregon Project must go to state supervisor Frederick W. Goodrich, who remained in his capacity from the formation of the FMP in his state until its conclusion.

Active operation of the FMP in Oregon began in January 1936, the first band having been organized a few days prior to Christmas of 1935. C. Ashley Cook was appointed conductor on January 6 and regular rehearsals began in earnest. The FMP band made its

²⁰⁴ The “spit, baling wire, and mirrors” quotation credited to Joseph Silverstein, fourth music director of the organization, as in “The Utah Symphony,” by Cherie Ann Willis, *Encyclopedia of Utah* draft, 1986, as in Conrad B. Harrison, *Five Thousand Concerts: A Commemorative History of the Utah Symphony* (1989) pamphlet, publisher unknown; George Foster, “Record of Program Operation and Accomplishment: The Federal Music Project 1935 to 1939, The WPA Music Program 1939 to 1943,” June 30, 1943, pg. 370.

first concert appearance at the Municipal Auditorium in Portland on January 19, 1936. Before the termination of the Projects in 1943, aggregate audiences in the state of Oregon would be well in excess of one million, many who were experiencing the pleasure of hearing symphonic music for the first time in their lives.

“During the past ten or twelve years,” Supervisor Goodrich observed, “our Symphony Orchestra has not played an average of one American composition each year, and some times an entire season with a single example.” The WPA music projects dramatically altered this pattern. Symphonic performances based upon indigenous and other themes of national origin were some of the most popular pieces performed. The project units regularly presented original works by American and especially Oregonian composers. During the years of the WPA music projects the orchestras played original works by the following Oregon composers: Christian Pool, Harry Knight, Lauren B. Sykes, Katherine L. Johnson, Frederick W. Goodrich, Manuel Palacies, Albert M. Schuff, Dent Mowery, Lucille Cummins, and Harry M. Grannatt. Dent Mowrey’s Symphonic Poem *At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier* received its world premiere by the Portland Philharmonic Orchestra, and the piece would find a moderate degree of popularity beyond the state borders. Also, “The Call to Worship” from the *Hebrew Symphony* by Frederick W. Goodrich was first presented in Oregon and would later be played in California and other states.²⁰⁵

The annual Festival of American Music began in 1936 and garnished much interest and enthusiasm throughout the state. Cooperation of the WPA music projects, the

²⁰⁵ “Federal Music Project Narrative Report For Month Of February 1938”; “Report On The Work Of The Oregon Music Project From 1935 to 1942,” both in Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, NARA.

churches, public schools and the parochial schools of the Catholic Church in the Archdiocese of Portland assured that programs would be performed in many public areas, schools and institutions. Soon a movement grew that extended performances beyond Portland and across the county and the rest of the state. There developed tremendous excitement in the music and a sizable representative committee organized for the sole purpose of advancing the Festival of American Music throughout Oregon. By 1939, the Festival had spread throughout much of the state, and the repertoire of the Portland WPA Symphony included a variety of pieces written by American composers. Among these were *Deep Forest* by Mabel Daniels and variety of Stephen Foster melodies arranged by Carl Busch.²⁰⁶

Oregon newspapers prominently reported these program; “Native Music of America in Spotlight” ran one headline in 1938. The article informed that while most concertgoers were unaware that there is any considerable American music, there existed in the country “a vast amount of folk music which is interesting and in many cases valuable, upon which the composers of the present will be able to build up great works that may eventually be numbered among the world’s masterpieces.” Among these, the article continues, are the stores of “Indian tribal melodies, the spirituals of the Negroes, the songs of the cowboys and plainsmen, the traditional tunes of the Appalachians and the Ozarks, the Devil Tunes of Tennessee, the songs and dances of the Spanish southwest, the Creole tunes of the former French possessions of Louisiana, and the lingering traces of the old colonial days of British occupation.” This “marvelous wealth

²⁰⁶ “Narrative Report For Month Of December 1937 Federal Music Project – Oregon,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371; “Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report For Month of February, 1939, Central Files State: Oregon, box 2372, both NARA.

of material,” evolving over the nation’s 160-year history, has been captured by native and naturalized American composers who are creating works of “sterling worth.” With the Festival of American Music, it concludes, the “Oregon units of the federal music project, churches, schools and colleges, by means of programs, will endeavor to further this exemplification of American music.”²⁰⁷

The school programs for the 1939 Festival of American Music were also very successful. Special concerts were presented at Roosevelt High School to 750 students, at the High School of Commerce to 1700, and at the Benson Polytechnic to 2600 where the Portland Mayor spoke before the musical presentations. 4500 persons attended the Americanization program for newly naturalized citizens at the Public Auditorium in Portland. The program of American music was “received with tremendous enthusiasm by the large audience.”²⁰⁸

Though not as ethnically diverse as other states in the western region, state supervisor Goodrich remained acutely aware of the cultural differences that did exist in Oregon, and strove to utilize the projects as instruments of good will. As in other states in the region, the demand for multicultural presentations often came as much or more from the general population rather than from WPA policy. “I am constantly getting requests from schools for Indian programs,” wrote Goodrich, and the state director strove to present the musical forms of the various ethnic groups requested throughout the state. Consequently, the works of Charles Sanford Skilton, a composer interested in the music of American Indians, became quite popular in the Oregon music projects. His *Suite Primeval*, derived

²⁰⁷ “Native Music Of America In Spotlight,” February 28, 1938, *Portland News-Telegram*, entry 826, box 68, NARA.

²⁰⁸ “Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report For Month Of February, 1939,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2372, NARA.

from his early works on Indian themes for string quartet, *Deer Dance* and *War Dance*, consisted of four movements based on traditional songs of three tribes. These were *Sunrise Song* from the Winnebago, *Gambling Song* from the Rogue River, *Flute Serenade* from the Sioux, and *Moccasin Game* from the Winnebago. Skilton also wrote operas on Indian themes, and several of these found their way into WPA music projects production. The three-act *Kalopin*, based on legends of the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes, was presented in various locations. And his one-act opera *The Sun Bride*, based on a Pueblo theme but incorporating motifs from both Winnebago and Chippewa music, proved so popular it was performed on a radio broadcast. Several Indian themed works of composer Victor Herbert, such as *The Dagger Dance*, were also regularly performed.²⁰⁹

Native American groups in Oregon also expressed interest in the classical European symphonic music produced by the WPA orchestras. The annual celebration in May at the Chemawa Indian school in Salem, for example, requested each year a performance of the federal 50-piece symphonic orchestra from Portland to perform. In attendance for the annual event were over 500 representatives of virtually every Native American group in the Pacific Northwest and northern California. A variety of Indian songs and dances were performed throughout the three-day celebrations. Oregon Governor Charles H. Martin and visiting officials of Bureau of Indian Affairs were regularly in attendance.

²⁰⁹ Fredrick W. Goodrich to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 30, 1936, Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370; compilation of Oregon Narrative Reports 1936-1938, Central Files State: Oregon, boxes 2370 to 2372, NARA.

The afternoon and evening performances of the FMP symphony down from Portland attracted large audiences and much interest and approval.²¹⁰

The African American population of Portland, as other cities in the United States during the 1930s, remained strictly segregated. Fredrick Goodrich's monthly reports consistently stressed the progress of the teaching units active in this community. Early in the program he wrote: "The colored teacher is doing excellent choral and teaching work among his own people in Northeast Portland." He reiterated the sentiment the next month when reporting how the state's music teachers were accomplishing tremendous results. "This is particularly noticeable," he continued, "in the case of the colored teacher, who is achieving wonderful results out in that section of the city where his people congregate." And several months later he reported that a "negro teacher working in the colored quarter presented a very successful concert by young people of his race on April 15th." ²¹¹

The state director expressed particular satisfaction with a review he had recently received from an attendee who had been present at the performance who felt it almost impossible to believe that some had only been practicing with their instruments for five weeks, "and equally hard to believe that such pleasing sound could come from make-shift articles. Newspaper accounts also reported enthusiastically the accomplishments of this project. One full-page article in the *Portland Journal* of May 1938 included three large

²¹⁰ "Federal Music Project Narrative Report For June," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370, NARA.

²¹¹ "Narrative Report Of Federal Music Project In Oregon From November 27, 1936 to December 27, 1936," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370; "Federal Music Project Of Oregon Narrative Report For Month of October, 1937, Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371; "Federal Music Project Narrative Report For June," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370, all NARA.

photos under the banner headline, “The ‘Williams Avenue Blues.’” Readers learned of “Portland’s Negro Federal School of Music, a WPA project,” that included a large group of boys and girls who met for regular practice at the Williams Avenue branch of the YWCA. The young musicians, according to the article, had organized a band of 32 pieces and a drum corps of 16 pieces and was said to be the only organization of their kind on the West Coast. A caption for one photo identified five “Drummer boys of the republic” by name and each of their specific percussive instruments.²¹²

When funding limitations forced the suspension of many teaching units in Portland, portions of the African American community responded immediately. “Nearly every colored organization in the Northwest has petitioned to me for restoration,” Goodrich reported. He acknowledged that the “colored teacher at work in the Northeast portion of the city, which has a very large negro population” had been performing splendidly. The teacher was a fine musician himself, wrote Goodrich, “and has a great deal of force and has really made a tremendous impression upon the needy colored people of that section of the city.” He concluded that he would certainly do his best to put him back to work “as soon as we can establish our bearings.”²¹³

The Oregon FMP also supported a Hawaiian orchestra that proved especially popular and was often requested to perform at civic clubs, schools, and charity events. One such performance was at what became known as the annual “Milk Bowl” football game between the Portland Interscholastic high school champions and a team of “all-stars”

²¹² “Federal Music Project Narrative For June,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370; “The ‘Williams Avenue Blues,’” May 1938, *Portland Journal*, entry 826, box 68, both NARA.

²¹³ “Federal Music Project Narrative Report For Month Of July,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370, NARA.

recruited from other area high schools. The event benefited the Portland Fire Department's "Milk Fund," in providing children in both public and parochial schools with two bottles of milk each day – "essential nourishment that otherwise they would lack." A twenty-five cent student ticket admitted one to the game and bought ten bottles of milk. One dollar's worth of tickets kept one child in milk for an entire school month. The Portland *Journal* in 1939 ran a front page story with large photo of Governor Charles Sprague, Fire Captain Fred Roberts and the WPA Hawaiian orchestra; the Oregon governor, the caption describes, "voices his approval" of the charity game as well as the band's performance.²¹⁴

The various concert orchestras of the Oregon FMP regularly performed programs showcasing the ethnic diversity of American history. Thematically, the presentations were often grounded in the "evolutionary" notions that had been prominent in intellectual circles since the late nineteenth century and had by the 1930s entered the popular imagination. On May 25, 1938, a concert orchestra from the project accompanied a pageant given by over 200 students of the Irvington School in the auditorium of the Grant High School of Portland. The pageant was entitled "America in Rhythm" and was "a very beautifully mounted and costumed event." The long rehearsed program "traced the evolution of American music through the Indian, Negro, Hillbilly, Plainsmen and Cowboy phases, down to the martial period of John Philip Sousa." So well received was the performance that it was recreated in the annual celebration at the United States Indian School a Chemawa, Oregon later that month.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ "Milk Bowl Game," December 17, 1939, Portland *Journal*, entry 826, box 68, NARA.

²¹⁵ "Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report For Month Of May, 1938," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, NARA.

Goodrich also made conscious efforts to ensure that the workings of the Oregon FMP benefited those citizens left most disenfranchised by the Depression. In October of 1936, for example, the WPA orchestra performed in venues “of somewhat varied character.” Given the unseasonably warm weather that month, regular noon-day concerts were given out of doors on the Plaza Block, facing the Multnomah County Court House. “The park space,” reported Goodrich, “is the resort of hundreds of unfortunates and a meeting place for radicals of all types.” Before the concerts in the park began approval had been sought and granted from the Mayor and City Commissioners. The crowd proved quite receptive: “The men make a very appreciative audience and make requests for music of the very best types.” The *Portland Journal* also described the positive impact of these performances in “the locale of the unemployed and of groups more or less antagonistic to law, order and the American plan of government.” The concerts were received with gratitude and enthusiasm, and national anthem was always greeted with the “respect due that sanctified air.” The long editorial argued that “[s]uch musical organizations ought not to be allowed to vanish from the life of Portland when the time comes for federal aid to be withdrawn.”²¹⁶

That same month the Concert Band traveled 15 miles outside of Portland to appear at “the Multnomah County Poor Farm” where a concert was given on October 16th to the 500 inmates. The Superintendent of the facilities noted that it was the first band concert presented at “the farm” in eight years. In another narrative several years later, Goodrich reported that numerous concerts for underprivileged groups had been performed at various locations throughout the region. The institutions included “the Albertina Kerr

²¹⁶ “Make Them Permanent,” August 30, 1936, *Portland Journal*, entry 826, box 68, NARA.

Home and the Neighborhood House, which is located in the Jewish and Italian section of the city.”²¹⁷

The teaching units were also given a high priority by the administration of the Oregon music projects. Almost immediately WPA teachers began providing musical instruction free of charge in eight separate counties within the state, many in rural communities that had previously been left “entirely unsupervised from the musical standpoint.” Within its first year sixteen separate choruses of women had been created and were under training, as well as a large number of children’s in-group piano classes. Goodrich was convinced that “a coordinated plan working under the Music Project can produce excellent results.”²¹⁸

Within several months the music teaching aspect of the Oregon projects did indeed begin to show quite impressive results. By late 1936 over 200 women were singing in the choruses and several hundred children were being instructed in-group piano lessons. Many of these young people were so poor, wrote Goodrich, “that they cannot even pay carfare to attend the classes.” Soon, however, community members came forward to transport the children to and from their music lessons. Without the generosity demonstrated by those Oregonians willing to volunteer time and donate various musical accoutrements, the goals of the teaching units would have soon proven impracticable. Goodrich acknowledged that he had received several donations of sheet music for the use

²¹⁷ “Report Of Federal Music Project In Oregon ... for October, 1936,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370; “Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report For Month Of May, 1939,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2372, both NARA.

²¹⁸ “Narrative Report of Federal Music Projects in Oregon for October,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370, NARA.

of the classes and that the Portland Council of Jewish Women provided an additional piano for the classes in the southern section of the city.²¹⁹

The teaching units of the Oregon FMP developed in various forms. The Girls' Edison High School of Portland, for example, had requested Glee Club instruction in their new school, but the Board of Education had no available funds that could be used for that purpose; FMP support filled this need. The High School of Commerce prepared a course of Music Appreciation and utilized the WPA Band and Orchestra to exemplify the various selections to the students. The Director of the 4-H Clubs in a rural Oregon county received funding to put together a band and small orchestra among the young people of that organization. And throughout greater Portland six groups of boys attending various grade schools were organized into a coordinated Harmonica Band at the request of the Principals.²²⁰

In his final report, Goodrich noted that during the life of the Project the music teaching section had given many thousands of class piano and violin lessons to children and adults who could otherwise not have afforded to receive them. These lessons were given to girls in institutions such as the St. Rose Industrial Home, the Louise Home and similar places where "the inmates had been sent by the courts of domestic relations." The music projects also provided music instruction for kindergarten groups in the Jewish Neighborhood House in South Portland, the Chinese Mission in North Portland and, as mentioned above, gave band and vocal training to young people in the predominantly African American section of the Northeast part of the city. The FMP also worked with

²¹⁹ "Narrative Report Of Federal Music Project In Oregon From November 27, 1936 to December 27, 1936, Ibid.

²²⁰ "Narrative Report of Federal Music Projects in Oregon for October," *ibid.*

the Oregon Music Teachers Association in playing the orchestral accompaniments for the winners in the annual State Contests in piano, violin and voice for grade school, high school and college students.²²¹

During the life of the Oregon Project special attention was given to the training of choral groups in the various communities. Some 20 women's choral groups were brought into existence under the project programs. For the five years of the Music Project 50% of the singers in the Annual Parent-Teacher Coral Festival Concert were trained by WPA teachers. The projects helped to organize the First Choral Festival of Higher Educational Institutions in Oregon and in 1940 the full orchestra accompanied the concert in which six separate colleges or universities took part. The work of the choral groups also presented the first performances in the Northwest of the "Stabat Mater" of Dvorak and the "Requiem" of Mozart. Both of these works were rendered to the Latin text.²²²

The radio work of the Oregon FMP was well received and provided on the air performances of the Orchestras and bands for shut-ins and others. For a year and a half the Portland Federal Orchestra from the project gave a continuous series of radio programs on Station KGW-KEX in Portland under the title of "Builders of To-Morrow, the Life Story of an Empire." The series presented a dramatic and musical exposition of the many undertaking of the Works Projects Administration. These continued until ASCAP litigation prevented further transmission.²²³

²²¹ "Report On The Work Of The Oregon Music Project From 1935 to 1942," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, NARA.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid.

The Oregon FMP also effectively cooperated with the various Federal Theatre Projects throughout the state with generally positive results. As early as December 1936 the two facets of Federal One united to produce a quite well received Christmas presentation to a audience of several thousand. Over a hundred schoolchildren played harmonica selection, and an African American chorus sang spirituals “to the great delight of the audience.” The Theatre Project co-operated by presenting an elaborate and equally well-received Christmas play. Administratively, the two Federal One projects combined efforts more than in any other state; by November of 1937, with permission from Washington, the offices of Business manager and Agent Cashier were joined for the Oregon FMP and FTP. The Music Project assumed the payment for the venue and guest conductors, while the Theatre Project agreed to return 50% of the salary to funds of the Music Project. For the most part, the reorganization served to benefit both projects.²²⁴

Artistically, the Music and Theatre Projects cooperated in numerous stage productions. In November of 1937, at the request of the state director of the FTP, a WPA band played for six modern dances in the amphitheatre of the recently dedicated Timberline Lodge on the slope of Mount Hood; an FMP unit also provided the official music for the arrival and departure of President Roosevelt that month who attended a Theatre Project performance. In February of 1938 the Music Project loaned an orchestra of 24 pieces to the Theatre Project for the production of the play “Pursuit of Happiness.” The production was performed eight times over a two-week period. Much favorable comment on the performance of the pit orchestra was received from those who were

²²⁴ “Narrative Report Of Federal Music Project In Oregon From November 27, 1936 to December 27, 1936,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370; “Federal Music Project Of Oregon Narrative Report For Month Of October, 1937,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, both NARA.

present. Both FMP and FTP state administrators and many of the administrative staff were present at the first night's performance and many "personally expressed gratification for the use of an orchestra playing with the theatrical production."²²⁵

The Oregon FTP production of the much acclaimed – and in some regions quite controversial – "Power" was also performed in cooperation with the Music Projects. For the first showing at Benson High School in Portland, the FMP provided a group of woodwind, brass and drums to produce the music for the performance. Through the joint effort "a very successful synchronization of music and stage action was made." The Music Project also supplied an orchestra for several performances of the Theatre Project's version of "Hansel and Gretel." And, in the summer of 1937, the music projects inaugurated the new orchestral shell on the South Park Blocks near the business center of Portland. The work was made possible through the cooperation of both the Federal Music and Theatre Projects as well as the Civic Stadium Association, the Portland Symphony Orchestra, the National youths Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and the City Bureau of Parks. The degree of cooperation between the Oregon Theatre and Music Projects surpasses any state in the western region except California.²²⁶

During the years of the Oregon Federal Music Project the state director initiated the build up of a WPA library of over a thousand band, orchestra, chamber music, dance and

²²⁵ "Federal Music Project Narrative Report For September"; "Federal Music Project Narrative Report For Month Of February 1938," both Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, NARA.

²²⁶ "Narrative Report For Month Of March 1938 Federal Music Project – Oregon,"; "Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report For Month Of July, 1936," both Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371; "Federal Music Project Narrative Report For June," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, all NARA.

folk song compositions. Among these are to be found many of the finest classical and modern foreign and American works. The entire library was carefully indexed by a card system, with a separate card index of facts concerning the lives and works of the most important composers. Also placed in the library were 1494 sixteen-inch recordings received from the various radio stations throughout the state.

The library catalogue was divided into seven separate sections which attest to the conscious effort being made to present the ethnic pluralism of America's musical culture. The first category – designated *Indian Music* – includes such titles as “Chippewa Music,” “Indian Action Songs,” “Great Rain Dance of the Zunis,” and the musical compositions of and books about the musical culture of many Native American groups. The section *Negro Music* included such titles as “Slave Songs of the United States” by Robert Allen, “Minstrel Songs Old and New” William by Fisher, “Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly” by John Lomax and dozens of others. The remaining organizational categories were *Other Folk Songs and Ballads*, *Songs by Early American Composers*, *Collections of Patriotic Songs*, *Orchestral Music*, and *Chamber Music*.

Director Goodrich endeavored to maintain positive relations with the local musicians union, the Musicians Mutual Association that was a branch of the American Federation of Musicians and an affiliate of the Oregon State Federation of Labor. The pre-existing Portland Symphony remained unstable during the 1930s, and the FMP attempted to absorb those musicians terminated from the organization. “The Portland Symphony season comes to an end on Sunday, March 7th,” Goodrich reported, and “[w]e are now faced with the problem of how to care for the men from the orchestra who will request reinstatement with our units.” The WPA project clearly provided a “safety net” for these

musicians, as through out the history of the FMP the Portland Symphony was entirely suspended on numerous occasions.²²⁷

As in other states, the policy of the music projects was to avoid competition with private organizations or teachers, and Goodrich clearly adhered to this directive. Yet, as late as 1941, John A. Phillips, the President of the local AFM, protested to the state WPA administration that “the Musician’s Mutual Association hereby objects to any further activity on the part of the music project in the Symphonic field after the close of the current season of the WPA Philharmonic Orchestra.” Participation of the Music Project in this field “makes it impossible for the Portland Symphony Orchestra to resume” their concert season. There was “not room in this city ... to support two symphony orchestras at the same time.”²²⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the motivation of such criticism, as the WPA Symphony Orchestra performed only when in not competition with the Portland Symphony Orchestra, which maintained a quite fragile existence during the entire New Deal period. During the 1936-1937 and 1937-38 the Portland Symphony Orchestra presented short seasons of 14 to 16 weeks duration each year. The Music Project helped the continuance of Symphonic music in the state by employing many of the Symphony Orchestra musicians during the remaining 36 or 38 weeks of idleness. By 1941 the Portland Symphony Orchestra was suspended entirely.

The year of 1939-1940 brought into existence the Portland Philharmonic Association which presented a season of several notable concerts under the conductorship of a variety

²²⁷ “Federal Music Project Narrative Report For February, 1937,” Central Files State: Oregon, box 2370, NARA.

²²⁸ John A. Phillips to Howard O. Hunter, March 12, 1941, Central Files State: Oregon, box 2372, NARA.

of visiting musicians. The Philharmonic Orchestra of 65 performers was composed of two-thirds music project workers and the remaining one-third engaged and paid by the Philharmonic Board. The City of Portland was the legal sponsor for the season. The 1940-1941 season was again carried on by the Philharmonic Association under the legal sponsorship of the State Board of Higher Education. During the summer of 1941 the Project co-operated with the Summer Symphony Board under a signed agreement with the Board which served as the legal sponsor. The contributions of the project musicians, staff, and state supervisor saved the Summer Symphony Board from ending the season with a financial deficit. Paul Lemay, of the Duluth Symphony, conducted the summer series. State Supervisor Fredrick Goodrich scored the state song "Oregon, My Oregon" for the final number of the last concert.²²⁹

As with other states, the music projects of Oregon shifted focus in 1941 to aid in defense activities. In April a Project band in Portland presented a United States Army Recruiting Service broadcast on Station KGW-KEX. The broadcast was "very effective and many expressions of satisfaction came in from listeners." In May the Portland Columbia Air Base began rapid construction. The music projects presented weekly programs of the concert orchestra, and the swing band also played for a weekly dance. The officers of the base sought out the WPA music projects when looking to organize a men's glee club, a men's chorus for religious services, and other matters including a provision for teachers of various instruments that may be utilized in the organization of a

²²⁹ "Report On The Work Of The Oregon Music Project From 1935 to 1942," Central Files State: Oregon, box 2371, NARA.

band, orchestra and swing band, which were formed at the air base from among the men stationed there.²³⁰

The WPA music projects also took over the arranging of copying and orchestration of the selected hymns used in the religious services at the base, with a goal of “making the work more systematic.” According to Goodrich, the WPA projects “promised to give every possible music assistance for the thousands of young cadets who will be quartered at this new base.” During “Flying Cadet Week,” as well as other occasions, the WPA presented band concerts for the recruitment campaign of the United State Air Force.²³¹

The primary musical form of the Oregon music projects was classical symphonic or chamber music with an occasional dance or small string ensemble formed from the larger orchestra. Within this framework the Oregon FMP presented a variety of programs that always emphasized American compositions, regularly performing works by Oregonians. Symphonic performances based upon Native American themes, such as Charles Skilton and Victor Herbert, were some of the most popular pieces performed. The annual Festival of American music found considerable interest. The teaching units extended to communities that had never before enjoyed access to musical instruction, and radio broadcasts of the orchestras and bands reached thousands of listeners. The library accumulation of musical compositions and folksong collections demonstrate a commitment to the preservation of the country’s diverse musical traditions. These varied accomplishments, combined with state supervisor Goodrich’s continued efforts to bring the benefits of the WPA music programs to those citizens most disenfranchised by the economic depression, amount to what should be viewed as a highly successful endeavor.

²³⁰ “Defense Activities,” April 1941, Central Files State: Washington, box 2372, NARA.

²³¹ “Defense Activities,” May, 1941, Ibid.

Though small, the Federal Music Project in the state of Washington also garnered considerable enthusiasm and approval; even prior its inauguration, the prospective programs elicited interest far beyond the state lines. Being that several of the interior western states such as Wyoming, the Dakotas, Montana and Idaho did not maintain Music Projects, some of the early applicants from these sections were instead directed to Washington for possible assignment. “Robert W. Stevens of Great Falls, Montana ... applied for State Director of Music,” read one letter from the national administration to a WPA supervisor in Seattle; the aspirant music director was informed that the limited enrollment of relief musicians in Montana would indicate that a state supervisor for that state to be unnecessary. Instead, if they were “completely stuck for a Regional Music Director up there,” this man may be considered for the position in Washington. Though the national administration of the FMP demonstrated a reluctance to transfer musicians from one state to another, during its initial months of organization the state of Washington received many such requests, particularly from unemployed musicians in the Northern Plains states that did not support music projects.²³²

Also unlike several of the other western states, Washington maintained a thriving symphony orchestra even prior to the development of the New Deal music projects. The Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the first and leading symphony orchestra in the state, was first organized in 1903. Restructured in 1921 as the Seattle Philharmonic Orchestra, it continued to expand and gain wider recognition. By the 1930s, the organization again became known as the Seattle Symphony Orchestra. And a year before his resignation as national director of the Federal Music Project in 1939, and for several years following,

²³² Alma S. Munsell to Elizabeth L. Calhoun, November 25, 1935, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

Nikolai Sokoloff served in the capacity of conductor for this Seattle Symphony Orchestra.²³³

Subsequently, the Federal Music orchestra strove to perform in locations and venues that would not compete with the established organization. In order to avoid the conflicts that beset Colorado and other states, newly appointed regional director Bruno David Ussher appointed Basil Cameron as state music supervisor of Washington and John Spargur as his assistant; Cameron had served as conductor of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra since 1932, and Spargur conducted the Seattle Philharmonic beginning in 1921. “By uniting the two men in the interest of the Federal Music Project,” wrote Ussher to national director Sokoloff, “the musical development of Seattle should receive a great stimulus.” To further avoid any competition with the existing symphony, the WPA orchestra was located in Tacoma rather than Seattle.²³⁴

A total of 38 musicians auditioned for the initial project in Tacoma, with four disqualified for not performing to the standards set by the three-member audition board. Four additional musicians were hired on non-relief status in order to complete the instrumentation necessary for a symphony orchestra. In addition to the flutes, piccolos, violins, and other instruments that constituted the symphony, the Tacoma FMP also employed several saxophonists, an accordionist and xylophone players, drummers and other musicians that made up the band orchestra. The units proved an immediate and unqualified success. Early in the spring of the first season Fred Henricksin, president of

²³³ Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Washington, *The New Washington: A Guide to the Evergreen State* (Portland, Oregon: Binford & Mort Publisher, 1941), 135-41.

²³⁴ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, January 21, 1936, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

the Metropolitan Park District of Tacoma, wrote to inform Dr. Ussher that the Park commissioners “appreciate the Musician’s Project sponsored by our Board.” Indeed, the musicians had quite quickly “developed into a first-class band and are playing regularly in our parks to large audiences.” Their music was extraordinarily well received and greatly appreciated by our public. The “splendid band concerts” held at the various city parks achieved “more for the development of the cultural qualities of the general public than anything else that could be done.”²³⁵

Because of the preexistence of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra, the local American Federation of Musicians closely monitored FMP activities in the state to prevent competition with privately employed musicians. In the summer of 1937, for example, national AFM president Joseph Weber wrote directly to Nikolai Sokoloff that he was in receipt of a letter from the local union in Tacoma, Washington that “the General Motors Corporation have been showing a General Motors Scientific Circus, free admission to the public ... and a request has been made that the local WPA Band play for the parade in connection with the same.” The musicians’ union strenuously protested the performance, and Weber appealed to the national FMP director to restrict the WPA Band from the activities in the direction explained. Sokoloff immediately asked the Tacoma FMP supervisor to provide him with a report on this situation as soon as possible so that he may send an informed reply to Mr. Weber.²³⁶

²³⁵ Fred S. Henricksin to Bruno David Ussher, April 20, 1936, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

²³⁶ Joseph N. Weber to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 18, 1937; Nikolai Sokoloff to Joseph Rausch, August 20, 1937; Nikolai Sokoloff to Joseph N. Weber, August 20, 1937, all in Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

Not all of the interaction between the AFM and the music projects in Washington, however, revolved around issues of possible competition. Instead, the most common concern of the local unions was to have specific unemployed musicians placed on the FMP payroll. Here, again, the substantial sway the AFM wielded over the music project administration is clearly evident. In September of 1936, for example, regional director Ussher exerted considerable effort to bring one Nicholas Oeconomacos onto the Tacoma project. The Washington state WPA administrator denied the request because the eligibility certification of the musician in question had previously been cancelled. Mr. Oeconomacos, it turned out, was receiving an “old age pension,” and unless he was willing to forfeit this income he could not be certified for the music projects. “We do not wish to be arbitrary on this decision,” Don Abel, the WPA director, wrote to Ussher, “but we have a limited quota for this state and still have some 34,000 person awaiting assignment” who had no relief income whatsoever. To make an exception in this one circumstance, it was asserted, would establish a precedent for further exceptions not in accordance with federal regulations.²³⁷

But the case of Nicholas Oeconomacos did not end there. Regional director Ussher appealed to several other WPA officials as well as the Utah director of the Division of Employment in order to persuade his counterpart in Washington to reinstate Oeconomacos on the music projects. “I will appreciate, indeed,” wrote Ussher, “you ... going to bat on behalf of this excellent clarinet player.” Ussher included several reasons why an exception in the regulations should be made in the case of Mr. Oeconomacos: Not only was he well qualified to be a member of the band, but his enrollment was desired by

²³⁷ Don G. Abel to Bruno David Ussher, September 19, 1936, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

the district supervisor of the Federal Music Project; Dr. Sokoloff, federal director of the Music Project, endorsed the request; and lastly, and almost certainly most significantly, “such action has been requested by Mr. Joseph Weber, National President of the American Federation of Music Units.” A position was soon found for Nicholas Oeconomacos in the Washington music projects.²³⁸

Within the first full year of operation, a separate FMP unit would also begin in Seattle in order to engage the unemployed musicians of that city. With a quota reduction of late 1936, regional director Ussher and several of the state administrators suggested to Nikolai Sokoloff that the two units could be combined in order to lower operation costs. In addition to this suggested unification, every effort to obtain cooperating sponsors to contribute transportation would also be made. Sokoloff, however, did not approve the effort to combine the two music projects. “Knowing the background of these two cities,” he wrote to Ussher, “I think a much happier solution would be to have one small unit in each.” The national director further explained that he did not believe there will be much general satisfaction if both units were combined, so after the reductions were made on each unit, Sokoloff directed that they continue to function separately.”²³⁹

The eventual establishment of the FMP in Seattle appears to have created no controversies or charges of competition with the existing Symphony already in operation. Conversely, in the fall of 1938 the members of the local American Federation of Musicians union in Spokane, Washington, lobbied to have WPA music projects funded in

²³⁸ Bruno David Ussher to J. G. Johnson, September 28, 1936, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

²³⁹ Don G. Abel to Bruno David Ussher, December 9, 1936; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 14, 1936; Nikolai Sokoloff to Bruno David Ussher, December 22, 1936; all in Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

their city. Dudley Wilson, president of the Local 105 of the AFM, wrote to Congressman Charles H. Leavy that because a number of members were enrolled for WPA work he felt justified in asking for an appropriation for a Federal Music Band Project in his jurisdiction. Wilson sought to get the people of Spokane interested in “good band music” and when this interest is created “there will be sundry means of making such an organization self supporting.” Congressman Leavy wrote various WPA administrators in Washington, DC, in the attempt to establish such an orchestra; the letters were forward to Ellen Woodward who informed Leavy that the responsibility for establishing local units of the FMP lies with state officials in the Works Progress Administration. Due to looming budget cuts, the efforts in creating a Project in Spokane did not reach fruition.²⁴⁰

The monthly narrative reports from Seattle and Tacoma reveal that the vast majority of FMP concerts took place in public parks, hospitals, and especially schools. A reference to Georgetown School in Seattle noted: “One of the very few schools we had not been to before, they were very appreciative and requested several encores.” The same narrative report acknowledged a performance at Woodland Park, comprised of “Concert and Gala music. The event was the All City playfield Finals in track and field sports, etc.” The attendance was in excess of 5000. The Seattle WPA Band also appeared at the Orthopedic Hospital and was well received by patients, visitors and also the staff, as well as at St. Uprasia, a school for “girls of broken homes” who “really enjoyed the better music.” The total attendance for the entire month was 25,100. Similar

²⁴⁰ Dudley Wilson to Charles H. Leavy, September 6, 1938; Charles H. Leavy to Aubrey Williams, September 9, 1938; Ellen S. Woodward to Charles H. Leavy, September 17, 1938, all in Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

reports from the Tacoma project shows that nearly all performances were at either schools or public parks.²⁴¹

The WPA orchestras and bands in Washington performed a variety of popular symphonies, marches, and contemporary dance numbers, with the majority being American compositions. Sousa marches proved quite popular, as were lesser known works by regional American composers such as: *Spiritual Rivers Overture* by George Gault, *Down South – American Sketch* by W.H. Middleton, and the *Skyliner March* by Harry L. Alford. Gault's *Down South – American Sketch* utilized Native American themes in three movements of his Symphony, titled "Cake Walk," "Sand Dance," and "Big Boat Dance." The *New World Symphony* by Antonin Dvorak, inspired by African American spirituals and Native American themes, was also regularly performed.

Judging from both newspaper accounts as well as monthly reports, the most heralded performances of the Washington FMP involved the several collaborative efforts made with Federal Theatre. *An Evening with Dunbar*, produced in Seattle and discussed in greater detail in a later chapter, was clearly the most celebrated of these. Even more than other states, the periodic suspension and eventual curtailment of FMP activities in Washington elicited considerable objection from both the musicians and the general public. One letter addressed to President Roosevelt arrived from an FMP employee in Seattle who had been working on the WPA in the symphonies as a musician and, earlier in California, at high schools and various churches as a music teacher. "My family of

²⁴¹ "Federal Music Project – WPA Band – Seattle Unit," June 1, 1938 to June 30, 1938; "Federal Music Project (Seattle Unit), Narrative Report," September 1, 1938 to September 30, 1938; "Narrative Report: Federal Music Project #2162: Tacoma Unit," October 5, 1938; "Narrative Report: Federal Music Project #2162: Tacoma Wn." November 7, 1938, all in Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

three adults,” wrote John Kovach following the suspension of his music project position, “are forced to live on thirty cents a day which is not enough for a single dog ... while ... jobs created by you are not filled due to the reactionary elements bound to destroy your New Deal.”²⁴²

Countless petitions, each signed by dozens of Washingtonians protesting the curtailment of the Federal One programs, landed on the desks of both the President and Harry Hopkins. The Auto Mechanics Local #289 wrote that the service rendered to the community by these arts under progressive administration was of inestimable value and was aiding the cultural, social and political level of the people without which “the nation would be more easily disarmed against the inroads of reaction and anti-New Deal policies.” The American Communications Association Marine Local #6 stipulated that the Music Projects occupied a special position among the WPA programs and “through their intimate contact with the masses of the public and the dramatic nature of their work” caused them “to be singled out as a special target by anti-New Deal forces.” And the University of Washington Teachers’ Union argued:

At a time when Fascistic governments abroad are curbing all forms of expression, destroying public education, and persecuting writers and artists for race, religion or creed, it would seem that our duty as citizens of a democracy is to preserve and cultivate our national expression. The opinion of artists in all fields has been practically unanimous that the Arts Projects have contributed enormously to this end.

Similar letters came from the Four Arts Council, State of Washington, the Seattle chapter of the American Newspaper Guild, and an independent group known as The Artists’ Council.

²⁴² John, Catherine, and Mildred Kovach to Our Beloved President, July 28, 1938, Central Files State: Washington, box 2739, NARA.

The Music Projects in Washington did not restructure during the summer of 1939 with the advent of the WPA Music Programs; in 1942, however, the WPA would engaged a small number of musicians from Seattle and Tacoma as part of a statewide War Service Project. As attested by the both public enthusiasm during its existence and the strong defense provoked by its looming demise, the Washington State Federal Music Project garnered varied interest and support and attracted considerable attendance at parks, schools, and other facilities. These public performances often highlighted the works of contemporary American composers, and both the Seattle and Tacoma projects presented both symphonic and more popular band music.

The states discussed here as divisions of the FMP's western region and initially under the directorship of Bruno David Ussher included Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico; California, which would eventually be divided as North and Southern, shall be addressed in the next chapter. Texas and Oklahoma (as Mississippi and Louisiana) began under the FMP directorship of Lucile Lyons, and these states are sometimes included in scholarly studies of the regional West. When considering the popularity of its *Tipica Orquestas* and substantial Hispanic population, the Texas FMP closely resembled other projects of the Southwest; in respect to specific policies involving race and ethnicity, however, the Texas administration more closely aligned with states of the southern region. As for Oklahoma, the state's FMP developed a vibrant educational division, created a permanent symphony orchestra, and – as will be discussed in a later chapter – engaged in an extensive effort to collect indigenous folksong. “The great depression abounded with disruptive events,” concludes Michael Steiner, “that evoked a keen desire for the stability of place in the lives of many people.”

Beyond the formulations and notions of intellectuals and New Deal planners, however, we see in the various music programs “the immediate, eloquent responses of ordinary folk” that evoked a profound regional consciousness and enduring appreciation of place.²⁴³

²⁴³ Steiner, 446.

CHAPTER 5
INNOVATION, PARTICIPATION AND “A HORRIBLE
MUSIC STEW”: CALIFORNIA

The FMP in California represents the largest, most eclectic and expansive of the music projects in the western region. More so than in any other state outside of New York, the Opera proved quite popular in California, and musical productions such as *Run, Little Chillun*, with an extended run in Southern California, and *Take Your Choice* in San Francisco, drew tremendous critical praise and public interest. African American choral groups in both the Bay area and Los Angeles also garnered much approval and remained some of the most popular of all Federal One efforts. The California Folk Music Project, cosponsored by the University of California, Berkeley, collected and preserved an extensive array of vital traditional music, and several *Tipica Orquestas* in Southern California grew in size and popularity. Federal Music in California also engaged the first female conductor of a major symphony orchestra, with the pioneering accomplishments of Antonio Brico producing overwhelming excitement and positive response.

Yet, controversies and contentions – more often involving administrative and human relations issues than debates about musical presentation – enveloped the California music programs from genesis to terminus. Not long after the start of the Project a letter sent to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 703 workers on the Federal Music Project in Los Angeles called for “an investigation of these abhorrent conditions and the removal of the men and women responsible for this state of affairs.” Though “intended to relieve the misery of thousands of unemployed professional musicians” and “give them the hope and opportunity of regaining their former place of respected usefulness in society,” instead,

the letter maintained, the California FMP had “fallen into the hands of a group of selfish, bigoted, degenerates who place their personal likes and jealousies above the needs of the musicians whom they are being paid to assist.”²⁴⁴

The lengthy correspondence alleges a variety of scurrilous behaviors among Project leaders. Regional director Ussher was abetted in “his campaign of misdirection” by his “girl friend,” Bernice Brand, Director of the Choral Department. “This woman has a most questionable reputation for her utter disregard for the common decencies of life,” concludes the letter, and “her very intimate association with Ussher (whose wife and children are in Europe) is a matter of common scandalous gossip.” As for the new state director Harle Jervis the accusations were no less lurid or scathing; Jervis, the letter asserts, was appointed by her “close friend” Elizabeth Calhoun “with whom she is known to have participated in drunken orgies and indecencies while on Government travel orders.” The letter declares Jervis “an unpleasant female of no known ability as a musician or executive” and, because she professed to have no interest in relief clients, “treats them like swine because of their present financial handicaps.” The correspondence continues unrelentingly, each accusation more scathing than the previous, concluding with a string of anti-Semitic epithets bemoaning the number of “foreign-born Jews” who had taken positions from “Anglo-Saxons” on the Project.²⁴⁵

The incendiary letter to the President was forwarded to Nikolai Sokoloff, who was understandably quite alarmed by both its tone and content. Director Sokoloff had spent most of his career in the Middle West or East Coast, and when appointing personnel in

²⁴⁴ Los Angeles Music Project Workers to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, April 7, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

the West, such as regional director Ussher, he relied substantially upon the advice of musical authorities in that section of the country in order to make his decisions. One such individual was Linden Ellsworth (L.E.) Behymer, Manager of Distinguished Artists representing both the National Broadcasting Company Artists' Service and the Columbia Concerts Corporation.

L. E. Behymer stands as a primary leader in the development of musical culture in Los Angeles; Opera first came to the bustling city of just over 100,000 in 1900 when Behymer staged the American premiere of Puccini's *La Boheme*, and the next year Behymer presented Emma Calve and Enrico Caruso in *Carmen*. In 1915, Behymer brought to Los Angeles Nijinsky and his company of dancers from Diaghilev's Ballet Russe. When the Los Angeles Symphony folded in 1920, Behymer acquired some its best musicians and organized and promoted the Los Angeles Philharmonic. "From the start serious music in Los Angeles had a populist bent which it never lost," writes one cultural history, and: "The day after the Philharmonic made its debut at Trinity Auditorium, ... Behymer offered a Sunday afternoon concert of even more accessible music at ticket prices beginning at twenty-five cents." It was Behymer who had originally recommended Bruno David Ussher and several other prominent FMP appointments to Sokoloff.

"I am very conscientious in any enterprise I am associated with, and I have a reputation for being most fair and impartial in criticisms, conclusions or actions," Behymer assured Sokoloff. Accordingly, Behymer argued that he had made no mistake in recommending Dr. Bruno David Ussher for the position of FMP regional director for the Western eleven states. He went on to explain that among the 1700 members active in

the Los Angeles FMP, there existed some very difficult elements to handle and direct. He continued:

Los Angeles city and Los Angeles County have the reputation of having more cranks, cults, isms, and fault-finders than probably any other section – all ready to jump on any enterprise, to criticize and send on to Washington or anywhere else, protests of many colors, – that unless one is acquainted with conditions here, one might consider them very serious.

Director Ussher had performed admirably given the fact that he had inherited quite a number of “down-and-outers” from the old structure under SERA. Many of these musicians were of an indifferent quality and it was exceedingly difficult to assimilate them “among the better-class musicians who gradually came in.”²⁴⁶

Some of those remaining from the original formative period, Behymer explained, were both disappointed and disgruntled, and “some were natural trouble-makers, lazy and indifferent, thinking the U.S.A. owed them a living, whether they earned it or not.”

Behymer attested that Dr. Ussher and most of the people under him and associated with him were doing exceptionally fine work. But, “please remember,” he concluded, “the political situation is of such a character that if the hosts of Heaven were running a Project, many would want them thrown out.” If director Sokoloff were to pay a visit and

²⁴⁶ L.E. Behymer to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 17, 1936, General Files, box 376, NARA. The poet Carl Sandburg once facetiously postulated that the peopling of Southern California occurred when God took the state of Maine as a handle, and a strong shake sent all loose nuts rolling in that direction; certainly the region’s FMPs encountered far more personnel scandals than any other section. For reasons of brevity (a full delineation would necessitate multiple volumes) and decorum (the gentle reader will here be spared the lurid and often fantastic accusations surrounding members of the short-lived FMP Los Angeles ballet troupe), suffice to say the said projects remained in a rather constant state of turmoil. And, as Catherine Parsons Smith in *Making Music in Los Angeles* provides a fine narrative of the “fiasco” involving the production of the opera *La Traviata* that precipitated the temporary suspension of all opera programs in the Southern California FMP, this situation will also not be here repeated.

make a survey of the situation himself, Behymer was “sure the atmosphere would be as serenely clear and beautiful as a bright summer morning in sunny Southern California.” Within several months of this controversy Bruno David Ussher was terminated from the Project; the state director of California, however, remained for several years until her voluntary resignation from the FMP in the summer of 1938.²⁴⁷

Harle Jervis stands as one of the most enigmatic figures in all of Federal One. Certainly many of the continued firestorms surrounding the administration of the California Federal Music Projects during her tenure emanated directly from the state director. At turns charming and vindictive, calculating and impetuous, Jervis displayed an uncanny talent for transforming enemies into allies, as well as the reverse, with remarkable alacrity. In the summer of 1937, for example, Walter Weber, the President of the American Federation of Musicians, appealed directly to Senator Hiram Johnson to have the Northern California FMP separated from the administration in the southern section of the state. Weber cites the reason for this request:

The Board resents the dictatorial attitude of Miss Harley Jervis, State Director for California and asks that she be told that her decisions will apply to Southern California W.P.A. Music Project only, she being a resident of Los Angeles and knowing the problems of Los Angeles musicians, to confine her decisions to that jurisdiction only.

Copies of this letter were also sent to California Senator William McAdoo, WPA director Harry Hopkins, Nikolai Sokoloff, and six other elected and WPA officials.²⁴⁸

In short order, however, President Weber’s adamancy was effectively subdued by director Jervis’ persuasive powers; “I have had a very friendly interview with Walter

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Walter A. Weber to Senator Hiram Johnson, June 9, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA.

Weber,” she wrote Sokoloff. The AFM President’s request for her separation from Northern California had been, she informed the national director, based on a simple misunderstanding. Jervis assured Weber of her utmost cooperation and they “separated calling each other by our first names.” Though many of her professional dealings remained tempestuous, to her must also be accorded much of the credit for initiating many colorful and dynamic musical presentations throughout the state of California in the mid-1930s.²⁴⁹

The full biography of Harle Jervis remains obscure, her appointment as state director of such a large Project at a relatively young age somewhat inexplicable. A brief outline of her training and experience submitted to the WPA administration reveals that she earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Columbia University in 1924 (suggesting her age at the time of her appointment to be in her early thirties.) According to the vita, Jervis worked as a professional pianist in New York City for four years before serving as a member of the faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles, for three years. She spent three additional years in the advertising and publicity fields, as well as three years in further music study, including teaching and composition. “Teachers with whom I studied” included Alexis Kall, Max Rabinowitsh, and Mary Carr Moore in Los Angeles, Isador Phillip and Nadia Boulanger in France, Lois Von Haupt in New York City.²⁵⁰

There seems ample justification, however, to question the accuracy of the Jervis resume. Enemies inside and outside the Project – and their numbers were legion – routinely claimed the state director had no prior administrative experience, no musical

²⁴⁹ Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, July 1, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA.

²⁵⁰ “Harle Jervis,” Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

background, and had previously earned her living as a physical education teacher. A painstakingly researched chronological history of the FMP in San Francisco at the California Historical Society maintains the following entry for the state director:

3) Miss Harle Jervis, California FMP Director, salary \$400.00. Joined FMP, 1935; resigned June, 1938. Professional background prior to WPA very confused. Possibly appointed to FMP position through her connections (direct or indirect) with Eleanor Roosevelt; possibly a gym instructor for girls prior to WPA California State Music Director.

Jervis remained the persistent target of charges of inexperience and incompetence from antagonists both within the FMP as well as the California press.²⁵¹

Even more personal attacks against Jervis occurred with regularity, and from an assortment of complainants. Not untypical was a letter sent to the state Democratic Party Chairman James Farley from several dozen Southern Californians both inside and outside the program asserting that “since the State Director of this Project is a degenerate – the talk of the Project – it is known that she appoints men and women to supervisory [sic] jobs, not for their abilities, but only because, and if they are her kind...” The correspondence asserts other oft-repeated claims, suggesting that director Jervis, though “devoid of any qualities and record,” received preferential treatment because of her relationship with Ellen Woodward, assistant to Harry Hopkins. She was, according to the letter, a “pervert,” a “woman lover,” involved in “immorality.” Further, the group

²⁵¹ “The W.P.A. Federal Music Project in San Francisco, 1935-1942,” compiled by John A. Emerson, April 13, 1997, California Historical Society, 678 Mission Street, San Francisco, California.

charged Jervis with being part of a conspiracy of “Russian and German Jews” seeking to control the California FMP, and of being “a Republican.”²⁵²

Support for director Jervis was just as vigorous as the attacks were virulent. In a letter to Harry Hopkins the FMP supervisor Raymond Eldred of Santa Barbara, California, sought to “express to you my sincere appreciation of the fine work being done by Harle Jervis, State Director,” as well as several other administrators under her direction. “I consider Miss Jervis a most able and sincere executive,” Eldred continued, and thanked Hopkins for “the fine thing you have done and are doing in the furtherance of fine music in America.” Eldred dismissed the criticisms of Jervis as originating from “a few that are of the reactionary type” who “do not want to lend support to anything that smacks of Federal aid.” Supervisor Eldred repeated many of these sentiments in a series of newspaper editorials. “Working directly under Dr. Sokoloff are all the state directors,” Eldred informed the readers of the Santa Barbara *New Press*. “California is fortunate in having in this capacity Harle Jervis, a woman of exceptional executive ability and one

²⁵² Correspondence to James Parley, September 2, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 921, NARA. Catherine Parsons Smith, in her study *Making Music in Los Angeles: Transforming the Popular*, provides some possible insights into the life of Harle Jervis (though Parsons Smith is incorrect in her assertion, on page 229, that “Jervis ... had been the only female state director in the entire FMP.”) Information on Harle Jervis, writes Parsons Smith, “has been difficult to obtain, partly because her birth name, Hortense Gerv(w)itz, was long unknown to me.” Jervis passed away in London in 1997 before her godson, Peter-Gabriel de Loriol, learned of Parson Smith’s interest in her. According to de Loriol, Jervis was born in New York between 1898 and 1902 and was associated with dancers, including Martha Graham, as a pianist and may have earned a master’s degree in physical education at UCLA. After World War II she served as cultural attaché in Paris, where she was involved with the Aix-en-Provence Music Festival. Jervis spent the last several years of her life in de Loriol’s household. “How she came to secure the position as California state director,” concludes Parsons Smith, “remains unknown.” de Loril remembers his godmother with fondness and admiration, but adds that despite her brilliance she had an “uncontrollable temper” and “hated Arabs and Jews,” pgs. 322-323.

who views California's problems with a comprehensive and sympathetic understanding."²⁵³

The relationship between Harle Jervis and Bruno David Ussher began amicably but soon deteriorated. The request for official confirmation of Harle Jervis as state director for the Federal Music Project in California was sent to the national administration from regional director Ussher in early December 1935. "Miss Jervis," he confirmed, "is well suited for this position by way of business experience, temperament and musical training." Jervis had been highly recommended by Elizabeth Calhoun, "whose judgment and integrity I need not inform you." Ussher also informed director Sokoloff that because of "her musical judgment" Harle Jervis "should be able to be of real assistance to me." Her salary was set at \$2600. By September of 1936, because California carried the highest music personnel of 3069 persons, director Jervis was recommended for and received a salary increase to \$3000. (Ussher had suggested an even higher increase, to \$3200.)²⁵⁴

By late 1936, however, the first fissure in the relationship between Ussher and Jervis became evident; the source of the discord was the regional director's complaints about not being informed about specific administrative decisions. "I am a little concerned," Sokoloff wrote to Jervis, "regarding your not giving complete information concerning all the activities of Music Projects in your state to Dr. Ussher when he requests it and even if

²⁵³ Raymond B. Eldred to Harry L. Hopkins, September 8, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 921; Raymond B. Eldred, "Eldred Sees It as Greatest Hope of Accomplishing National Goal," December 20, 1937, Santa Barbara *News-Press*, box 49, both NARA.

²⁵⁴ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 2, 1935, Central Files State: California, box 917; Mr. Cogan to Miss Cronin, September 17, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, both NARA.

he doesn't request it." Though director Jervis was given authority to act in her state, Sokoloff continued, she "must not forget that Dr. Ussher represents me in the region." To Ussher national director Sokoloff wrote: "If there is any question in your mind, for instance, as to which units should be released from the California Project, or as to which units should retain or eliminate the non-relief personnel, and you should find yourselves in disagreement, please refer the matter to me."²⁵⁵

Ussher's correspondences with Jervis grew terse and demanding. "I cannot understand why you as state director do not have such information," he wrote concerning tardy financial statistics, adding: "...see to it that these figures reach me soon in quadruplicates." Ussher also expressed displeasure with the Jervis's dismissal of Vernice Brand, "whose outstanding work as Choral Supervisor," he argued, "has resulted in one of the best organized and most artistically efficient activities of the local program." Ussher also objected to a variety of the California FMP activities, including the production of the political satire *Take Your Choice* ("I am not in sympathy with the tenor nor much impressed with the caliber of the work done") the publication of *The Baton* (a "waste of money" and a "classic ... example of colored new and suppressed news") as well as business director Loren Green ("Miss Jervis' evil man Friday"). When Ussher was terminated from the FMP in January of 1937, a series of scathing correspondences, including one to an assistant to Ellen Woodward, identified "Jervisian duplicity" as the source of his demise: "To repeat, I do not want a job. But I wish to see human and musical fairplay, as I was able to promote every where except in Los Angeles, WHERE

²⁵⁵ Nikolai Sokoloff to Harle Jervis, December 1936; Nikolai Sokoloff to Bruno David Ussher, December 5, 1936, both Central Files State: California, box 919, NARA.

THE REAL INTERFERING WAS AND IS BEING CARRIED ON BY MISS JERVIS.”²⁵⁶

Unquestionably, the most publicly conspicuous administrative controversy to erupt in the California FMP involved the dismissal of Ernst Bacon as district supervisor of the San Francisco Music Project in May of 1937. The action elicited strong response from all Bay area media, the public, as well as other musicians and the musician’s union. With Bacon’s firing state director Jervis again found herself again in the center of an administrative storm, and was once more supported in a controversial decision by national director Sokoloff.

Ernst Bacon was, in many ways, the “rising star” of the California music projects. Born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1898, Bacon studied at both Northwestern University and the University of Chicago, and eventually took a Master’s degree from the University of California at Berkeley for the composition of *The Song of the Preacher* in 1935. As a composer, though strongly influenced by the nineteenth century classical music of Schubert and Brahms, Bacon primarily strove to create an American musical tradition in the manner that Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and others had done in the literary realm.

Bacon was particularly drawn to the works of Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and set a number of their poems to music. Another influence, as well as a personal friend, was the poet Carl Sandburg. Like Sandburg, Bacon was interested in the history and folklore

²⁵⁶ Bruno David Ussher to Harle Jervis, December 7, 1936, General Files, box 384; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 18, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 919; Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 17, 1936, General Files, box 384; Bruno David Ussher to Lawrence Morris, May 22, 1937, General Files, box 384, all NARA.

of the United States, and especially its indigenous music. Bacon's primary contribution to the FMP was the well-received political satire *Take Your Choice*. Nikolai Sokoloff clearly held Bacon in high regard, regularly describing him as one of the most "talented and serious musicians among the younger composers" whom the national director recommended "most highly as a person of fine musical integrity." Upon his death in 1990, Ernst Bacon had been awarded three Guggenheim Fellowships and a Pulitzer Prize, and his body of works included symphonies, chamber music, piano concertos, ballets, over 250 songs, as well as several published books about music.²⁵⁷

The circumstances leading to Ernst Bacon's dismissal from the FMP stemmed, at least superficially, from administrative conflicts. At the core of the contentions, however, existed a "power struggle" between Bacon and state director Jervis. Both of them young, talented and ambitious, both given to occasional flourishes of impudence, Ernst Bacon and Harle Jervis contributed proportionately to this high profile FMP tempest.

Bacon's tenure with the music projects – beginning months before the arrival of Jervis – commenced in a rather contentious atmosphere. "I want to say that we feel great injustice is being done in the appointment of Ernest (sic) Bacon as Supervisor of Music in San Francisco," Albert Greenbaum, local AFM President, wired Nikolai Sokoloff. Greenbaum argued that a member of the American Federation of Musicians should have been placed in charge of the Project. Sokoloff, however, confirmed the appointment of Bacon. The national director confided to California WPA official Elizabeth Calhoun and several others that he was frustrated and having a great deal of trouble appeasing the music union leadership. The AFM officials were, according to Sokoloff, trying to control

²⁵⁷ Nikolai Sokoloff to Henry Allen Moe, December 2, 1936, General Files, box 384, NARA.

the appointment of supervisors in the Federal Music Project, “and this, you know, I will not tolerate.”²⁵⁸

Though this conflict with the AFM soon lessened, Bacon himself did not approach his new position benignly. “I am sorry that he is turning out to be difficult to handle,” Sokoloff later wrote Elizabeth Calhoun concerning the continued controversies that seemed to follow Bacon with his new supervisory job. The national director had been clear when he offered the position that there would be very little opportunity for him to conduct orchestras; Nikolai Sokoloff certainly preferred to keep Bacon, but if he would not cooperate, felt he would have to be replaced. Sokoloff concluded that “it might be well ... to have Bacon as assistant to the supervisor so he may guide the musical end rather than the administrative.” In April, Sokoloff again expressed frustration with Bacon; the national director believed him tardy in producing a score commissioned through the Rockefeller Foundation for the purpose of have a few American composers write original works. “I was awfully disappointed to find that you haven’t started on your composition which you promised to do for me.” Sokoloff had hoped for the work to be presented at a May Festival, but this could not be done. If not completed by the first of June, the \$250 gift would need to be refunded.²⁵⁹

Ernst Bacon’s eventual dismissal as supervisor of the San Francisco FMP in May of 1937 constituted a melodrama for Bay area newspapers. “Bacon Asked to Quit in S. F. Federal Music Project Crisis” reported a banner headline in the San Francisco *Chronicle*.

²⁵⁸ Albert A. Greenbaum to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 29, 1935; Nikolai Sokoloff to Elizabeth L. Calhoun, October 31, 1935, both Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.; Nikolai Sokoloff to Ernst Bacon, April 11, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

And the rival *Examiner* informed their readers: “Discord has ripped asunder the concord of sweet co-operation in California’s WPA Federal Music Project.” The explanations given by Jervis to the media were vague; “I don’t want to issue statements hurtful to Mr. Bacon,” she said. “Please say we just didn’t agree. I tried to work with him. I couldn’t. I asked him to resign. He wouldn’t. So I released him.” Within several days, however, Ernst Bacon was calling for a full investigation of the California FMP, charging Jervis with “maladministration” in a laundry list of matters, including demotion of eminent musicians in charge of various projects throughout California, waste of Government funds, favoring foreign-born musicians against native talent, hostility toward organized labor and unnecessarily frequent changes in policy and personnel. He stated he was officially dismissed for “administrative inefficiency.”²⁶⁰

The local press sided for the most part with Bacon in the controversy; many included personal attacks on Jervis. Argued one editorial:

No one can find out what Miss Jervis ever did in the way of music. She is an outsider, pal of Mrs. Ellen S. Woodward, pal of someone else, who is probably a pal of Mrs. Roosevelt. Why should one of the premier music cities of the world, our own, be administered from Los Angeles? But if we must be managed by Los Angeles ... why not be governed by a Californian? Why are aliens sent into the state from the East? Why not send Miss Jervis back home to administer, if she can, in her own state? Her previous record shows she was athletic instructor in a girls’ school.

Other commentaries followed a similar vein. One writer who “admires the courage of Ernst Bacon,” argued that the FMP “has not been in accordance with the original intent

²⁶⁰ Alfred Frankenstein, “Bacon Asked to Quit in S.F. Federal Music Project Crisis,” May 27, 1937, San Francisco *Chronicle*; Alexander Fried, “Bacon Is Ousted as Music Project Chief,” San Francisco *Examiner*, May 27, 1937; “Bacon Asks Probe on Music Project Ouster,” May 31, 1937, San Francisco *Examiner*; “Bacon Seeking Music Project Investigation,” May 31, 1937, San Francisco *Chronicle*, all entry 826, box 48, all NARA.

and purpose of the WPA Act.” Another described Bacon as a man who conducted his office with the utmost sincerity and competency while state director Jervis had permitted personal friends or acquaintances to influence her in her prejudices against a capable musician. And in the weeks following Bacon’s termination the San Francisco *Chronicle* editorialized that “unless the WPA higher-ups” make an investigation and administrative reversal, a talented artist will have been “thrust out of his place under conditions deplored by San Francisco musical circles.” Indeed, while Bacon had eminently lived up to his national reputation as musician and composer, Harle Jervis was unknown until she became associated with the project. The brouhaha remained of interest to the Bay area press for some time.²⁶¹

“I am forwarding herewith reasons for the dismissal of Mr. Ernst Bacon as Supervisor of the San Francisco Music Project,” Jervis wrote to Sokoloff. According to the state director, there existed various phases of the administration of his Project which she believed to be irregular. It was determined that Bacon needed to acquire a business assistant approved by Jervis, but he resisted the directive. Bacon was asked to resign, he refused, and he therefore was dismissed. Harle Jervis repeated to Sokoloff what she had

²⁶¹ Claude A. La Belle, “‘Alien Control’ Of WPA Music; Dismissal of Bacon Brings Months of Trouble to Head; Much of Animosity Is Personal, but Unprejudiced Observer Sees Plenty of Proof That There Is Bad Odor to Administration,” July 10, 1937, San Francisco *Chronicle*; Alfred Metzger, “Playing Politics With Music,” June 11, 1937, *The Argonaut*, both Central Files State: California, box 921; Marjory M. Fisher, “Ernst Bacon Demands Thorough Sifting Of State Music Project; Claim Made Original Intent of WPA Has Been Changed; Charges Made; ‘Amateur Background’ Is Laid to Miss Harle Jervis,” June 7, 1937, San Francisco *News*, entry 826, box 48; numerous unidentified clipped articles, n.d., Central Files State: California, box 920, all NARA.

told the Bay Area press: “His musical background and integrity has never been questioned.”²⁶²

For his part, Bacon began a negative campaign against the state director and demanded that Harry Hopkins investigate the California FMP from the top down. His dismissal, he wrote Sokoloff, was the result of “dictatorial impatience” on the part of Jervis because he did not respond to her “every whim and fancy.” The action was “outrageous and calculated” by a state director who “is an amateur of no experience whatever.” Sokoloff, however, supported the decision, explaining to Ellen Woodward that Bacon had manifested a resentment of Jervis’ authority as state director, with the result that he offered her no cooperation whatever. Though Sokoloff had earlier specifically counseled Bacon to carry out the Harle Jervis’ directives, “I was advised that he had continued his non-cooperative attitude and procedure of independent action.” Sokoloff would “be very glad indeed” if Bacon’s request for investigation were undertaken; however, no such action ever occurred.²⁶³

²⁶² Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, May 29, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA.

²⁶³ Ernst Bacon to Dr. Sokoloff, n.d.; Nikolai Sokoloff to Ellen S. Woodward, June 17, 1937, both Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA. Evidently, a clandestine organization led by disgruntled former FMP employees began meeting in Los Angeles in the summer of 1937 that “disparaged the work of all the executives of the Federal Music Project beginning with Dr. Sokoloff,” according to a letter from director Gastone Usigil to Jervis; three separate gatherings in July attracted seventy to nearly 100 persons, and Dr. Bruno David Ussher served as primary speaker, (Gastone Usigli to Harle Jervis, July 16, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA.) The next month Linton H. Smith, a regional director of Women’s and Professional Projects, wrote to national director Mary Isham warning about ex-employees being “extremely bitter toward Harley [sic] Jervis,” and that “Dr. Usher [sic] would never be satisfied until she is removed from office of State Director.” Further, they “evidently are working with Ernest [sic] Bacon in an endeavor to originate as much adverse publicity as possible.” Further the Los Angeles *Times* music critic Isabel Morse Jones regularly received negative FMP information from

Some Bay region observers predicted the Bacon controversy would hasten the demise of the entire Project. The appointment of the renowned Dr. Alfred Hertz, the former San Francisco Orchestra leader, as the new Bay Region FMP supervisor calmed the storm. “All was serene today on the Federal Music Project,” reported the San Francisco *Call-Bulletin* as the Hertz assignment was announced. Another paper informed that the appointment of Hertz “should end the verbal tom-tom orchestration” which had prevailed since the removal of Ernst Bacon. According to state director Harle Jervis, (whose considerable powers of persuasion no doubt convinced the famed conductor to accept the position in the first place) the “appointment of Dr. Hertz has practically submerged further protest about Ernst Bacon’s dismissal.”²⁶⁴

Though the most highly publicized, the Ernst Bacon episode did not end the turmoil within the Jervis administration. In early 1938 Gastone Usigli addressed a long, vaguely worded letter of complaint to national director Sokoloff; up to this point, the accomplished conductor, composer and supervisor of the Los Angeles FMP had been an avid supporter of Harle Jervis in her on-going contentions with Ussher and others. Now, however, Usigli appealed to Sokoloff to “stop her abuses,” as all the efficient programs

the group, and “Dr. Usher had arranged for considerable adverse publicity in national music publications,” (Linton H. Smith to Mary H. Isham, August 6, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 921, NARA.)
²⁶⁴ “‘Papa’ Hertz Signs; Tune Up Music Project ‘Flats’; Federal Music Project Gets Veteran S.F. Director,” June 24, 1937, San Francisco *Call Bulletin*; Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, July 1, 1937, both Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA. ca-e-23, 25. Even the venerated Hertz could not escape the California FMP unscathed; at a meeting held March 17, 1938, members of various units of the Bay Region Federal Music Projects assembled as a protest committee, and drafted and passed unanimously a two-page resolution accusing Hertz of incompetence, financial extravagance, gross neglect, exploiting the Federal orchestras in advertisement for private commercial enterprise, and of being “unjustly arbitrary and autocratic,” (“Protest Committee, Bay Region Federal Music Projects, March 17, 1938,” Central Files State: California, box 922, NARA.)

he had formed “have been taken away by Miss Jervis.” Usigli seemed to be tendering his resignation. “I am completely amazed at your letter,” Sokoloff replied; “It grieves me greatly that California has always been in a horrible musical stew.”²⁶⁵

The Usigli matter resembled the Ernst Bacon dismissal; again director Jervis attempted to reorganize administratively causing consternation, and again Sokoloff came to her defense. At the center of all of these implosions was one Loren Greene. A man with no musical background and apparently little administrative experience, Jervis defended him as “a highly intelligent, straightforward and competent executive with a fine business background.” Sokoloff sought his demotion or dismissal on numerous occasions, but Jervis would insist upon his vitality to the Project; Greene remained a trusted confidant of director Jervis. Ernst Bacon, David Bruno Ussher, and Gastone Usigli each cited Loren Greene as a provocateur and the primary source of their discontent.²⁶⁶

In late January eight member of California Society of Composers wrote Ellen Woodward that the antagonistic attitude of Harle Jervis “augers ill for the future of the Project.” Eventually Congressman John Costello, responding to demands of his constituents, expressed concern to Harry Hopkins about the administration of the California FMP. Ellen Woodward assured Costello that Jervis had capably discharged her duties under trying and difficult circumstances, and therefore, she has no thought of replacing her. On June 8, 1938, Harle Jervis tendered her resignation from the Federal Music Project. She gave no specific reasons for her decision, but expressed to Dr.

²⁶⁵ Gastone Usigli to Dr. Sokoloff, January 8, 1938; Nikolai Sokoloff to Gastone Usigli, January 14, 1938, both Central Files State: California, box 922, NARA.

²⁶⁶ Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 28, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 919, NARA.

Sokoloff her “deep appreciation for the guidance and the invaluable support you have given me during ... my incumbence”²⁶⁷

Undoubtedly a considerable portion of the criticisms leveled toward Harle Jervis were motivated by resentments stemming from gender bias and stereotypes; more than a few of the written complaints to the FMP national administration demanded that she be replaced by a man who would “naturally” be “less emotional” than the female director. The degree to which the prevailing prejudices of the 1930s should be attributed to the state director’s difficulties would be difficult to access with any degree of certainty, but the decade does represent a unique era in gender history. “The New Deal” writes Barbara Melosh, “stands as the single example of a liberal American reform movement not accompanied by a resurgence of feminism.” Instead, Melosh continues, the ramifications of the Great Depression “reinforced the containment of feminism that had begun after the winning of suffrage.”²⁶⁸

“Don’t take a job from a man!” became a familiar slogan of the Depression era. The WPA followed the initiative of many state legislatures and eventually the federal government allowed public works to only hire one member of a family – this being nearly always the husband. School districts routinely released female teachers whose husbands had steady employment. A *depression*, of course, is not only an economic but psychological state, and Eleanor Roosevelt encouraged wives to provide moral support to their unemployed or underemployed husbands, exhorting: “It’s up to the women!”

²⁶⁷ Henri Lloyd Clement to Ellen S. Woodward, January 24, 1938; John M. Costello to Harry L. Hopkins, March 8, 1938, both Central Files State: California, box 922; Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, June 8, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 923, both NARA.

²⁶⁸ Melosh, *Engendered Culture*, 1.

Melosh accurately concludes that the New Deal “brought a host of women to positions of new prominence in federal government, but their policies were aimed at ameliorating women’s condition rather than demanding sexual equality.” The Federal Music Project replicated these policies and developments.²⁶⁹

On at least one specific occasion California state director Harle Jervis felt the need for careful consideration before placing a woman named Ruth Haroldson in a position as head of an orchestra where a vacancy existed. “Since we have never used women conductors in the past, I wanted to be doubly sure that she was satisfactory before sending her to Sacramento,” Harle Jervis acknowledged. Harlodson was first placed as assistant conductor with Modest Altschuler in Pasadena “so that we could have his opinion as to whether she would work out with a small orchestra.” (Ironically, the renowned Russian-born Altschuler had earlier attempted to deny women the opportunity to audition even as musicians on the WPA orchestras, before being swiftly and unequivocally overruled by Jervis, regional director Ussher and national director Sokoloff.) Though she performed admirably, Haroldson found herself the center of a “smear” campaign charging that she was, among other things, married to a wealthy lawyer and therefore not eligible for the WPA position. Though she was indeed single, non-relief status would not have disqualified her from the conductorship. Regardless, Miss Haroldson resigned from the FMP entirely and Bernard Callery, former conductor of the discontinued Carmel Music Project, accepted the conductorship of the Sacramento orchestra.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 4, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 921, NARA.

Whatever the basis for the fissure that eventually developed between Jervis and Ussher, the record does not indicate that the regional director discriminated in any manner against female employees; his promotion and advocacy of both Helen Chandler Ryan in New Mexico and Lucile Lyons in Texas do not suggest that Bruno David Ussher harbored such attitudes. Indeed, Harle Jervis, Helen Chandler Ryan and Lucile Lyons remained the only female state directors in the FMP, and Bruno David Ussher recommended all three for their positions. Further, Nikolai Sokoloff supported Ussher in each of these decisions.

Early on Dr. Ussher stood firm with state director Jervis in challenging Modest Altschuler's efforts to disenfranchise women from the California Music Project symphonies. And in July of 1936 Dr. Ussher was "decidedly disappointed" with a story running in the Los Angeles *Times* about the FMP teaching programs that "does not even mention Mrs. Abbie Norton Jamison, associate supervisor of the education department ... without whose help" the entire program would have been "difficult to carry on." Ussher continued:

If it is the criterion of a tendency to give women the "back seat" (first manifested when Altschuler refused to admit women to "his" symphony) then I desire it understood definitely that I disapprove emphatically.

Please instruct [the editor] Mr. Carter to get a picture of Mrs. Jamison in to the papers, giving her due credit. She is a music and education pioneer in this city, has done most splendid work in the development of music clubs and music in women's clubs, prominently affiliated with the Nat. Fed. of Music Clubs etc. etc.

“WHO OK’d the story?” Ussher asked pointedly of director Jervis. Ussher expressed satisfaction with other articles published in the same issue of the *Los Angeles Times* involving other activities of the FMP.²⁷¹

On more than one occasion specific situations of what would a half-century later be identified as “sexual harassment” came to light, and these were not ignored within the California FMP. A memorandum to Ellen Woodward in Washington, DC, from a supervisor in Southern California, for example, stated that he was “in receipt of information” that “Gladys Brana, a young girl ... complained ... from time to time, regarding the conduct of Paul de Ville, a Federal Music Project supervisor” in Los Angeles. According to the complaint, “Miss Brana stated that unless she acceded to the demands of Mr. De Ville, which were of an immoral nature, that she would be discharged immediately from the Music Project, on which she was employed.” There was a separate complaint “that Cecile Garren, a widow with two children, had been constantly harassed and threatened by De Ville during the period of time she was employed on the Federal Music Project in Los Angeles.” How Woodward adjudicated this individual case is unclear, but similar situations were not uncommonly addressed in the California program.²⁷²

Women active in Music Projects in the West, however, often found themselves described in press accounts in manners markedly different than their male counterparts. Whereas men would be primarily presented in reference to their musical prowess and accomplishments, women musicians would just as often be described in terms of their

²⁷¹ Bruno David Ussher to Harle Jervis, July 26, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

²⁷² Mr. Bounds to Mrs. Woodward, May 19, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920, NARA.

physical appearance. For example, the Los Angeles *Examiner* reported in 1939 that Sylvia Kunin, a “petite young guest pianist,” would be making her local debut with the 100-piece Federal Music ensemble the following evening at the Hollywood Playhouse; the Los Angeles *Daily News* also printed a story about the “petite ... attractive 21-year-old guest pianist.” And a performance of Hollace Shaw, “one of a family honored in this community,” as a guest vocalist with the WPA symphony in San Diego elicited such press accounts heralding the “ slim, beautiful, titan haired young girl.” A month later columnist Sally Brown Moody with the San Diego *Union* wrote of Lillian Steuber, pianist and guest soloist with the San Diego Symphony orchestra at the Ford Bowl. The three-column headline (with large photo) told of the “Slim, Poised Pianist” who, the story related, possessed “the spirituelle type of beauty.”²⁷³

Dr. Antonia Brico remains arguably the single most renowned of all women affiliated with the WPA music projects. Born in Rotterdam in the Netherlands in 1902, her birth parents, Johannes and Antonia Brico, died when she was two years old. Brico and her foster parents immigrated to the United States in 1907 and settled in Oakland, California. Brico’s childhood was not a happy one, and a doctor recommended piano lessons at age 10 to alleviate severe nail biting precipitated by a nervous condition. The young musician showed remarkable prowess. Though she originally dreamed of becoming a concert pianist, she set her sights on conducting after attending a park concert given by Paul Steindorff. After high school graduation, Brico reclaimed her birth name, ended all

²⁷³ “Sylvia Kunin, Pianist, Plays Tomorrow,” January 23, 1939, Los Angeles *Examiner*; “Marriage With Flying Start,” January 16, 1939, Los Angeles *Daily News*, both entry 826, box 52; Sally Brown Moody, “Hollace Shaw Wins Acclaim At Symphony,” July 29, 1939, San Diego *Union*; “Slim, Poised Pianist Will Be Guest Artist On Tonight’s Symphony Program In Park, Lillian Steuber Praises Sokoloff As Conductor,” August 8, 1939, San Diego *Union*, both entry 826, box 54, NARA.

contact with her foster parents, and began study under Steindorff at the University of California at Berkeley.²⁷⁴

She graduated with honors in 1923, and advisors recommended a teaching job; conducting was not an avenue then open to women. Instead, Antonia Brico moved to New York City to study with Sigismond Stowjowski for two years and then to Hamburg, Germany, the only student ever accepted by the legendary Karl Muck. She became the first American, and only the second female, to graduate from the Berlin State Academy of Music in 1927. Before her work with the WPA in California, Brico made her conducting debut with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1930, and for two years toured Europe conducting symphony orchestras in Germany, Latvia and Poland. Despite overwhelmingly positive reviews, (“Miss Brico displayed unmistakable and outstanding gifts as a conductor,” wrote the *Allgemeine Zeitung* of her Berlin performance) she was not able to obtain a permanent conducting position upon her return to the United States.

In 1937 Brico began conducting the Bay Region Orchestra of the Federal Music Project; prior to this she had pioneered (with the help of Eleanor Roosevelt) the Women’s Symphony Orchestra in New York City, which would later become the Brico Symphony Orchestra following the admission of men. In 1938 the usually taciturn Bay region supervisor Homer Henley felt compelled to write a lengthy letter to Nikolai Sokoloff about the “outstanding manner,” both artistic and financial, in which Brico had impacted the Project. Her performances had been “of the highest character” that “captivated our

²⁷⁴ Folk singer Judy Collins and filmmaker Jill Godmilow created and released a highly acclaimed documentary film portraying Brico’s life, *Antonia: A Portrait of a Woman*, in 1974. The film chronicles the career of a woman of extraordinary talent, perseverance and humor despite the frustrations and discrimination she encountered throughout her life.

communities” of Oakland and San Francisco and would compare favorably with any outstanding conductor’s work across the country. Further, during Dr. Brico’s incumbency practically every concert had sold out, even at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium that held over 7000 concert-goers. Certainly no other conductor in the western region of the FMP rivaled Brico in the amount of excitement and interest she generated in symphonic music.²⁷⁵

Yet Alfred Hertz, newly appointed supervisor and conductor in the Bay region, wrote to Sokoloff that in spite of the fact that Dr. Brico attracted capacity houses, “she has been badly ‘roasted’ in every San Francisco paper after each of her appearances.” This may be something of an overstatement borne of professional jealousy, but Brico did regularly receive rather patronizing journalistic reviews given her indisputable talents and commercial successes. (The one notable exception would be the Communist press which, as discussed in chapter 5, consistently accorded Conductor Brico the respect she deserved.)²⁷⁶

More often than not her performances would be reported as novelty rather than accomplishment. Justifiable praise often mixed with what appears almost requisite stereotyping. “Anyone who thinks a woman cannot be an effective orchestra conductor should have been at the Veterans’ Auditorium last night,” reported the San Francisco *Examiner* in review of one of Brico’s first performances with the FMP. But, the critic seemed compelled to add: “Not always, indeed, was her performance mature.” Rather, “On the whole, though good in quality, it was emotionally overdriven.” And in 1938 the

²⁷⁵ Homer Henley to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 2, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 924, NARA.

²⁷⁶ Alfred Hertz to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 15, 1938, *ibid.*

Oakland *Telegraph* printed an unflattering caricature of Brico conducting an orchestra of comic hobgoblins, leprechauns and other farcical creatures above a caption: “Dr. Antonia Brico, directing silly Symphony.”²⁷⁷

But largely the press reports reflected both the curiosity and enthusiasm the wider public maintained for Antonia Brico, which in many ways paralleled the popularity of the various ethnic music genres of the FMP throughout the West. And the San Francisco Bay area press also provided a forum for which Dr. Brico to regularly express her beliefs concerning gender equity; “Providence,” she told on reporter, “has not distributed talent only among men.” Brico was certainly not reticent in articulating ideas that were not widely held in Depression-era America:

Women who are talented musically have as much ability as men. There is no difference, and there should be no difference either in recognition or opportunity. There is not even any difference in their temperament. A woman physician has the same temperament as a man physician and in the same way a woman musician’s temperament is the same as a man musician. Certainly, I don’t urge all women with a little talent to go out and try to become professional musicians. But I do say that there should be no discrimination between two musicians just because one of them wears skirts.

The WPA music programs provided an opportunity for the considerable talents of Antonia Brico that would elude her the rest of her life; never able to secure a permanent

²⁷⁷ Alexander Fried, “Woman Conducts; Antonio Brico Does Effective Job,” October 6, 1937, San Francisco *Examiner*, entry 826, box 49; “Conductor Brico At Auditorium,” August 19, 1938, Oakland *Telegraph*, entry 826, box 51, both NARA. Brico returned briefly to New York City in 1938 to become the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. A music critic applauded her interpretation of the Sibelius *Symphony #1*, reporting that it “brought one of the most spontaneous and sustained outbursts of approval of the ... season.” (“Philharmonic Led by Antonia Brico,” New York *Times* review, July 26, 1938.) Regardless, Mrs. Charles Guggenheimer, long a patron of the New York City arts, told Brico: “It’s a disgrace that a woman is conducting this venerable orchestra.” (“Music, Maestra,” Hubert Saal with Abigail Kuflik, *Newsweek*, August 18, 1975.)

conducting post, she settled in Denver after the War, taught piano and took whatever guest conducting jobs she was offered. She retired from conducting at age 79, but continued teaching. Antonia Brico passed away in a nursing home in Denver in 1989 at the age of 87.²⁷⁸

The music projects of Southern California regularly performed the musical compositions of several American female composers, most notably the works of Mary Carr Moore. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1873, she moved to the West coast with her family at the age of ten, where she lived the rest of her life. Though at first a singer, Moore became interested in composition, especially opera. She would compose a total of eight grand operas, including the frequently performed *Narcissa* and *David Rizzo*. Financial restraints prevented her from studying abroad, which was customary for serious musicians of her day. Moore was also barred by both gender and geography from working in professional opera houses with professional singers and musicians, where she might have found the stimulation to develop her gifts even further. Yet, “she made the most of the opportunities that came her way, and left an important body of work that deserves more exploration than it has received to date” concludes one brief biography.²⁷⁹

Mary Carr Moore’s involvement with the California FMP included her important role as member of the Advisory Committee, through which she served as a fervent advocate of American composers. Her achievements with the Federal Music Project included offering assistance in developing of the California Society of Composers, which created

²⁷⁸ “Brico Backs Women As Musicians,” August 18, 1938, Oakland *Post-Enquirer*, entry 826, box 51, NARA.

²⁷⁹ see Catherine Parsons Smith and Cynthia S. Richardson, *American Composer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987) and “Moore, Mary Carr,” *American National Biography*, John A. Garraty, Mark C. Carnes, editors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

festivals of American Music beginning in 1937. Mary Carr Moore also conducted during her time with the FMP. One press account described Moore as “a little lady, several times a grandmother, who has written more grand operas than any other woman in the United States.” Her musical output, according to the same critic included “a great many songs, much chamber music, several symphonic suites, a concerto or two, and probably many other things that I don’t know about.” Her two major symphonies, *Indian Idyll* and *Ka-Mi-A-Kin*, were performed regularly throughout the state by WPA orchestras. On several occasions, Carr Moore conducted her own symphonies. “Her conducting is of intelligent and quiet order,” the review continued, “and she has the knack of fusing all parts into balanced ensemble.”²⁸⁰

The FMP symphonies in California provided avenues open to female musicians that were otherwise unattainable; like most other American orchestras of the 1930s, the Los Angeles and San Francisco Philharmonics did not accept women as members. One enthusiastic supporter from Southern California wrote directly to Eleanor Roosevelt that the Federal Orchestra surpassed the private orchestra:

May I say how much we have enjoyed the Federal Symphony Concerts – The Federal Orchestra will soon catch up with our Philharmonic Orchestra. They are ahead of the Philharmonic in having women players. We are looking forward to the Federal grand opera season.

It seems so nice to have someone in the White House who realizes that there are people in the United States, instead of being cognizant of Wall Street only, as previously.

Again, though it is difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty, one must assume Eleanor Roosevelt played a significant role in the increased participation of women in

²⁸⁰ Francis Kendig, “Concerts in Review,” May 29, 1937, Los Angeles *Saturday Night*, entry 826, box 48, NARA.

Federal One, and specifically the Music Projects. Her efforts in the California FMP generally, however, are indisputable. In a letter to President Roosevelt from Bay Region supervisor Homer Henley, it was claimed:

This Project has been flourishing now for nearly three years, by reason, notably, of the personal interest taken in it by Mrs. Roosevelt and yourself. We feel very proud that we were the Number One, or first Federal Music Project in the United States, and that it was due chiefly to the personal efforts of Mrs. Roosevelt that we became so.

Mrs. Roosevelt personally visited California as First Lady on two occasions, and expressed interest in the Federal One programs, and specifically the FMP, during each visit.²⁸¹

The commitment of the FMP to engage female musicians came from the highest administrative sources. As mentioned, Nikolai Sokoloff's support for the participation of women in symphony orchestras finds antecedents prior to his WPA directorship; from 1916 to 1917, as musical director of the San Francisco People's Philharmonic Orchestra, he had insisted upon including women in the orchestra at the same pay scale as men.

And, according to one undated Music Project press release:

Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, director of the Federal Music Project, has held through a long professional career that the chairs in the great orchestras should be available to women where their musicianship and talent are equal to those of men. During fifteen years as conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra he admitted women musicians in its ranks.

It is not here implied that the number of women employed by WPA Music at any time reached a parity with men; the same press release confirms that among the 14,900 individuals at that time on the rolls of the FMP, 2600 of them were female. Further, the

²⁸¹ Elsie G. Wedler to Mrs. Roosevelt, June 11, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 920; Homer Henley to the President of the United States, December 5, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 926, both NARA.

greater number of these women were “engaged in the educational activities which enter the remotest rural areas as well as the congested centers of the great cities.” But while “naturally they appear in the opera projects and oratoric choruses,” many women also performed in the instrumental ensembles, the concert orchestras and even the larger symphony orchestras.²⁸²

As in most other state projects, classical symphonic music initially maintained preeminence over other musical genres early in the development of the California FMP. Within the first year of operation, however, the programs became more varied, including a wide variety of operas (several with all black performers), African American spiritual choirs, musicals, (specifically *Take Your Choice*, which dealt with topical and political issues) as well as some popular and ethnic folk music. As in other states where the Federal Music Projects (and later WPA Music Programs) existed, California programs became ethnically and musically diverse as the Project developed. And, as in other states of the western region, this loosening in initial policy came from both the local and upper administrative levels.

“May I sum up some of the outstanding results?” L.E. Behymer rhetorically asked director Sokoloff when touting the achievements of the California FMP after ten months. And it was not the classical symphonic music that the legendary Los Angeles music promoter first mentioned when pointing out the successes of the local music projects. “Take the Colored Group – it is one of the finest Colored Choruses it has been my pleasure to hear.” And another “outstanding feature of the Project are the Mexican and Spanish Groups.” Those in the western region, Behymer continued, “have for a century

²⁸² “From the Federal Music Project: Women’s Orchestra Story With five photographs,” entry 815, box 29, NARA.

heard this character of music; it is a heritage from the old days of the Dons and Padres.” Behymer went on to speak of the successes of the light opera *Mikado* and, lastly, the fine reception of the symphony concerts in Trinity Auditorium. For Californians with far less musical background than Linden Ellsworth Behymer, the ethnic presentations became easily the most popular aspects of the Projects.²⁸³

The popularity and demand for the various forms of folk music – such as hillbilly, cowboy, Mexican *tipica* and other ethnic presentations – existed even prior to the administrative development of the FMP in California. “I have received letters from every camp superintendent and recreational director in this area, and they stated emphatically, that the type of music which is most appreciated by the men in the camps, is the Hill-Billy type,” wrote A. A. Tormohlen, Recreational Director of the FERA and ERA camps to W. L. Dean, then acting director of the Musicians Project. Though Tormohlen engaged both drama and choral projects in the camps, the hillbilly musicians “make the men in the camps feel that they are on the basis as these musicians are.” Indeed, it “being the object of the Federal Government to keep the unemployed men in camps and satisfied,” only the hillbilly music had been effective in accomplishing this goal.²⁸⁴

Certainly one of the most tenacious and ongoing early controversies concerning choice of musical presentation involved the twelve-piece Glendale Banjo Band as well as several hillbilly and cowboy bands operating around Los Angeles. It is also one of the more telling episodes in the early development of the FMP in California. The dilemma would soon involve statesmen and citizenry, musicians and laymen, and address issues ranging from naturalization, race, region, and class. The reaction of the FMP national

²⁸³ L.E. Behymer to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 17, 1936, General Files, box 376, NARA.

²⁸⁴ A.A. Tormohlen to W.L. Dean, July 31, 1935, *ibid.*

administration demonstrates the initial preference for traditional European musical forms, yet also illuminates the New Deal emphasis upon cultural inclusion and diversity of expression.

In November of 1935 each of the twelve musicians of the Glendale Banjo Band had been approved and began performing around the greater Los Angeles region almost immediately. The group played a variety of programs and venues, including high schools, CCC camps, civic clubs, and fraternal organizations. One of many responses from throughout the community came from Reverend E. E. Haring, General Chaplain of the Los Angeles County General Hospital, who in a lengthy letter wished to convey the great benefit the entertainment provided for the patients who were “intensely delighted.”

The patients and hospital staff had disliked “having so much foreign music foisted upon them” to the neglect of American music, and this banjo band and their old-time music “maintain the true American spirit in these great United States.” The response typified many similar letters of approval.²⁸⁵

In early May of next year, however, the musicians received verbal notice, “like a bolt from the blue,” that WPA support for the Glendale Banjo Band would be discontinued on the 20th of the month. “Each of us has taken the required musical audition, and passing the same successfully, has for months passed performed conscientiously and sincerely duties required of us in the capacity of a banjo band,” wrote one of the terminated musicians to Harry Hopkins. The musician pointed out to Hopkins that they face disbandment “irregardless of the fact that there is being retained a music unit of Mexicans, 12 to 15 of whom are, as yet, unnaturalized [sic] citizens, also a unit of

²⁸⁵ E.E Haring to O.W. Bruce, February 12, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

approximately 15 Hawaiians who play fretted instruments the same as do we.” The writer assured Hopkins that the members of the banjo unit “do not speak derogatorily of the Mexicans and Hawaiians – God knows, they too, need aid,” but the “boys of our unit are men of family and loyal Americans,” many of whom have sons “whom are ready and able to bear arms for our country should occasion obtain.”²⁸⁶

Glendale, California, in the 1930s was a white working-class community, consisting of a large number of transplanted Midwesterners who had moved to sunny Southern California following the end of the Great War. The FMP Glendale Banjo Band performed such concert selections as “Stars and Stripes Forever,” the “Eagle March,” and several other John Philip Sousa marches. They also played, according to the Band’s spokesman, a symphonic arrangement of Liebestraum’s “World is Waiting for the Sunrise,” and the “Star Spangled Banner.” But, “to be frank, Mr. Hopkins,” the spokesman continued, “we do also plead guilty to playing our American folk songs and the popular songs which become so much a part of our fellow citizens through the vehicle of Radio, Motion Pictures, etc.” The implication, of course, is that the writer was well aware that these numbers were not held in high regard by the Music Project administration.²⁸⁷

The Banjo Band leader relayed to Hopkins that he was told by a WPA representative: “We don’t care what the people want, they are going to take what we give them and like it.” This same administrator acknowledged his prejudice against fretted instruments in general and the banjo specifically, “although woefully ignorant of the same.” He also

²⁸⁶ George Clarke to Harry L. Hopkins, May 19, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

stated “most vociferously” that “the knife of slaughter would not stop until the entire music project here was stripped down to symphony orchestras...” Indeed, the WPA official decreed that “there’s no place for a Banjo band on a Federal Music Project.” The Banjo musicians subsequently appealed to Dr. Ussher, Mr. McGarrigle, and other administrators, “all down the line.”²⁸⁸

When the banjo musicians of Glendale began working for the Federal Music Project, they earned from \$85 to \$94 per month – the FMP rates for professional musicians in Southern California. With the disbanding of the Glendale Banjo Band, most of the twelve members accepted manual labor “pick and shovel” jobs with the WPA, which paid \$55 to \$65. “We are fighting for the security of our wives and children,” Clarke wrote to Hopkins. “When we ... started working for our Government ... our hearts were made glad and our spirits were revived.” Performing as part of the FMP “tended to bring better conditions under which to raise our families. Is all of this to be made nil?”²⁸⁹

But the Glendale Banjo Band saga did not cease. Mr. Clarke’s letter to Harry Hopkins traveled to Bruce McClure and then to regional director Bruno David Ussher. In response, Ussher acknowledged he had already been familiar with the objections raised by the discontinuance of the banjo unit, which had performed for several months in suburban areas of the Los Angeles Federal Music Project. “Musically,” Ussher continued, “this unit should never have been encouraged in the Music Project, if the word ‘professional’ is to be taken in the better sense of its meaning.” Dr. Ussher instructed the district supervisor to investigate Mr. Clarke’s allegation that a band consisting of “unnaturalized Mexicans is being maintained on the Federal Music Project payrolls.”

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

The district supervisor would also look into the complaints involving the Hawaiian unit.²⁹⁰

So heated would the controversy become that Oscar W. Bruce, Project supervisor of the Los Angeles Federal Music Project, tendered his resignation as a result of the termination of the Glendale Banjo Band and another group of Cowboy and Hillbilly musicians. "I am resigning because I protest against the un-American and Communistic way this project is being run," stated Bruce in his letter of resignation. Like Clarke, he objected to the alleged hiring of musicians who were not naturalized citizens, as well as the employment on the FMP of foreign-born musicians rather than "true native ... Americans who know no other country and who love, live and die in our own native land." Bruce further explained the reasons for his departure:

You have on this project Symphony and Concert Bands, Dance Bands, Hungarian, Hawaiian and Mexican Bands, but there is no room for our own American folk music bands whose music and songs are of our plains, ranches, farms and hills and it wouldn't be just to my countrymen and to our own music to stay and keep my job while our native musicians and our old supervisors, (who have worked day and night to make this an outstanding project for our government and country) are being dismissed or transferred to other projects.

The folk units, according to the former Project supervisor, "sing and play one hundred per cent American music," and he believed their dismissal unjust and intolerable.²⁹¹

National director Sokoloff's response to the festering crisis was quite telling. The resigning Mr. Bruce "makes a very important point," Sokoloff maintained. Certainly it was the most desirable step for these "non-professional" units to be assigned to a

²⁹⁰ Bruno David Ussher to Bruce McClure, "Complaint of George Clarke against Dismissal of Glendale Banjo Unit," June 10, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

²⁹¹ Oscar W. Bruce to James G. McGarrigle, June 26, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

Recreation project. But, if “the Hungarian, Hawaiian, and Mexican bands” remain part of the FMP, wrote Sokoloff, “then we shall certainly have to reinstate the hill-billy outfit” as well. Though he probably would have preferred all popular and folk units transferred to the Recreation projects, it seems clear that Sokoloff was reluctant to discontinue the groups performing various forms of ethnic music; in effect, the presence of these groups “saved” several of the Anglo units from removal within the ranks of the FMP. Though the hillbilly and cowboy bands would remain, their early existence (like that of the Hungarian, Hawaiian and Mexican units) would be precarious dependent upon periodic cuts in national funding that threatened the entire FMP.²⁹²

Though the hillbilly and cowboy units were reinstated, the fate of the Glendale Banjo Band was not as fortuitous; the most probable explanation would be that regional director Bruno David Ussher remained obstinate in his rejection of the group. Letters continued for some time to pour into WPA administrators protesting the Banjo Band’s demise. Harry Hopkins received one angry correspondence from a former band member who wrote to “demand an immediate investigation” within the next three weeks “or we will have to turn the matter over to the President & expose it in local newspapers.” The resentment fueled animosity toward the various ethnic musical units: “There is another

²⁹² Nikolai Sokoloff to Harle Jervis, July 3, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA. While I strongly agree with most of Catherine Parson Smith’s perceptive insights in the final chapter, “Calling the Tune: The Los Angeles Federal Music Project,” of her book *Making Music in Los Angeles*, I dispute her assertion that “the non-Anglo units became the first victims when Congress began to cut the number of musicians it would support,” pg. 221. Certainly, the symphonic and light operas were initially accorded higher priority, but, as the situation with the hillbilly, cowboy, and banjo bands demonstrate, these cuts were based more upon 1930s notions of an artistic, musical and class hierarchy than any ethnic considerations. The various African American units, for example, would remain the most popular and consistently funded in the state.

unit just like ours that is composed mainly of Chinamen, Filipinos, Hawaiians, everything but White red blooded Americans.” According to the letter, this group could be seen “smoking & drinking 2/3 of the time” instead of rehearsing and included “a 300 lb. man who carries an 8 inch Uke around with him worth about \$150.”²⁹³

Another letter to Hopkins signed by all the members of the disbanded Banjo Band led them to deduce that “somebody has marked Mr. Roosevelt’s New Deal and we are getting a Raw Deal. (We did not borrow that phrase from Howling Willie Hearst.)” Eventually a wife of a former band member wrote directly to “Your Majesties Mr. & Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt” that the only response they had received concerning their dilemma was from Nikolai Sokoloff who told the banjo players: “It is not what the American people want but what he sees fit to give them they will take & like.” The woman assured the President that they would “change our political affiliations & to the best of our ability campaign against another four years of such conditions.”²⁹⁴

The complaint to President and Mrs. Roosevelt from the members of the Glendale Banjo Band was forwarded to national director Sokoloff and then to state director Jervis. The Band had been, according to Jervis, “dismissed in June due to reduction in quota and also it was not up to professional standards.” Ten of the men had transferred to the Labor projects, and two to the County Recreation Department where their status was changed from musicians to school grounds workers. So ended the case of the Glendale Banjo

²⁹³ Richard S. Stone to Harry Hopkins, August 20, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.b11

²⁹⁴ James B. Richards, Presley N. McCoy, Eugene J. Vernable, Joe Roselli, Durrand Anderson, Frank Mudge, Sie W. Kelly and Harry E. Claiborne to Harry Hopkins, October 22, 1936; Leedy Marsh to Your Majesties Mr. & Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, September 30, 1936, both Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

Band, a controversy that illuminates several of the early issues involved in the administration of the California Federal Music Projects.²⁹⁵

Los Angeles area music projects also confronted an unsympathetic or sometimes even hostile response from regional newspapers; previous FMP histories have all acknowledged this situation. Most recently Catherine Parsons Smith writes of how the “local press, firmly Republican, led a chorus of objection to the invasion of the federal government into what had been a local or state responsibility,” and thus accorded the FMP and other aspects of Federal One minimal coverage. Even years after the demise of the WPA, when former Illinois FMP director and conductor Albert Goldberg relocated to Los Angeles to take a position with the *Times* as a music critic, the anti-New Deal sentiment remained. An oral historian reminded Goldberg that the *Times* had printed an announcement about his joining the newspaper in June of 1947 and Goldberg responded:

But there’s a story to that announcement. They assigned a big, fat reporter named Tom Bridges to write this. I told him the facts of my life up to that point, and mentioned my work on the Federal Music Project. He said, “We can’t print that. This is a Republican paper.” Now, he was taking it on himself to censor the story, so anybody going back into the files and wondering about my history will wonder why I didn’t mention the Federal Music Project in that initial interview, but I wasn’t permitted to.

Not unlike the rest of the country, most newspapers of the western region remained staunchly partisan throughout the Depression era.²⁹⁶

²⁹⁵ Harle Jervis to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 18, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 919, NARA.

²⁹⁶ Catherine Parson Smith, *Making Music in Los Angeles*, 221; Albert Goldberg, “The Sounding Board,” unpublished oral history, 1988, interviewed by Salone Ramis Arkatov and Dale E. Treleven, Special Collections Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 249.

And especially in the weeks prior to a Presidential election, the Los Angeles *Times* and other conservative Southern California newspapers proved unrelenting in their attacks on the Roosevelt administration and Federal One. In the October 21, 1936 issue of the *Times*, for example, readers learned from the front page headlines alone that: “Flag Waving Masses” hailed GOP nominee Alf Landon as he “Attacks Threat to Liberty”; the Supreme Court had “Put Halt to New Deal Intimidation”; and that a previous Democratic presidential candidate “Says New Deal Violates All Democratic Principles.” An article in the next section of the same newspaper informs of “a shake-up of the Federal Music Project, stormy petrel of the government unemployment relief organizations here.”²⁹⁷

But closer inspection of the Los Angeles area newspapers during less politically volatile periods reveals more balanced and often flattering reports of Federal Music Project activities. Even the conservative *Times* regularly ran announcements of future FMP performances, writing in March of 1936 that: “Musical programs of exceptional interest will feature the evening services at two Los Angeles churches tomorrow” as “100 professional Negro singers from the Federal Music Project of W.P.A. will render Handel’s ‘Messiah’ at the First Baptist Church.” And in a review of the FMP symphony several months earlier, a *Times* headline announced that a “Federal Music Project Concert Proves Successful” and that the seventy-piece orchestra “organized less than a month ago by Modest Altschuler with the help of Regional Director Bruno David Ussher

²⁹⁷ “Thousands Cheer as Landon Attacks Threat to Liberty,”; “Davis Attacks Record of Roosevelt Regime,” both pt. I, pg. 1; and “Greene Heads Music Project,” pt. II, pg. 3, all Los Angeles *Times*, October 21, 1936.

and State Director Harle Jervis, is very near a miracle created by sincerity, enthusiasm, ability and hard work.”²⁹⁸

Yet, the assertion by one pro-New Deal publication in Southern California that the editors of the *Times* and *Examiner* “never permitted their first-string critics to cover [productions] angeled by Franklin D. Roosevelt” rings true. Isabel Morse Jones would remain the primary *Times* reporter of FMP and WPA Music Program events throughout the duration of the New Deal, rather than more well-known critics such as Philip Scheuer. And while most of her reviews were positive and enthusiastic, Morse Jones also showed no reluctance in reporting the less flattering aspects of Federal Music administration; the music critic seemed to particularly relish detailing the circumstances surrounding the dismissals of Ernst Bacon, Bruno David Ussher, as well as other Project controversies. Only in Southern California did serious criticisms of FMP employment of foreign-born musicians and administrators – up to and including national director Nikolai Sokoloff – continue throughout the duration of the Project. The editors of several Los Angeles newspapers saw fit to consistently report upon each new xenophobic development.²⁹⁹

In a more jocular vein, a popular columnist for the San Bernardino *Evening Telegram* expressed particular amusement with a stated goal of the FMP which was to “rehabilitate musicians.” Queried Arthur J. Brown: “Am I to understand that the musicians in this part

²⁹⁸ “Special Music Programs Scheduled In Churches; Arizona Teachers’ College Choir and Negro W.P.A. Singers to Be Heard Tomorrow,” March 14, 1936; Isabel Morse Jones, “Federal Music Project Concert Proves Successful,” December 27, 1935, both Los Angeles *Times*, both entry 826, box 46, NARA.

²⁹⁹ “Uncle Sam’s Success Story,” October 22, 1938, Beverly Hills *Script*, entry 826, box 51, NARA. The same *Script* editorial conceded, however, critic Philip Scheuer did review the FTP production of Sinclair Lewis’ *It Can’t Happen Here*; Isabel Morse Jones, “California Music Project Under Fire; Directors Criticised for Appointing Non-Musicians and Foreign-Born Artists to High Administrative Positions,” June 13, 1937, Los Angeles *Times*, pt. III, pg. 5.

of the country need rehabilitation because they have become debilitated?” The workings of the FMP would even inspire the columnist to rhyme:

Little Willie, from his bed,
Fell upon his little head,
Willie’s head was soft like putty,
So the fall made Willie nutty.

But the doctor, in a hurry,
Said to Mom and Pop “don’t worry,
Bill to play a sax ain’t fated
Unless he gets more debilitated.”

Those California newspapers unsympathetic with New Deal objectives did not hesitate to on occasion castigate or ridicule specific workings of the FMP; it is an exaggeration, however, to conclude that the reporting of Federal Music events – even by the conservative Los Angeles *Times* – gravely hampered Project goals and activities. And while the *Times* and other Republican papers did not always assign veteran journalists to cover FMP performances, Project events did not go underreported in Southern California or anywhere in the regional West.³⁰⁰

The California programs did not emphasize the performance of folk music as much as in New Mexico or Arizona, or of swing and dance music as in Nevada. Yet, as detailed in a later chapter, the African American performances of *Aida* and *Run Little Chillun*, as well as the continued popularity of the various Negro Choirs and *Tipica Orquestas* throughout the state, attest to the continued ethnic diversity of musical presentations; and the political satire of *Take Your Choice* and the many presentations of “The Ballad for Americans” discussed in chapter five demonstrate that the programs did not avoid topical or provocative performance. But even within the more conservative structures of

³⁰⁰ Arthur J. Brown, “The Mirror,” February 12, 1936, San Bernardino *Evening Telegram*, entry 826, box 46, NARA.

classical European musical performances, the California music projects regularly presented pieces written by American composers, as well the first operas in California musical history.

In Los Angeles, a number of such musical units operated throughout the life of the Federal Music Project and the subsequent WPA Music Projects. Wendell William Greenlee, Jr., in a 1987 master's thesis, examines the activities, growth and accomplishments of the WPA symphony, opera, and light opera, concluding that "the quality of the project was very successful, maintaining and upgrading the skills of unemployed musicians by having them prepare and present musical events that reached a surprisingly high level of achievement." Because of these FMP units, the "project also assisted in furthering the cause of American music by presenting American compositions regularly at orchestra concerts." Though initially emphasizing symphonic music, the project expanded with each year of existence.³⁰¹

The original desire by the national administration for traditional symphonic forms expedited the organization of performing units in California; a lack of such emphasis on professional artists sometimes slowed the development of other Federal One projects. An orchestra of between seventy and 100 musicians was up and performing in Los Angeles by December of 1935, giving its debut the day after Christmas in front of an invited audience of musicians and music critics. The works performed included Claude Debussy's *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Fawn* and the premier of *American Fantasy* by Pasadena, California, composer Harlow John Mills. The program also included a

³⁰¹ Wendell William Greenlee, Jr., "The WPA Federal Music Project in Los Angeles, 1935-1942: Three Performing Units." (M.A. thesis, California State University, Los Angeles, 1987), ii.

selection of Christmas standards performed by the 100-member Negro Chorus. The unit performed several pieces by George Fredric Handel and the “Wassail Song” by Ralph Vaughan Williams. Carlyle Scott conducted the group. Media reports for the entire program were quite positive and enthusiastic, notwithstanding the fact that the both groups had been organized only a month earlier.³⁰²

The Federal Music Project and WPA Music Programs eventually provided a forum for an eclectic assortment of music presentations in California. “American operas,” reported one music critic, “long neglected in the West,” were performed by the WPA units for the first time in California history. By the time of the 3rd FMP Report from the national administration in 1938, the Projects in California could boast of many varied successes, including: audiences of over eighteen thousand heard the first four performances of the light opera *Tales of Hoffman* in Long Beach, Pasadena, San Bernardino and Los Angeles to rave reviews; 4800 attended two performances of *Cavalleria Rusticana* in San Diego; San Francisco had heard Bach’s *Magnificat* and Palestrina’s *Stabat Mater*, and Verdi’s *Requiem* was performed both in the Bay area and San Diego; Gounod’s *Faust* was presented by the San Bernardino music project to various cities in California, and the same unit performed Gluck’s *Orpheus* in the Redlands Bowl with a chorus of 40, a ballet of 48 and an orchestra of 50.³⁰³

The Report went on to list other operatic works performed in California: In Los Angeles – *La Traviata*, *Boris Godounov*, *Parsifal*, *The Mikado*, *Pinafore*, *Chimes of Normandy* and *Robin Hood*; in San Diego – *Hansel and Gretel*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*,

³⁰² *Pacific Coast Musician*, January 4, 1936: 10; Isabel Morse Jones, “Federal Music Project Concert Proves Successful,” Scrapbook, 1935, December 29, Los Angeles Public Library Music Department; see also Greenlee, pg. 47.

³⁰³ “Federal Music Project – 3rd Report – 1938,” General Files, box 383, NARA.

The Secrets of Suzanne, and *The Gondoliers*; in San Francisco – *Carmen* and *Fidelio* and Rimsky-Korsakoff's *Mozart and Salieri*, based on the Pushkin tale, was performed in San Bernardino. The performances of these operatic units, as the African American groups, the *Tipica Orquestas*, and other musical presentations, reached audiences of millions that had never before been exposed to such a variety of music genres. Despite continued administrative quirks and quarrels, the California projects overcame many of the stifling cultural assumptions of the Progressive Era and allowed for a dynamic and varied assortment of musical presentations.³⁰⁴

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER 6

“NO ONE SINGS AS CONVINCINGLY AS THE DARKIES DO”:

SONG AND DIVERSITY

Just prior to his death in 1967 poet Langston Hughes completed the verse for a small picture book, which, at first glance resembles any of the dozens of children’s books printed during the decade catering to the new readers of the “baby boom” generation. Closer inspection, however, reveals that that the posthumously published *Black Misery* is probably best suited for an adult readership. Composed of twenty-seven short prose statements and corresponding drawings the book characterizes – sometimes with unsettling poignancy – the frustrations, indignities, and continuous struggle to comprehend what W.E.B. DuBois called “the strange meaning of being black” in twentieth century America. In one passage Hughes seems to capture a seminal aspect of the African American experience during the New Deal music projects:

Misery is when your white teacher
tells the class that all Negroes
can sing and you can’t
even carry a tune.

African American musical productions within the WPA elicited considerable interest in many regions of the country, and in the West several of the black units proved to be the most popular and highly attended of all New Deal artistic ventures. But tempering this exposure and appreciation was an ever-present stereotyping and patronization as well as specific instances of pay discrimination. This chapter explores the efforts within the New

Deal music projects to ensure ethnic, cultural and religious diversity throughout the region, and the resultant successes and failures.³⁰⁵

The music presentations throughout the West exhibited consistent efforts to express musically the religious diversity of the region. Partially in response to the repression and persecution occurring in other parts of the world in the 1930s, the FMP administration displayed a general cooperation and a desire to engage a variety of religious groups and musical performances; and, with the financial sponsorship necessitated by the eventual WPA Music Programs, these relationships would only increase and become even more conspicuous. Though personal correspondence and occasional press accounts suggest degrees of intolerance in the form of anti-Semitism, religious bigotry or xenophobia – the latter specifically in the Southern California region – the various state and regional administrations of the FMP strove to present to the general public musical presentations that supported an acceptance and inclusion of the various religious faiths of the United States.

In Oregon, during the first year of Project participation, state music director Frederick Goodrich organized a four-day Spring Musical Festival during which local FMP units coordinated with community musicians groups. The Festival occurred in late May 1936 at the site of the newly built Government Hotel at the foot of Mount Hood. “The first day” of the Festival, according to Goodrich, was a “Religious Day, with specimens of choral music illustrating forms used in Jewish, Catholic and denominational worship.” The themes continued for the remainder of the music festival, with the second day featuring school groups, the third day highlighted by social groups being trained by WPA

³⁰⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Co., 1903), v.; Langston Hughes, *Black Misery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), n.p.

instructors, and on the last day, “a festival of band music in which our Symphonic Band would be featured together with other bands now being trained by W.P.A. instructors.”³⁰⁶

By May of 1938 the northern California FMP sponsored what would become an annual “Concert of Sacred Music.” In June of that year the San Francisco *Call-Bulletin* ran a full front-page drawing of the city’s Memorial Opera House with an unfurled flag on the roof reading, “World Premiere Concert of Sacred Music presented by Catholics * Jews * and Protestants.” Beneath the banner headline – “Song of Tolerance” – Bay area readers learned that:

The sacred concert to be given by the Catholics, Protestants and Jews of San Francisco tomorrow evening is a new and inspiring idea of unity, tolerance and brotherhood for this nation – and for the nations of the world. Unfortunately, it is only in a few countries such as the United States that such a concert could be held. In other lands priests are being killed, Jews are being persecuted and driven from their homes, Protestants are being imprisoned, churches are being burned – and democracy is being ruthlessly destroyed.

Sponsored by the San Francisco Conference of Jews and Christians, the Concert of Sacred Music was directed by Guilio Silva and the program included Bach’s “Cantata No. 79 for the Reformation Festival,” Palestrina’s “Missa Brevis,” and Ernest Bloch’s “Sacred Service” or “Sabbath Service” (Avodath Hakodesh).³⁰⁷

It was the first time in world history, more than one newspaper asserted, that such a concert was organized. The production was introduced by Frederick J. Koster as “[a]n impressive and inspiring occasion,” and the unanimous media response supported the assessment: “The performance on a beautifully set stage ablaze with candelabra

³⁰⁶ Frederick W. Goodrich to E. J. Griffith, “Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes,” March 16, 1936, entry 815, box 28, NARA; also in “Central Files: Analysis,” box 0371, NARA.

³⁰⁷ San Francisco *Call Bulletin*, “Song of Tolerance,” June 1938, California Press Clippings, box 50, NARA.

surpassed the Federal Music Project's previous records.”; “There is no better way to reveal the eternal verities that underlie the faiths than through the monuments of art they have created.”; “...the finest achievement of the F.M.P. in this city to date.; “It is San Francisco's way of making every day ‘Brotherhood Day’ in this great city.”; “It is the American way that all religious faiths, enjoying liberty under the flag of democracy, can lift their voices in praise of God and church.” The crowd reaction for each performance was attentive and “applause throughout the evening was enthusiastic.”³⁰⁸

Project support of specific denominational celebrations and activities continued throughout the existence of the music programs in the West; at no time did this government sponsorship of religious functions seem to create controversy. In August of 1936, for example, an Arizona newspaper reported that in Mesa the first in a series of relief programs scheduled by the Mormon church would commence with a “bundle dance” at the ward chapel the next evening. “Dancing will begin at 9 o'clock,” the article informed, “with a Works Progress Administration orchestra from Phoenix furnishing the music.” Those attending were requested to bring a bundle of clothes or a quantity of non-perishable food as the admittance fee. The proceeds were “used toward taking church members off the relief rolls.”³⁰⁹

Such efforts through the joint cooperation of WPA music and the LDS Church occurred regularly in Utah and bordering states of the Southwest. In Arizona, one

³⁰⁸ San Francisco *Examiner*, “Giulio Silva Leads Religious Chorales of Three Masters,” May 25, 1938; Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco *Chronicle*, “Three Faiths Concert Given Here,” May 25, 1938; San Francisco *News*, “Sacred Concert Given Under Silva's Baton Thrills Crowd,” May 25, 1938; San Francisco *News*, May 18, 1938, California Press Clippings, NARA.

³⁰⁹ Arizona *Republic*, “Church Begins Relief Fetes,” August 31, 1936, Arizona Press Clippings, NARA.

narrative report detailed the various weekly programs by the Concert Band group during the month of July 1940. The unit performed in three Phoenix City Parks, the Civic Center Park in Glendale, and various Parks in Mesa and Chandler. For one performance in Mesa 7000 persons attended a commemoration of the arrival of the first Mormon pioneers in the Arizona. As discussed in greater detail in chapter three, the Music Project performances in Utah – some within a religious context and others of a more secular nature – created a foundation for the continuation of a symphony orchestra to the present day.³¹⁰

The various Jewish communities and organizations throughout the West played a particularly important part in the Music Project presentations and served consistently as sponsors during the subsequent WPA Music Programs. Soon after the start of the FMP, the *Jewish Voice*, a publication in southern California, announced a “Conference on Family Relations” to be held at the Menorah Center the following Monday at 8 pm. “Musicians under the auspices of the Federal Music Project will furnish a musical program,” the periodical informed. The program “will include two one-act plays, ‘The Prescotts Have a Problem’ and ‘Confidence and Trust.’”³¹¹

The *B’nai B’rith Messenger* the same week reported that February 25, 1936, was set as Ladies Auxiliary Day at the Clarence Kauffman Menorah Center. “A musical program,” the article continued, “under the direction of Mrs. S. Tolchinsky, social chairman, will be presented through the courtesy of the Federal Music Project.” Later that year the Kauffman Menorah Center held an open forum with “famed juvenile court

³¹⁰ “Arizona Music Project Narrative Report, July 1940,” General Files, entry 805, box 9, NARA.

³¹¹ *Jewish Voice*, “Conference on Family Relations Set For Menorah Center Monday Night,” February 28, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA.

judge” Ben Lindsey as the guest speaker. The program, under the sponsorship of the Menorahs, staged plays in Yiddish and Hebrew portraying the story of Esther as presented by the pupils of the Talmud Torah. Dances and songs by the pupils followed the plays, and the entire event was “with classical music furnished by the Federal Music Project of the city.”³¹²

Gentiles also enjoyed music associated with Jewish traditions through the auspices of FMP programs. The Los Angeles *Eastside Journal* reported late in 1936:

An unusual musical program has been arranged for next Sunday. The WPA Band, under the direction of Arthur J. Babbitz, will present an all-Jewish music program at the Hollenbeck Park pavilion in the afternoon from 2 to 4 o’clock.

In addition to the Music Project band, concertgoers were treated to the talent of Peter Lewin, formerly with John Philip Sousa and the US Marine Band in Washington. Lewin “will render some of his own compositions on the Xylophone,” and many of the afternoon’s numbers by the WPA band also represented the works of Mr. Lewis.³¹³

Music Project support for a variety of performances at Jewish centers as well as musical productions based on ancient Hebrew themes occurred throughout the West. In Arizona, a Purim masquerade party was held in the spring of 1938, at the Jewish Visitors Club in Phoenix. In addition to the music provided by the FMP, other entertainment included “a recitation by Miss Amy Futterman in English and a humorous Yiddish reading by Leon Kovin.” During the same month in San Francisco, the Federal

³¹² *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, “Ladies Auxiliary Day Next Tuesday At Menorah Center,” February 21, 1936; *Jewish Voice*, “Judge Ben Lindsey, Famed Juvenile Jurist, Leads Menorah Open Forum,” March 6, 1936, California Clippings, both entry 826, box 46, NARA.

³¹³ Los Angeles *Eastside Journal*, “Jewish Music To Be Featured,” December 10, 1936, California Clippings, entry 826, box 47, NARA.

Symphony Orchestra and Chorus performed composer Ernest Bloch's "Sacred Service."

The Bay area press responded enthusiastically. Respected music critic Alfred

Frankenstein editorialized:

No one may judiciously proclaim a masterpiece after a single hearing, but I suspect that many members of the huge audience that jammed Temple Emannu-El last night to hear the service as presented by the Federal Music Project were sorely tempted to commit that indiscretion.

The work is unique and not only because it is the first organic, symphonic setting of the Jewish liturgy. Its special uniqueness lies in this – that all the compositions on Hebraic themes by a composer noted for his handling of such subjects, this most Hebraic subject of all sounds least like the music of Israel.

Explaining this apparent paradox Frankenstein noted that while the music includes traditional synagogue chant, the symphony "approaches the liturgical text from the point of view of its universal religious and ethical significance, and therefore composes for it music that transcends" other considerations. The editorial concludes that: "The performance was probably the best the Federal Chorus and orchestra have given together."³¹⁴

A February 1941 California WPA Music Program narrative explained how in San Diego, as the nation was being drawn into war: "The most impressive program of the month was held at the Jewish Temple Beth Israel on the evening of February 24, at which time both orchestra and chorus were combined. The climax of the program was an excellent rendition of Sibelius' 'Finlandia.'" The program was of particular significance because among the 800 attending were a Navy Admiral and other high ranking military officers. "San Diego," the report concludes, "more than any other district, has

³¹⁴ Phoenix *Republic*, "Jewish Visitors Club Sets Masquerade Fete," March 16, 1938, entry 826, Arizona Clippings; Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco *Chronicle*, March 29, 1938, entry 826, box 50, NARA.

considerable territory to cover in the matter of furnishing programs to the Army and Navy.”³¹⁵

In Oregon, state supervisor Fredrick Goodrich included in his monthly narrative that on May 6, 1940, a WPA Music Program community band concert was presented at B’Nai Brith Community Center in the southern part of the city. “This was largely attended by the Jewish people of the city,” Goodrich reported, with the “B’nai Brith Community Center is doing great social work for the Jewish people in Portland.” And from the Lone Star state, an editorial announcing the FMP sponsored Music Week festivities, concluded that “no Texas community has cherished music more as an essential element in its social and civic life than has San Antonio.” Indeed, the “city was founded by music-loving people” and drew newcomers “from all quarters of the globe who brought their music with them.” The Music Week activities, the article continued, would:

...embrace several band concerts, a “German night,” college music, organ recitals, an entire concert of Jewish music and another devoted to Irish melodies, a WPA program of Negro songs, choral singing, Mexican music and – as a fitting climax – on Saturday afternoon the old fiddlers’ and harmonica players’ contest at Witte Memorial Museum.

“Thus,” the editorial proudly concluded, “will be exemplified the many parts which various music plays in community life throughout the year.”³¹⁶

Jewish communities in cooperation with WPA music programs also engaged in the “Americanization” of recent immigrants fleeing persecution following the rise of Fascism in Europe. A 1941 California narrative, for example, reported that classes in Americanization for adults were held each week at the Wilshire Menorah Center in Los

³¹⁵ “California Music Program Narrative Report, March 1941,” Central Files: California, box 926, NARA.

³¹⁶ Frederick W. Goodrich to E.J. Griffith, Central Files, entry 806, box 12; *San Antonio Express*, May 2, 1937, General Files, box 373, NARA.

Angeles. The local music project cooperated by teaching the National Anthem, American airs, and folk songs. The students – “refugees from Europe” – ranged in age from forty to eighty years. None of the participants spoke English and were “bereaved and bewildered; strangers in a strange land” but were finding consolation “in the universal language of music.” Several other Jewish Centers in Southern California regularly engaged music education units of the WPA programs designed specifically for children; the instruction often encompassed both traditional concerns as well as the contemporary goal of “Americanization”:

In addition to the usual classes in piano, voice, violin, and theory at Clemence Kauffman Menorah Center, a class of 300 children is being trained to sing the Star Spangled Banner and other American patriotic airs, as well as the difficult songs of their ancestors. In Hebrew music it is necessary for the children to master the ancient Hebrew script, in addition to learning the melody.

Involvement of Jewish Centers in the activities of both administrations of New Deal music was consistent, as was the public interest in the presentation of both traditional music and new compositions based upon Hebraic themes.³¹⁷

An assortment of other groups performing the music of specific ethnic or cultural minorities was supported by the FMP. Early on, many of these units did not receive the priority accorded symphonies or the light opera, and their very existence was often threatened by periodic budgetary restrictions. In other instances – primarily in the East – they were labeled as ‘novelty’ acts and received less pay than other the other ‘professional’ performing units. Nevertheless, the participation of these groups in the New Deal music presentations remained quite popular with the general public and

³¹⁷ “California WPA Music Program Narrative Report, March 1941,” Central Files: California, box 926, NARA.

received consistently positive reviews from the regional press. And, though funding proved unstable and predicated upon the current political climate, many of these units grew in popularity as the Project progressed. And, with the demise of Federal Theatre in 1939, the Music Projects engaged some of the musicians who suddenly found themselves without employment.

Hawaiian musical combos, for example, provided entertainment in numerous West coast cities with larger numbers of citizens with Pacific Rim ancestry. (And, somewhat curiously, the FMP also funded a Hawaiian trio in Oklahoma.) In Oregon, during the summer of 1939, the FMP had taken over a few people from the discontinued Federal Theatre Project, “among them four Hawaiians;” the musical group was “giving very successful performances almost every day in the various parks and playgrounds.” And a few months later an Oregon state report described how the “Hawaiian Quartet has been very busy during the last month working under the sponsorship of the Portland Fire Department, in their work for the underprivileged children of the community.”³¹⁸

In Southern California, Hawaiian musical units formed soon after the Project’s start and remained in consistently high demand. An early report from Glendale wrote approvingly of a unit composed entirely of natives from the South Sea Islands, “mostly Hawaiian, a few from the Samoan Islands, from Guam and the Philippine Islands.” The group had toured extensively throughout the United States “on Orpheum and Keith Circuits and Chautauqua programs” but performance opportunities declined precipitously with the coming of the Depression. Through the support of Federal Music the group

³¹⁸ “Federal Music Project – Oregon Narrative Report for Month of July, 1939,” and “Narrative Report Month of November, 1939, Oregon Music Project,” both entry 805, box 10, NARA.

found steady work and remained extremely popular wherever they appear. Another Hawaiian group of Los Angeles toured extensively throughout the county; civic organizations, schools, and other public meetings regularly engaged the musicians. In late March of 1936, the unit performed for a Rotarian Club in the downtown William Penn Hotel and the engagement, judging from numerous newspaper accounts, was an unqualified success. The unit included eighteen musicians, several dancers, and provided “intriguing music ... which made it easy to picture the beautiful Hawaiian Islands with all the spreading palms and other touches of nature including the blue Pacific.” Other WPA Hawaiian musical units operated in Long Beach and Santa Ana and remained popular throughout the life of the programs. The Santa Ana group, which was a portion of the larger symphony orchestra, performed throughout Orange County. A review in the *South Coast News* of Laguna Beach reported: “Hawaiian melodies played by a six-piece string band and a short motion picture carried out the travelogue theme at the Mariners’ club meeting last night.” The article applauded the musicians who were furnished by an orchestra provided by the WPA music project in Santa Ana.³¹⁹

The Santa Ana FMP also on numerous occasions provided the Rotary club of Laguna Beach with its very popular Cowboy Band. “The ‘Western Pals,’ a ten-piece cowboy orchestra,” reported a local newspaper, “entertained the Rotary club at their meeting in Bird’s café Friday noon.” The orchestra performed “an interesting variety of hill-billy songs.” At the close of the program the entire Laguna Rotary Club joined with the

³¹⁹ “March, 1936 Project Report of Glendale Units,” entry 86, box 13, NARA; Los Angeles *News*, “Hawaiians in Program For Rotary Club,” entry 826, box 46, NARA; *South Coast News*, “Mariners’ Club Enjoys Travelogue,” September 15, 1936, entry 846, box 47, NARA.

orchestra in singing several numbers, including “Home on the Range,” and “Comin’ Around the Mountain,” which “the club had been practicing for several weeks.”³²⁰

Undoubtedly the most enthusiastic recipients of the Cowboy and Hillbilly bands were schoolchildren. One newspaper reported that in February of 1936 the Cowboy bands and hillbilly singing groups would make free appearances at elementary school playgrounds throughout Los Angeles County. A month later another article wrote: “Repeated requests from elementary schools in this section for the return of cowboy bands and singers sponsored by W.P.A. Music Project No. 297 resulted ... in the announcement of a new [expanded] schedule yesterday.” The concerts were open to pupils and the general public. In another district, “Brooklyn Avenue School children were entertained ... by the WPA hill-billy musical unit. More than 400 youngsters attended.” Later that school year, it was announced that in Reseda, California, the “W.P.A. Cowboy band will be at the Winnetka playground.” And in neighboring Van Nuys, California, cowboy bands and singers appeared in varied programs throughout the summer months at school playgrounds. Dressed in cowboy regalia, the bands interpreted Western folksongs as well as contemporary popular melodies. All programs were provided bi-weekly free of charge for children and the general public. The Cowboy Bands remained quite popular in southern California, but they also performed in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. By the 1930s, the iconic image of the singing cowboy of the Wild West had been popularized by the Hollywood film industry, and this recreation in the FMP proved quite appealing.³²¹

³²⁰ South Coast *News* (Laguna Beach), “Rotary Hears Western Pals,” September 15, 1936, entry 826, box 47, NARA.

Though not initially encouraged by the national administration, most districts in the West supported jazz or swing dance combos, usually to enthusiastic response. In the Nevada FMP, such music was the primary form. Often the new jazz as well as native folk music was evidenced in the contemporary American compositions performed by FMP units. “The influence of jazz and American Indian music,” reported an Oakland paper, “will be found in Frederick Jacobi’s concerto for piano and orchestra, to be played by his wife, Irene Jacobi, with the Bay Region Federal Symphony orchestra.” Another WPA composition, *Phantasmania* by Homer Simmons, incorporated jazz and blues themes. The piece, performed on several occasions by the combined San Francisco and Oakland Federal Symphony, “won overwhelming public ratification [for] the Bay Region Federal Music Project.” The “jazzy” *Phantasmania* “showed high accomplishment in racy modern-popular style of composition.”³²²

And with the administrative restructuring and changing priorities that occurred when the Federal Music Projects became the WPA Music Programs in 1939, these popular music forms found even greater support from both the regional as well as national administrations. When announcing the plans for the third annual Festival of American Music in 1940, the new assistant WPA commissioner Florence Kerr asserted her belief that “a new, organic and idiomatic music, reflecting the spirit and cadence of America, is

³²¹ Los Angeles *Citizen News*, “Cowboy Bands, Hillbilly Units to Give Concerts,” February 20, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA; *Independent* (California), “Cowboy Bands to Play at Schools,” March 13, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA; *East Side Journal* (California), “School Children Entertained by Federal Music,” March 5, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA; *Reseda News*, July 17, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA; *Van Nuys News*, “Cowboy Band Will Appear in Van Nuys,” July 27, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA.

³²² *Oakland Post-Enquirer*, “Reiser to Conduct; Mary Groom at U.C.” July 30, 1937; Alexander Fried, *San Francisco Examiner*, “Federal Music,” July 14, 1937, both entry 826, box 48, NARA.

in the making.” Accordingly, “for the first time in these festivals, there will be representative programs of the swing and jazz of today.” Printed programs confirm that this new development was particularly in evidence with the music festivals in the West, especially along the Pacific coast and in Nevada.³²³

As the decade of the 1930s unfolded and the many disturbing political developments abroad became more widely known, the FMP educational units and musical programs for schoolchildren clearly demonstrated a reaction to these reports. Because of the ramifications of the growing militaristic nationalist movements and corresponding ideologies of ethnic superiority, the FMP activities became even more cognizant of presenting America’s diverse heritage through music. This proved especially true of the programs in the public schools. Reflective of this was a front-page story in the *Pasadena Post* on May 9, 1937: “Students Of Every Race Respect One Another’s Musical Ability,” read the heading over a full-page, five-column photograph of a music teacher leading a group of elementary school students in song. The caption leaves no room for mistaking the varied ethnic and religious backgrounds of the smiling young vocalists:

Left to right, standing – J. Maria Pierce, Lincoln School teacher; Gloria Bunch, Negro; Charles Abrahamson, Scandinavian; Shirley Berman, Jewish; Eduardo Magallanes, Mexican; Alvin Johnson, Negro. Seated, left to right – Helen Morita, Japanese; Mary Marcias, Mexican; and Osamu Fujii, Japanese.

The accompanying article – “Music Found Common Tongue, Unites All Races at School”— reiterates what had become an oft-repeated axiom in the western Projects: “Music is a common denominator for all races and nationalities.” The music instructor J.

³²³ Florence Kerr quoted in “WPA Music Program for release in Sunday a.m. paper February 18, 1940; 7,000 WPA Musicians in Third American Festival,” entry 821, box 36, “Records Relating to Music Festivals. 1935-1940,” NARA.

Maria Pierce (described as “the attractive young teacher” in this era of relatively dormant feminism) asserted that “racial understanding comes best from an appreciation of one another’s contributions.” The editorial continued that at Pasadena’s most cosmopolitan of schools which “appropriately bears the name of Abraham Lincoln,” each of the ten or a dozen nationalities represented has made “great contributions to the world’s musical literature.” And:

So, brown, black, red, yellow and white children learn to love the emotional beauty of a Negro spiritual, the gay abandon of a Mexican dance, the happy lilting melodies of their Italian cousins, the stirring rhythms of an Indian chant, the grace of Chinese poetry set to music. They are proud of the Japanese pupils who make exquisite musical manuscripts and thrill to the rich heritage of the German boys and girls.

The reader further learns that these activities, as well as the monthly performance of a symphony orchestra, were made possible to all through the Federal Music Project. Indeed, the “project fills the needs of 550 children” who otherwise could not afford musical instruction or concert admission.³²⁴

Despite the strivings of the music programs for ethnic and religious inclusion within the public schools, the successes were often tempered by persistent instances of prejudice and condescension. One state report tells of a school in California:

The supervisor at this school is keenly interested in the general welfare of his students, all between the ages of 8 and 12, and of all colors except white. They are Mexican, Negroes, Chinese and Japanese. He realizes with us the responsibility of making intelligent American citizens from this not too promising material.

³²⁴ Ruth Billheimer, “Music Found Common Tongue, Unites All Races At School,” Pasadena *Post*, May 9, 1937, entry 826, box 48, NARA.

As with the other FMP activities in the West, though often mixed with wrong and potentially harmful ethnic presumptions, the educational units remained cognizant of the importance of expressing the nation's diverse ethnic culture.³²⁵

Even in politically conservative Los Angeles, the Federal Music Projects from the beginning supported a remarkable variety of musical styles that only increased through the duration of the programs; in an initial report from December of 1935, supervisor William Dean detailed the many types of units operating in Los Angeles County alone. The Los Angeles Project, in just one month since it first organized, had auditioned 1,892 relief workers, requisitioned 1,887 (including non-musicians), dismissed 52, and assigned 1401 new employees. By May, the Project supervisor anticipated a full quota of 2,152 persons. Striking in the speed with which the various programs coordinated and began performing, this and numerous other statistical reports further demonstrate the eclectic assemblage of musicians and styles that constituted the FMP in Los Angeles and many districts.³²⁶

And the staunchly Republican Los Angeles *Times*, on more than one occasion, reported approvingly of the wide range of the presentations given by the newly hired

³²⁵ "Southern California Music Project March 1937," Central Files State: California, box 926, NARA.

³²⁶ The report read as follows:

1 Symphony Orchestra	3 Concert Orchestras	1 Concert Band
1 Vaudeville Orchestra	1 Hungarian Orchestra	1 Tipica Orchestra
1 Hawaiian Orchestra	1 String Trio	5 Dance Bands
1 Old Time Band	1 Colored Concert Orchestra	1 Colored Concert Band
1 Colored String Quartet Orchestra	1 Colored Drum Corps	1 Colored Dance
5 Mixed Choral Units	1 Male Chorus	1 Colored Chorus
A Cappella Choir	Opera Unit	Educational Unit

W.L. Dean to Harle Jervis, "Special Statistical Report District No. 11, Los Angeles," December 18, 1935, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

FMP musicians. A headline in February of 1936 – “Federal Project to Offer 350 Musicians, Singers, Dancers” – told of the free tickets available for the coming “gala musicale” to be presented at the Hollywood High School. The article informed its readership the FMP will “colorfully portray music and costumes of various foreign countries” including the “thrilling strains of the tango and rhumba” to “resound when Jose Garcia and his Mexican Tipica Orchestra accompany dashing Latin dance teams.” Additionally, the “songs of old Hilo will be sung by the Hawaiian entertainers,” and “sixteen Spanish senors and senioritas will present folk songs of the Iberian Peninsula.” The program was also to include an Hungarian Symphonette to “complete the international journey.” The *Times* reporting of FMP and all other New Deal activities grew decidedly less approving as the presidential election in November neared.³²⁷

Throughout much of the regional West, first year FMP productions proved equally as diverse in scope. A program of 25 weekly musical entertainments “ranging from Gounod’s opera ‘Faust’ to American folk music of the Kentucky mountains,” announced one newspaper from California’s Inland Empire, “will be presented for San Bernardino music lovers by the Federal music project.” And while primary emphasis remained on symphonic performances, many early correspondences reveal the national administration’s encouragement of community engagement in the programs. “This is in answer to your letter of July 22 urging the giving of public dances by WPA Federal Music Project,” Oklahoma state director Dean Richardson wrote Nikolai Sokoloff during the Project’s first summer of operation. One of the more recent ones, Richardson informed the national director, was a multi-ethnic affair that “was held at the Black Gold

³²⁷ Los Angeles *Times*, “Federal Project to Offer 350 Musicians, Singers, Dancers,” February 20, 1936, entry 826, box 46, NARA.

Celebration at Seminole, Oklahoma in which approximately 6,000 people participated.” Other music festivals were planned during the month of August for various communities in the state.³²⁸

The ethnic and religious diversity of the FMP performances in the West was approvingly commented upon by more than one outside observer. While on vacation in June of 1938, Mildred Taylor Sloan (the wife of East coast regional director Blanding Sloan) attended performances of the San Francisco Federal Chorus and the Bay Region Symphony Orchestra of the FMP. She was so touched by the programs she waxed poetic in a three page description of her experiences to her husband. The visitor had witnessed “a Jewish Composer’s work – presented in a chapel dedicated to J.C.” which attracted an “Audience of all kind people – Musicians young – old –middle – Italians, Jews, Scandinavians, etc – et all” with “no feeling of star system.” The program, she continued, “made me weep because it marks beginning of a golden age” of opportunity “for life and liberty and one’s chosen tasks.” She concluded her lengthy correspondence to her husband: “Yours for more ‘dictators’ of Roosevelt type if that is what he can lead us to.” Sloan typed up the poem from his wife and forwarded it to a number of WPA officials, several of whom expressed pleasure with its contents and reprinted it in various Project missives.³²⁹

As the FMP developed, periodic Congressional budget cuts sometimes resulted in the discontinuation of specific programs, and initially the first to feel the effects were the

³²⁸ San Bernardino *Telegram*, “Operas, Concerts Booked By Federal Music Unit,” September 30, 1936, entry 826, box 47, NARA; Dean Richardson to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 4, 1936, entry 815, box 28, NARA.

³²⁹ Mildred Taylor to Blanding Sloan, June 28, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 924, NARA.

non-symphonic units. In Long Beach, California, for example, a local newspaper announced that an old fiddlers contest, Ozark barn dance and numbers by the Hawaiian Orchestra and the Spanish Players under the auspices of the Federal Music Project would mark the annual Missouri picnic at Bixby Park. All persons who ever lived in Missouri are invited. The next day's publication of the same newspaper, however, told of the "dismissal of the Long Beach area Federal Music Project's Mexican and Hawaiian orchestras and Hillbilly band which have been providing Tuesday and Friday night concerts" at The Village artists' and craftsmen's arcade. These units would eventually be reinstated; and with the subsequent bureaucratic changes in the summer of 1939 such groups usually found themselves with more secure situations.³³⁰

"Heretofore," concluded one regional advisory board for the newly restructured WPA Music Program, "not enough attention was given to community integration." Under the previous Project, "no attempt was made to find out if the community wanted" a certain type of musical presentation. With the new structure, however, "if the community wants this service, sponsorship for it will naturally follow" and "if the sponsorship for any unit has not reached the 25% point ... we will remove ... the organization." No musical unit was sacrosanct; though Los Angeles had been "told it must have a fine symphony orchestra on WPA," no attempt had been made to determine if the community had actually *wanted* such an organization. The extensive conclusions and suggestions of the advisory board asserted that the WPA symphony orchestra or any other unit would be discontinued if the community involved did not care to sponsor it. The new structure put

³³⁰ Long Beach *Press-Telegram*, "Ozark Barn Dance to Be Attraction at Missouri Picnic," August 29, 1936, entry 816, box 28, NARA; Long Beach *Press-Telegram*, "Village Still to Offer Serenade," August 30, 1936, entry 826, box 28, NARA.

in effect in the summer of 1939 until the end of the New Deal music programs in 1943 further broadened the scope of the presentations.³³¹

But even prior to these administrative alterations, many of the projects in the West produced a remarkable mixture of performances and musical genres. One particularly perceptive San Francisco music critic captured the essence of the recently organized FMP in her city when she wrote of the new hires who produced “no dreary humming, but tonal and rhythmic patterns richly diversified.” With little preparation, nearly four hundred musicians were rehearsing daily and bringing excellent music to schools, hospitals, community centers, museums and other public gathering places, “as a free gift of Uncle Sam.” Further:

No manner or style of music is barred. Good music of any type, soundly conceived, sincerely performed, is welcome. Soloists, orchestras (symphonic, theatre and dance), band, and string ensembles are at the service of the community. [Last month] trombones and tympani and urgent swing music was carried out to the Marine Hospital to cheer some two hundred seamen temporarily immured in bathrobes....

Scarcely three months old, the columnist concluded, and “the project has already contributed significantly to the enrichment of the city’s musical life.” Another Bay area observer of the recently formed Federal Music Project spoke equally as glowingly of specific performances:

The other night a little novelty orchestra, which counts among its unconventional assemblage of instruments one harmonica, and whose personnel seemingly strikes its roots back into all the races that ever were, brought its polyglot heart (and fingers and tracheas) into one tuneful and rhythmic accord to bewitch the feet of several hundred dancing Chinese-American youths. Frankly experimental, untrammelled.

³³¹ “Minutes of Advisory Board Meeting Southern California Music Project,” n.d., Central Files: California, box 926, NARA.

More than any other feature of FMP activities in the West, this so-called “polyglot heart” shown both in press and personal correspondence as the most frequently referenced aspect of the various musical units; indeed, Music Project performances rivaled any other aspect of Federal One in this regard.³³²

Yet, historian Jerome Mileur has concluded that while the WPA projects were generally integrated, “Harry Hopkins handled the race question ‘gingerly’ in his various work programs” and there are “documented cases of discrimination in both relief and public works programs.” Within the music programs evidence demonstrates cases of both discrimination against Hispanic Americans and African Americans as well as instances of salary parity with white musicians. In early 1936 Lucile M. Lyons, state director of the Texas FMP, stood as a staunch supporter of the various *Tipica Orquestas* in her state. Yet, she argued in a letter to the national administration that “while these Mexicans do make good music” ... it ... “makes somewhat of a complication in this state if we pay them as high wages as we do other musicians on the project.” She continued, “this condition is peculiar to Texas and is difficult to understand by those who do not know at first hand the situation.”³³³

The national WPA administration in New York clearly recognized the significance of Lyons’ letter, as a copy was forwarded to no less than Bruce McClure, director of Professional and Service Projects under Jacob Baker. In his response McClure quoted Executive Order 7046, Part 5, Section E which stated: “Workers who are qualified by

³³² Karen Frisbie, “Federal Music Project,” n.d., entry 826, box 46, NARA.

³³³ Jerome M. Mileur, “The ‘Boss,’” in Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur eds., *The New Deal and the Triumph of Liberalism*, (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 117; Lucile M. Lyons to Alma S. Munsell, February 11, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA.

training and experience to be assigned to work projects shall not be discriminated against on any grounds whatsoever.” For emphasis, McClure pointedly added: “This means what it says.” He also asked Mrs. Lyons to report back “assuring us that it is being lived up to.” Lyons responded to McClure via Alma Munsell that “we shall adjust this matter at once.” She would soon be going to San Antonio and would take the situation up with the state administrator through the Director of Professional Projects who was responsible for wage adjustments. “I will report to you as quickly as possible but you may be assured the ruling of ‘no discrimination’ will be adhered to.”³³⁴

Evidently local considerations superseded Lucile Lyons’ assurances to Bruce McClure. Late in 1936 national director Sokoloff wrote to Lyons again concerning her designation of “Intermediate” musicians in the Texas programs. “There can be no ‘Intermediate’ musicians,” Sokoloff commanded. “They must be either skilled or professional. This applies to all projects.” Lyons responded that the musicians classed as “intermediate” were done with the advice and request of the State Employment Division, Labor Relations Section. “The situation in Texas with reference to Mexican and negro labor is responsible for the position of the State Labor Relations Division.” Lyons argued that the classification “does not necessarily mean discrimination, as we are paying them more money than they would receive in any other work.” To raise these musicians to the “professional” wage of \$68 would be “inviting labor trouble.”³³⁵

³³⁴ Alma S. Munsell to Mrs. John F. Lyons, February 19, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA; Lucile M. Lyons to Alma S. Munsell, February 22, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA.

³³⁵ Nicolai Sokoloff to Mrs. John F. Lyons, September 11, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA; Lucile M. Lyons, September 18, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA.

Director Lyons further pointed out that this situation was not unique to the state of Texas; indeed “intermediate musicians were included on Project Forms ... submitted from Louisiana and Mississippi.” To change the classification, Lyons argued, would cause “endless complication and a complete revision of the wage scale.” Nevertheless, if ordered to comply, she would take the matter up with the State Employment Division in San Antonio once again. Sokoloff responded: “I understand fully your explanation concerning the Intermediate musicians and it will not be necessary to make the change we originally proposed.”³³⁶

This wage discrimination did not extend, however, to all the music projects in the West. One memorandum sent to Nikolai Sokoloff from then acting state director of California W.L. Dean clearly reveals that the 119 African Americans employed on the Federal Music Projects in Los Angeles County in the summer of 1938 did not encounter salary discrimination. “I believe you may be interested in the attached table showing figures relative to the employment of negroes of the ... Federal Music Projects in Los Angeles County,” Dean proudly informed the national director. Of the African Americans working for the local FMP the monthly wages ranged from \$55 for unskilled workers to \$94 for professional musicians to \$140 for the director of the Colored Chorus. Thirty-eight of the 119 musicians were female. National director Sokoloff was indeed “quite pleased” with the information; the salary distribution for African Americans revealed an exact parity with all music projects operating in Los Angeles County at that

³³⁶ Lucile Lyons to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 18, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA; Nikolai Sokoloff to Mrs. John F. Lyons, September 22, 1936, Central Files State: Texas, box 2636, NARA.

time. Many of these musicians were engaged with the immensely popular production of *Run, Little Chillun* playing at the Mayan Theatre.³³⁷

In the Southwest, the most popular and requested form of WPA music was that of the *Orquestas Tipicas* which performed throughout Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and also Southern California. By the 1930s the *tipica* had developed in the United States and brought a colorful and compelling musical and sociological tradition from its earlier origin in Mexico. The Spanish word “tipico” (typical) is relevant to an understanding of the music; though imprecise, the nearest English translation would probably be “down home.” The *Orquesta Tipicas* made an early impact on the way the United States would perceive Mexican music. The first touring Mexican *Orquesta Tipica* was formed in 1884 and soon thereafter made a highly publicized tour of the United States. The *tipicas* at this time were coronet-led bands supported by clarinets and trombone, with tympani dominant in the percussion. Musicologist Emilio Grenet describes the sound as a “picture of blinding luminosity which brought our most remote sensuality to the surface.”³³⁸

The *tipicas*, however, had found popularity south of the Rio Grande well before the first tour of the United States. Their origin in Mexico extends at least back to the middle of the nineteenth century. At that time, the *tipicas* were associated with the Mexican peasantry, working-class, and rural *mestizo* populations. The instrumentation of these groups differed by region, and accordingly a variety of *tipica* styles emerged. The standard *tipica* of this period, however, consisted of some combination of one or more

³³⁷ W. L. Dean to Nikolai Sokoloff, July 26, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 923, NARA;

³³⁸ Emilio Grenet, *Latin American Music* (Santa Ana California: Fine Arts Press, 1934), 28.

violins, psaltery, contrabass, guitar, mandolin, as well as a clarinet or flute. In the 1840s, the famous writer Ignacio Altamirano gave such a description of a *tipica* group while touring a rural region of Mexico in the 1840s.³³⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, Mexico experienced a prolonged period of “romantic nationalism” precipitated by the expulsion of the French. A standard history of the period maintains that because of these developments: “Self-esteem replaced the sense of shame of the introspective diagnoses of the past.” According to Manuel Pena, the growth of the *Orquesta Tipicas* represented the upper classes attempts “to invoke *lo mexicano* by appropriating selected elements of the true *tipicas* of proletarian origin – simplicity of an idyllic, rural (ranchero) life.” These later orchestras were bourgeois versions of the rural, folk *tipicas* that had existed among the Mexican proletariat since the first part of the century. Thus, as Baquerio Foster observed of the first officially designated *tipica*: “We must speak, of course, of the founding of the *Orquesta Tipica Mexicana* [as] a monument of musical nationalism in Mexico.”³⁴⁰

The Mexican middle class could not get enough of the *Orquesta Tipicas*. “Folkloric *Tipicas*,” writes Pena, “began to crop up all over Mexico among urban petit bourgeois groups.” Certainly, the appropriation of poor people’s culture to further the objectives of an elite nationalist movement was not a new phenomenon. But as Bradford Burns convincingly argues, “that spirit seems to have been endemic to Latin America generally

³³⁹ Ibid., 64.

³⁴⁰ Micharel C. Meyers and William L. Sherman, *The Course of Mexican History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 466; Manuel Pena, “From Ranchero to Jaiton: Ethnicity and Class in Texas-Mexican Music (Two Styles in the Form of a Pair), in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Winter, 1985), 36; Geronimo Baqueiro Foster, *La musica en el periodo independiente*, (Mexico, D.F.: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 1964), 59, as in Pena, 39.

and Mexico in particular throughout the nineteenth century and at least the early part of the twentieth.” During this period, Mexico had become enamored with *costumbrismo* – the creation of a national culture for middle class consumption modeled upon notions of proletarian forms. But, according to Gerard Behague, “popular folk music had to be clothed in genteel ‘garb’ to make it presentable to concert audiences.” Accordingly, the *tipica*’s roughness, both in sound and appearance, needed to be gentrified so as not to offend the sensibilities of the mid-nineteenth century Mexican bourgeoisie. The social conflict represented by these competing and contradictory manifestations of the *Tipica Orquesta*, according to several scholars, never found true resolution. Cultural analogies can be made to the post-revolutionary Mexican murals of the 1920s.³⁴¹

By the 1920s – and perhaps a bit earlier – the first nationalistic *tipicas* were organized in the Southwest region of the United States. The Mexican Revolution had fanned nationalist sentiments in Mexico, and these same feelings found expression in the Hispanic Southwest through *tipicas*. Though many Mexican Americans had been born or lived most of their lives in the United States – on lands acquired some seventy years previously as a result of the Mexican War – they were largely denied the ‘cultural citizenship’ enjoyed by other members of society. The events of the Mexican Revolution and the subsequent flowering of nationalist pride in Mexico were shared by those Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the Southwest. On both sides of the border the *Tipica Orquestas* served as a vehicle of expression for these sentiments. The *tipicas*

³⁴¹ Manuel Pena, *The Mexican American Orquesta: Music, Culture, and the Dialectic of Conflict* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 98; Bradford E. Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 99; Gerard Behague, *Music in Latin America: An Introduction*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 217.

remained popular throughout the Depression years, but by the end of the Second World War they had largely disappeared, replaced by the *mariachi*. The true *tipicas* of the Southwest were predominantly of the string variety; by the mid-1940s the trumpet-led *mariachi* lent itself more suitably to radio broadcasting.

The *tipicas* of the WPA Music Programs proved the most popular and requested musical form in the Southwest by both Hispanic as well as Anglo audiences. The best of these units were comprised of skilled and quite entertaining musicians, sometimes maintaining several dozen in a single *orquesta*. The performers often appeared in traditional and colorful garb, creating a striking appearance. The *tipicas* played music native to Mexico as well as songs by Spanish composers such as Alvarado, Alfonso, and Barcelata. The *Tipica Orquesta* also performed songs popular in United States. Such was the case for an observance of the annual FMP sponsored Festival of Music by American Composers Texas. An article of February 22, 1938, in the *El Paso Times* headlined “Children of Mexican Descent Sing Famous American Songs,” reported how “one-hundred and forty youngsters of Mexican descent lustily sang” versions of both “Yankee Doodle” and “Dixie” in their performance of *tipica* music. The concert included hymns, battle cries and love tunes written exclusively by American composers. The most surprising performances, and the ones which elicited the most audience response, were “swing effect” arrangements of John Philip Sousa’s “Star and Stripes Forever” and other marches as presented by the various *Tipica Orquestas*. The various *tipicas* usually began their concerts with sing-a-longs of the Mexican national anthem

followed by the “Star Spangled Banner.”³⁴²

The extraordinary increase in immigration to the Southwest during the 1920s – primarily from Mexico – helps to explain both the popularity and continued engagement of the *tipicas* by the WPA music projects. Throughout that decade nearly 500,000 Mexicans legally entered the United States, and countless more crossed the border without documentation. The majority settled in the border regions of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. The established Latino leadership believed, as did most Anglo leaders, that in order for the newly settled Mexican-Americans to adapt to life in the United States they should also embrace their Mexican cultural heritage. Feeling of attachment toward the United States, it was believed, would invariably follow the patriotism the recent arrivals maintained toward their former country. The position was not dissimilar to those held by Progressive Era reformers in their efforts to absorb and assimilate – “Americanize” – the large number of southern and eastern European immigrants during the late nineteenth century.

“The organization known as the ‘Lulacs’ is the League of United Latin-American Citizens,” wrote New Mexico director Helen Chandler Ryan to the national administration in 1936 in reply to a request for information on folk music. The group, Ryan continued “is a very strong organization which is doing much to foster the Hispanic culture and to perpetuate the folklore, handicrafts, etc., of the Latin-American people in the Southwest.” Founded in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas, the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), organized just as Hispanics in the United States were emerging from their darkest epoch. Anglo violence toward Hispanics in the Southwest

³⁴² “Children of Mexican Descent Sing Famous American Songs,” *El Paso Times*, February 22, 1938, pg. 7.

was widespread, and discrimination in employment and denial of voting rights equally so. LULAC was modeled after other civic organizations, and in many ways its formation resembled the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1910. LULAC's early leadership, wrote one observer, "served notice that it was time to stop gazing nostalgically at Mexico or Spain and clinging to the mentality of isolation in *colonias*." Instead, the administration announced that it was time to establish roots in the United States and "venture forth to mix with the dominant society in all aspects of life."³⁴³

LULAC remained intimately involved with the workings of Federal Music in New Mexico, and to a somewhat lesser degree in Texas and Arizona, again challenging the conclusion drawn decades later that Federal Music – through the efforts of a white elite – strove to homogenize ethnic musical representation into a single voice. And the varied appeal of the *tipicas*, as demonstrated in the previous chapter on regionalism, remained singularly widespread and found the approval of a variety of musical experts. According to Texas state director Lucile Lyons the world-renowned violinist, conductor and composer Max Rubinoff "was in El Paso for a concert and upon hearing the Tipica Orchestra at the Union Station ... spoke most enthusiastically both to them and of them." Later, Rubinoff not only conducted a number for them but invited the entire group to his concert, – "all of which served to bring these musicians into favorable attention." Lyons continued her report: "Many other prominent visitors to El Paso comment on the unusual and interesting work of this group."³⁴⁴

³⁴³ Helen Chandler Ryan to Harry L. Hewes, June 5, 1936, "Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes," entry 814, box 27, NARA.

³⁴⁴ Lucile Lyons to Florence Kerr, January 10, 1940, entry 805, box 9, NARA.

In late 1940 the El Paso group gave a four-day tour in Tucson where they appeared at public functions in connection with the premiere of the motion picture *Arizona*. Reviews from Tucson often displayed more enthusiasm for the *tipica* than the feature film; one newspaper reported: “To our certain knowledge, we have never heard any orchestra pack more music into one half hour than this organization for El Paso.” The previous month the El Paso *tipica* “had the unusual distinction of playing, on October 16th, for the dedication of the Christo Bay Statue on the mountain between the United States and Mexico.” Over 2000 persons attended, including many prominent Church and government dignitaries. The conductor of the group “was personally thanked and congratulated by the Bishop and Pope’s Representative on this occasion.”³⁴⁵

The *Tipica Orquestas* of the Southwest maintained an eclectic appeal. As mentioned earlier, both the LDS churches and various Jewish community centers requested the *tipicas* regularly, and the groups remained in high demand for radio broadcasts. In Southern California, a recording of the WPA Mexican *Tipica Orquesta* performing “Machiquito,” “No Nieguies,” “Mi Morena,” and “Little Jesusita,” found extensive distribution. In San Antonio, the local district FMP supervisor wrote proudly that the recently formed *Tipica Orqesta* “has become one of the show pieces of San Antonio.” Within the first several months of existence the unit played 79 performances and was heard by 42,546 people, attesting to the interest the new WPA *tipica* elicited in the San Antonio region.³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Lucile M. Lyons to Florence Kerr, January 10, 1940, “Texas Narrative Reports,” entry 805, box 9; Lyons to Kerr, January 14, 1941, “Texas Narrative Reports, November and December 1940,” entry 806, box 12, NARA.

³⁴⁶ Herbert C. Legg to Florence Kerr, January 16, 1940, “Central Files: California,” box 926; “Programs and Schedules,” entry 825, box 45, NARA.

A traveling *Tipica Orquesta* performed for state Centennial Celebrations in various Texas cities in 1937 and produced “much favorable comment and approval for Federal Music Project.” Enthralled by the professionalism and musicality of the unit, many in attendance also noted the colorful traditional Mexican performing uniforms which created a “striking appearance.” In Dallas, as in other cities, the traveling group consistently “proved the high light of entertainment” and in Fort Worth five separate programs were given to large and enthusiastic crowds – an estimate of 7,000 people enjoyed the *tipica*’s concerts in a single weekend. In San Antonio the group was equally well received, and for both the performers and the FMP “this trip has brought us much good will.”³⁴⁷

As the United States moved closer to war in late 1941, the *Tipica Orquestas* in the Southwest remained the most popular of the WPA musical units with recently arrived soldiers and military personnel. Religious organizations expressed particular approval. In October Irwin Lefkowitz, the director of the Hebrew Community Center in San Antonio, wrote to the state Music Program supervisor: “May I take this opportunity to thank you in behalf of the Army and Navy Committee of the Jewish Welfare Board for providing us with the WPA Tipica Orchestra on Wednesday, October 1, 1941. Through your cooperation we were able to entertain our boys in arms in a very successful manner.” Lefkowitz trusted “that I may call upon your services again in the near future.”

And the next month a letter to the Texas state supervisor arrived from Father Herbert F. Leiss, executive director of several Catholic community service organizations in the greater San Antonio metropolitan area. The correspondence expressed appreciation for

³⁴⁷ “Texas Narrative Report, April 1936,” entry 804, box 1, NARA.

the WPA *Tipica Orquestas*, which proved the most popular entertainment attraction at the National Catholic Community Service U.S.O Club. Each week, attendance for the *tipica* performance increased, and received nothing but the highest praise from both the service men as well as the civilian groups in attendance, and eventually, confirmed Father Leiss, “on a night on which the orchestra is scheduled to appear, no other entertainment is booked. The TIPICA is THE entertainment of the evening ... on ‘WPA TIPICA NIGHT.’” Many of the soldiers had recently arrived in the Southwest from other regions of the country, and many would “simply stand in wonderment, admiring the splendid performance of the maracas, the congo drums, the castanets, and the accordions, that lend the exotic touch and color to the music.” Beyond the entertainment value of the *tipicas*, the presentations also acted to impress upon the young servicemen – many away from home for the first time – about the multicultural reality of the country they may soon be defending in military combat overseas.³⁴⁸

And the promotion of the various *Tipica Orquestas* throughout WPA music in the Southwest also had other specific social purposes; they served as vehicles of ethnic identification and pride and, often under aegis of local LULACs or similar organizations, the process of ‘Americanization.’ In Arizona, for example, the “La Fiesta de Navidad,” a Christmas party specifically for “Mexican youngsters of Tempe and vicinity,” was held on Christmas Eve 1937. Officials of Junta Patriotica, a Mexican-American organization, arranged the event. The local WPA *tipica* as well as a Music Project band provided the entertainment. In addition to a Christmas program the Junta Patriotica leadership provided the young children with bags of candies, nuts and fruits as well as warm meals.

³⁴⁸ Irwin W. Lefkowitz to Edgar Corrigan, October 3, 1941, box 2 file 1, LOC; Herbert F. Leiss to Edgar Corrigan, November 25, 1941, box 2, file 1, LOC.

The social results of other *tipica* units in Texas “is nothing short of amazing,” concluded one monthly report. “They are like new people,” wrote the state supervisor of the musicians, their “respect for themselves and for their art and realization that they have a definite place in the community life has worked wonders in building up a fine morale.”³⁴⁹

The involvement of the Music Projects in the Americanization efforts in the Southwest exceeded any other Federal One program; *tipica* and other Hispanic music proved the most relied upon vehicle for this purpose. “Southern California has many foreign-born groups who have practically no association with America or American Government,” observed one monthly educational report of the California project. The narrative contended that there were “more Mexicans in Los Angeles than there are in the City of Mexico” and that entire transplanted communities resided in the city where not a word of English was spoken or understood. “Music is the most easily available means” the report concluded “of imparting good English, good manners and good citizenship, and all of these things receive special attention.”³⁵⁰

A similar monthly report of an educational unit in Santa Ana described how “some of the shy Mexican children are gaining self-confidence and initiative. One boy with excellent rhythmic perception is scoring ‘Chiapaiacas’ for percussion band.” The national report described – though certainly with more than a hint of ethnocentrism – how “these children with almost no cultural background, living in drab and congested homes, are developing a love for good music.” The next month described how “Americanization programs recently inaugurated as an activity of Adult Education ... presented a wide

³⁴⁹ South Side *Progress*, “Mexican Christmas Party Plans Made,” December 23, 1937, Arizona Clippings; “1937 Narrative Report Summaries, Texas,” entry 804, box 1, NARA.

³⁵⁰ “Monthly Educational Report,” April 1938, entry 807, box 17, NARA.

variety of music, always including American folk and patriotic numbers as well as popular Mexican songs, for the audiences are mostly Mexican.” The same report described a situation in Santa Barbara:

Three of our Mexican students played at the Mexican Mothers’ Club to celebrate Washington’s Birthday. With such large Mexican-Spanish districts, such events help in molding, educating, and acquainting children of foreign parentage with our American way of life, without destroying their traditions, folk songs, and customs.

A month later in Santa Ana the “Americanization programs recently inaugurated as an activity of Adult Education ... presented a wide variety of music, always including American folk and patriotic numbers as well as popular Mexican songs, for the audiences are mostly Mexican.”³⁵¹

“Besides the foreign-born groups,” read a similar report from an educational department of a southern California project, “there is an enormous Colored population which must be taken into consideration.” The narrative continued:

The Colored people who contact the Teaching Project have been taught the value of the things that belong to their own race and how to develop their own gifts. This has had the effect of making them self-sustaining and self-respecting and does away with the desire to emulate or imitate the white race.

The description of project activities succinctly captures the essence of African American experiences in the WPA music projects in the West. Participation was encouraged, and the enthusiasm from a diverse audience for the black musical units was perhaps

³⁵¹ “Monthly Educational Report,” April 1938, entry 807, box 17; “Monthly Narrative Reports,” Central Files: California, box 926, NARA.

unparalleled through the entire regional FMP. But with this exposure came segregation and the stereotypes predicated upon the notions of the age.³⁵²

Public interest in African American musical presentations within the FMP, however, was not regionally specific; the East, Midwest, and South also maintained WPA sponsored 'Negro Choirs' or 'Colored Chorals.' African American slave spirituals proved immensely popular in the states of the old Confederacy. A WPA Music Program special concert in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, attracted "over 3000 white and colored patrons" to the Bowman Gray Memorial Stadium for a "Melody in the Moonlight" program. A performance of African American spirituals in Asheville, "sung in all their natural beauty and freedom of expression," held the audience spellbound. In South Carolina, the FMP units included the Florence Colored Choral that regularly "delighted music lovers with their renditions of negro spirituals." A Tuscaloosa, Alabama, newspaper ran a full-page photo and story of white schoolchildren listening intently and respectfully to a presentation of a WPA Colored Chorale performing the songs of the antebellum South.³⁵³

In Louisiana, the state director wrote in a June, 1936 report that the "negro units were given particular attention during this period for a two-fold purpose, to aid the project in staging a Negro Music Festival and to demonstrate to the colored race in Louisiana what the negroes have done in music by way of composition." The monthly narrative

³⁵² "Monthly Educational Report, California" October 1938, entry 807, box 17, "Monthly Narrative Reports," Central Files: California, box 926, NARA. 3-6-8.

³⁵³ Winston-Salem *Journal*, "Large Audience Hears Concert By Negro Singers at Stadium," August 5, 1939, entry 804, box 80, NARA; The Asheville *Citizen*, "Audience Thrilled by Negro Spirituals at Music Festival Here," September 24, 1937, entry 804, box 80, NARA; Florence County, n.d., "Colored Singers at City Park Sunday," entry 804, box 81, NARA.

emphasized how the program consisted entirely of music written by African Americans, with one selection composed by an FMP employee from New Orleans. The attendance was good, the report continued, considering that the Festival was “held on the campus of a negro college, and the Southern negro has not yet sufficiently overcome his awe of education in the abstract” to feel comfortable on a college campus. For this reason, the next festival “will be given in a typical negro section of the city where the genuine ‘nigger’ can attend, either in shirt sleeves or overalls.”³⁵⁴

Throughout the South similar FMP sponsored festivals were common, as in Mississippi where in October of 1936 a festival given during Harvest Week in Meridian included “The Evolution of Negro Music.” (Programs with “evolutionary” themes dominated Federal Music productions across the country, another holdover from the Progressive era when popular notions of Darwinianism dominated societal sensibilities.) The program presented four scenes: “Scene one, plantation featuring Uncle Tom and Old Black Joe and negro spirituals; scene two, show boat; scene three, Stephen Foster’s songs with the male quartet and scene four, modern music and orchestral numbers.” Virtually all state reports and newspaper accounts, while celebrating the actual performances, dripped with similar racial characterizations and analysis.³⁵⁵

A 1937 Narrative Report from North Carolina, however, attests to the beneficial aspects of various FMPs in the South in the area of race relations. Nell Hunter, director of “Negro Work” in the eastern part of the state, reported that through Project cooperation several permanent organizations formed “not only to sing but to promote all

³⁵⁴ “Report for June 1936, Rene Salomon,” “entry 804, box 1, file 3, NARA.

³⁵⁵ Meridian Star, “Negro Music ‘Harvest Week,’” October 11, 1936, entry 804, box 78, NARA.

movements of civic betterment.” She related how in Rocky Mount and Tarboro there developed choruses of 65 or 70 voices, taken from every section of the city and from every social and economic class. Indeed, “groups equally balanced with professional and business men and women, with day laborers and domestic servants.” She further reported: “Large audiences, of both races, attended in both cities, with requests for repeat performances” for “higher types of music.” The North Carolina director concluded enthusiastically: “Barriers of long standing broken down, thru the spirit of song!”³⁵⁶

Certainly Depression-era notions of “race” varied regionally, and it is not here suggested that the West was somehow impervious to the prevailing bigotries and prejudices of the period. Rather, the historical record in some instances suggests just the opposite; a generally xenophobic reaction to foreign born WPA administrators appear to have been more prevalent in the far West, particularly Southern California, than any other section of the country involved with FMP activities. And a particularly telling newspaper description of the opening in Los Angeles of the production of *Run, Little Chillun*, which supported an all African American cast, explained that the interpretation of the musical revue would contrast dramatically with its earlier production at the Lyric Theater in New York City. Specifically:

Players have been instructed to play the piece for laughs and much of the action borders on the burlesque with conscious intent to appeal to an audience which has been accustomed to laugh at the Negro on the stage.

For generations, extending back to the origins of blackface minstrelsy and earlier, white audiences had largely come to anticipate only comic representations of African Americans in public performances. By the 1930s, as result of the sensibilities brought

³⁵⁶ “North Carolina Narrative Report – July 1, 1937: from Erle Stapleton, for May,” entry 804, box 1, NARA.

about by the Harlem Renaissance and the conscious awareness of the “New Negro,” artistic performances in New York and several other east coast cities fought these racist characterizations. The repercussions of these developments, as we shall see later in this chapter, served to differentiate many African American WPA musical performances in the West from those in the East.³⁵⁷

Throughout its duration, the FMP also funded or assisted minstrel presentations in a many regions of the country. In Atlanta, Georgia, a local WPA band provided continued support for the West End Boys’ Club minstrel show, a regularly performing and popular group which appeared throughout the city in order to augment funding for the organization. The unit maintained a cast of thirty-nine boys ranging from ten to fourteen years of age. In July, 1939 a Pasadena, California newspaper ran a story beneath the headline, “Sixty Boys and Girls Will Appear in Minstrel Show,” replete with an accompanying photo of what appears to be pre-teen boys smiling broadly with their faces smeared in black greasepaint. The eventual production – “Showboat on the Mississippi” – was presented at the Civic Auditorium of Pasadena as part of a summer series of musical performances. Another minstrel group called “the Black-outs” also appeared, performing chorus numbers and various routines including “intriguing one-act comedy, played in the old fashioned-manner.” Before and following the minstrel shows, the Pasadena Federal Orchestra of the Works Projects Administration entertained the crowd.³⁵⁸

³⁵⁷ San Diego *Union*, “Talented Cast Shows Pageant of Negro Life,” June 4, 1939, box 53, NARA.

³⁵⁸ Atlanta *Constitution*, “Minstrel Show Aid Youth Project,” May 6, 1937, Georgia clippings, NARA; Pasadena *Star-News*, “Sixty Boys and Girls Will Appear in Minstrel Show,” July 31, 1939, box 54, NARA.

“No one sings Negro Spirituals as convincingly as the darkies do,” wrote a San Francisco music critic of a 1937 performance by the Colored Choral of the Oakland FMP. The review was reprinted regularly either whole or in part for various WPA reports as evidence of music program successes. “Even when their natural racial exuberance has been disciplined to conform to high musical and choral standards,” the article continues, “the racial flavor remains.” Another music critic, of the Los Angeles *Times*, attended a performance of William Grant Still’s *Lennox Avenue* and applauded the “real Negro character” of the musical. The critic confirmed that a “marching chorus strongly indicates that contemporary Negroes are picking up their feet, not just shufflin’ along.”³⁵⁹

Such patronizing and denigrating descriptions of African American participation in the music projects typify the reactions of the mainstream media. Only the Communist press consistently reported these events with the sensitivities later associated with the more enlightened understandings emerging from the mid-century Civil Rights movements. Yet, despite persistent stereotypes and racist characterizations, African American involvement and accomplishments in the New Deal music programs in the West were singularly substantial. “Musically,” wrote a Southern California newspaper, “the Negro has outshined all other groups” in the FMP as “only in the colored group has it been possible to secure fine, experienced [musicians] at WPA salaries.” The attendance and popularity of *Run, Little Chillun*, for example, surpassed all private musical productions in Los Angeles at that time. And, mirroring the attainments of

³⁵⁹ Malory M Fisher in *San Francisco News*, “Negro Choral of WPA Sings Appealingly,” August 17, 1937, box 49, NARA; Isabel Morse Jones in *Los Angeles Times*, “Native Composers Aided by Radio,” October 31, 1937, box 49, NARA.

Mexican *Tipica Orquestras* in other sections of the Southwest: “Negro groups have paid at the Box Office. In some instances colored shows supply financial backing for all other failing ... experiments” of the WPA Music Programs.³⁶⁰

Despite the unqualified success of these productions, African Americans active in the music projects were constantly forced to confront the entrenched and pervasive racial presumptions of the period. Scholars in a variety of disciplines have analyzed the strategies of resistance and confrontation of minority groups in reaction to a dominant and repressive culture. Certainly, the resultant behaviors of Americans of color during the 1930s reflect the gamut of these responses. Often, this took the form of subtle rebellion; in other instances the resultant manifestations of self-fulfilling prophecy would produce a variety of caricatured behaviors. Sometimes, the activities of specific African Americans reflect acquiescence to the expectations of the dominant society.

In March of 1941 the accomplished African American conductor Elmer Keeton led the WPA Negro Chorus in a successful concert for a predominantly military audience at the San Francisco Presidio. The program consisted of slave spirituals, folk songs and solos. Keeton was in “rare form with his humorous stories,” recounted the subsequent state report, and it continued: “He, at times, assumes an Uncle Remus attitude toward his audience which fits the occasion like a glove. The young soldiers enjoy it and make it loudly known that they do.” As throughout their history, African Americans responded to mistreatment and indignities in disparate manners.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ California *Eagle*, “Past, Present, Future,” December 21, 1939, box 55, NARA. The California *Eagle* maintained a predominantly African American staff and readership.

³⁶¹ “March 1941 Narrative Report, The Northern California WPA Negro Chorus,” Central Files: California, box 926, NARA.

Social scientists have long explored the motivations behind perhaps the most consequential political realignment of the 20th century – that of African Americans from the “Party of Lincoln” to the Democratic Party in the 1930s. Experiencing first-hand the discriminations of various aspects of the New Deal, some participants dubbed the National Recovery Act (NRA) the ‘Negro Run Around’ or even ‘Negroes Ruined Again.’ African Americans displayed little enthusiasm for Franklin Roosevelt’s candidacy in 1932. In Chicago, for example, the future president received only 21 percent of the black vote.³⁶²

But by mid-1938, during a period of the New Deal’s lowest general popularity, Roosevelt commanded the support of 85 percent of African Americans – reflecting a truly staggering electoral shift. After several months of FMP operations in California Edna Rosalyne Heard, a member of the Negro Chorus in Los Angeles, had sent a letter of appreciation to the Project’s regional director. Perhaps within this correspondence lay some of the answers concerning the realignment of African American party identification during the Depression era. Heard began by acknowledging that: “Words are inadequate with which to express my most sincere gratitude and appreciation for the Government-sponsored music project.” And she stipulated that the stated attitudes were not merely her own but rather, “I am writing you not as a musician or as a member of any particular music unit, but as one of the 12 million black Americans in this country who is indeed proud and most grateful for this great work.” Heard continued:

Allow me to speak also for other members of my group here in Los Angeles who have expressed themselves both through pulpit and press in

³⁶² Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 32; see also Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983).

terms praising the present administration, and the cultural benefit they have derived from its educational program. With best wishes for the continued success of this great movement....

The letter was forwarded to national director Sokoloff and then to President Roosevelt.

Within the New Deal administration – including the FMP – there exists documented evidence of racial discrimination and pay inequities. Yet, there seems no reason to question the sentiments expressed in this letter or the larger ramifications of Federal Music within the African American community.³⁶³

The efforts and influence of Eleanor Roosevelt in this regard also should not be underestimated. Throughout the duration of the New Deal cultural programs, the First Lady consistently stressed the need for inclusion of minorities in the various Federal One activities. During her several trips to the West, as in her newspaper column, Eleanor Roosevelt repeatedly expressed interest in the involvement of Mexican and African American participants in the art projects. As biographer James Baker writes, Mrs. Roosevelt “was the only one in the New Deal administration to express an active interest ... and to take a personal and semiofficial stand on civil rights, even when she risked antagonizing political support for the president.”³⁶⁴

The encouragement of and enquiries concerning African American involvement in the Federal One programs arrived regularly from sources high in the New Deal administration. Typical of these was a letter posted in early 1939 from WPA official

³⁶³ Edna Rosalyne Heard to Bruno David Ussher, June 12, 1936, Central State Files: California, box 918, NARA.

³⁶⁴ Barker, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, 69. In his book *The Glory and the Dream* William Manchester writes that Mrs. Roosevelt once “wondered whether her outspokenness might be a liability to Franklin. (At the time she was defending the right of Americans to be Communists.) He chuckled and said, ‘Lady, it’s a free country,’” 111.

Lawrence S. Morris to the five directors (including Historical Records) of the cultural projects. “In preparation for a meeting with a large delegation of Negroes who are to be in Washington next week,” Morris wrote, “we would like to get together as much information as possible on the extent of Negro participation in your project.” A later correspondence questioned “the extent to which individual Negroes are included in your program.” Nikolai Sokoloff distributed several press releases during his tenure that informed of the accomplishments of African Americans in the Projects:

The contribution of the Negro to the creative music of America has been recognized as challenging and significant, and the composers of both races have drawn deeply from his vernacular songs and tunes. Under the program of the Federal Music Project, however, new opportunities have been afforded the Negro musician, both as composer and as executant artist.

The same January 1939 press release lists 28 separate units operating in 15 states composed exclusively of African American vocalists and musicians. Of these, the largest in the entire country were the California units – the Los Angeles Colored Chorus employed 49, the Los Angeles Concert Band 29, and the renowned Oakland Choral Group 67 – in addition to several smaller units scattered throughout the state.³⁶⁵

African American activities in the Los Angeles FMP garnered much attention and praise soon after the Project’s start. “Nationwide acclaim was accorded the Carlyle Scott chorus last May,” reported the *Times*, “when it presented the complete ‘Messiah,’ it being the first Negro chorus in the United States to produce the famous oratorio.” The article trumpeted the anticipated performance that coming Wednesday at the Trinity Auditorium. The subsequent review later in the week told of how the performances by

³⁶⁵ Lawrence S. Morris to Mr. Alsberg, Mr. Cahill, Dr. Evans, Mrs. Flanagan, Dr. Sokoloff, January 6, 1939, entry 815, box 31, NARA; “From the Federal Music Project Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Director,” January 9, 1939, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

the Colored Chorus was “making a well-deserved hit with large audiences” and that the chorus as well as the Hallelujah Quartet and the Colored String Quartet showed an ability and musical talent previously unknown in the city. The critic seemed obliged to acknowledge: “Of course, you take it for granted that the rhythm would be superior.”³⁶⁶

Several FMP Los Angeles light operas comprised wholly of African American musicians delivered some of the most memorable performances of the western Projects. A Los Angeles *Examiner* music critic, writing about the joint FTP and FMP production of *Run Little Chillun* as well as the other FMP musicals, maintained that the performances were:

... not only great entertainment, but extremely significant. It may be that the Negro race may one day revere [specific WPA leadership] as the founders of a real Negro theater, and regard Los Angeles as its birthplace.

One of the first FMP productions involving all African American participants was the classic early nineteenth century operetta *Fra Diavolo* composed by Francois Auber. The performance in three acts and sung in English opened in April of 1937 and garnered much enthusiasm and critical acclaim. Not untypical was a review from the Beverly Hills *Script* which complimented “another experiment of the Federal Music Project, given with an all-colored cast, even to the ballet. It is an amazing production!” The critic vociferously applauds the dancing, the music, the staging and costuming, but mostly “the behavior of the principals.” The review then repeats many of the same ethnic stereotypes and characterizations of earlier performances of blacks in the music projects: “With the irrepressible histrionics of their race”; “their racial love of music”; and “If you

³⁶⁶ Los Angeles *Times*, “Federal Music Project Presents Colored Chorus,” October 25, 1936, box 47, NARA; Isabel Morse Jones in Los Angeles *Times*, “Singing Chorus Wins Favor,” October 30, 1936, box 47, NARA.

don't think it an amazing sight to see an all-colored cast in Italian costumes, aping the grand manner, go and see 'Fra Diavalo.'"³⁶⁷

But many newspaper reviews of African American FMP production in Southern California remained quite flattering, avoided racial stereotypes and instead recognized and acknowledged the social significance of the performances. "Another milestone in the musical history of the American Negro is being marked by the current Los Angeles Music project attraction 'Fra Diavalo'," a Laguna Beach newspaper reported. Further, "this is believed to be the first time a standard comic opera favorite has ever been produced by a Negro company." This and other reviews complimented the elaborate staging of the performance; the staging included a colorful torchlight parade of 50 Easter choristers robed in scarlet and white which opens the third act and was "said to form one of the most picturesque tableaux ever produced at a local theater." Another paper enticed prospective patrons: "If you like colorful banditti, heroic captains, pretty daughters of staunch innkeepers, melodramatic lines and lovely tunes, this is your meat." Yet, as with other FMP productions involving black participants (particularly *Run, Little Chillun*), some reviews of *Fra Diavolo* alluded to a perceived wanton sexuality in the performance; one music critic advises readers, "by no means should you miss the highpoint of the second act – a coloratura strip-tease number."³⁶⁸

The next spring *Fra Diavolo* reopened the week of March 27, 1938, in the Belasco Theatre for a ten-day run. Most of the Los Angeles newspapers announced the highly

³⁶⁷ Harry Crocker in Los Angeles *Examiner*, "Among the Angels," September 8, 1938, box 51, NARA; Beverly Hills *Script*, "Fra Diavolo," April 17, 1937, entry 826, box 48, NARA.

³⁶⁸ South Coast *News*, "Negro Company Presents Play," April 20, 1937, entry 826, box 48, NARA; Los Angeles *United Progressive News*, April 12, 1937, entry 826, box 48, NARA.

anticipated restaging, including the *Times*, which informed readers that the week for the Federal Music Project would begin with a performance of the Federal Symphony Orchestra and the opening night of the opera presented by an all African American cast. The production proved so popular that the comic opera was extended though the summer. Four particularly well-received performances were given in Griffith Park Theatre late June and early July of 1938. A Los Angeles FMP announcement further described:

The classic operetta recounts the adventures of a bandit who not only robs ladies of their jewels, but also makes love to them. Assisting the principals will be the famous Negro Chorus, directed by Carlyle Scott.

A nominal admission charge of twenty-five cents was made, and all performances played to capacity audiences.³⁶⁹

Another Los Angeles FMP musical (with limited FTP involvement) employing an African American cast was the production of the well-known *Androcles and the Lion* by playwright George Bernard Shaw. Opening just before Christmas in 1937 at the Hollywood Playhouse, the Negro Chorus of 50 voices under the direction of Carlyle Scott preceded the play and performed spirituals including “When Gabriel Blows His Horn” and “Great Day.” Both audience and music critics hailed the performance. “Richly studded with the enjoyable and rib-tickling humor of George Bernard Shaw,” raved one review, and the performers “gave ... an evening of superb entertainment.” Further, the performance:

... was acted expertly and forcefully by an all-Negro cast. This most vigorous presentation, a product of the combined forces of the Federal Theater Project and the Federal Music Project, gave ample proof of what these projects are capable of turning out.

³⁶⁹ Los Angeles *Times*, “Federal Music Project Presents Young Artists,” March 27, 1938, box 50, NARA; Federal Music Herald, “Negro Cast in ‘Fra Diavolo,’” June, 1938, Los Angeles, California, entry 825, box 39, NARA.

The consistently positive reviews praised all the individual actors and musicians, as well the entire FMP orchestra, conductor and musical producers, for a music production described as “stirring, yet pleasing, and very well arranged.”³⁷⁰

The famous Verdi opera *Aida* was another immensely popular FMP production performed by several different projects in Southern California. The musical presentation began in Los Angeles in July of 1937. “With complete Negro chorus included in a massed operatic ensemble totaling more than 300 artists,” announced a local newspaper, “‘Aida’ will receive one of the most spectacular local production ever given the Verdi masterpiece when it is presented Wednesday night at the Philharmonic Auditorium by Los Angeles Music Project.” The FMP press release had specifically emphasized the participation of African Americans in the performance: “In California, Verdi’s ‘Aida’ was given its first two presentations with a real ‘Ethiopian’ chorus, when an entire Negro Choral unit was introduced.” The storyline of the opera involved the inter-racial relationship between an Egyptian king and an Ethiopian woman. Following the performance in Los Angeles the production moved to the Municipal Auditorium in Long Beach and then the Bowl in Santa Barbara.³⁷¹

The enthusiastic public and critical response to the FMP production of *Aida* necessitated a much larger venue for a performance a month later. “The Los Angeles Federal Music Project announces that a mammoth open-air production of ‘Aida’ will be staged at the Inglewood Bowl on Saturday evening, August 14,” informed one article.

³⁷⁰ Los Angeles *Daily News*, “All-Negro Cast Gives Shaw Play,” box 49, NARA.

³⁷¹ Los Angeles *New Age Dispatch*, “Negro Group in Opera at Philharmonic Wed., July 14,” July 9, 1937, box 48, NARA; “From the Federal Music Project, Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Director,” January 9, 1939, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

The opera would serve as “a fitting close to the Centinela Parade week festivities.” The following summer the production was again restaged in response to extraordinarily high public demand. “‘Aida,’ grand opera by Giuseppe Verdi which was greeted by sold-out houses at the Belasco Theater last month,” announced an FMP promotional periodical in June of 1938, and the opera was performed four times in the open air at the Griffith Park Greek Theatre beginning July 6, heading the Federal Music Project’s July schedule in the outdoor amphitheatre. Critical reviews unanimously praised all the repeat performances of *Aida*.³⁷²

The most popular African American performances of the Music Projects – indeed, the most highly attended of *any* Federal One endeavor – was the production of *Run, Little Chillun*. A joint venture with Federal Theatre, *Run, Little Children* elicited from Clarence Muse, a widely read columnist for the Los Angeles *Eagle* (an African American produced newspaper), an enthusiastic testament to its accomplishments:

“Run, Little Chillun” is one of the outstanding successes in all of America. It has played to over 250,000 persons in Los Angeles; is now entering its second year, something that has not been done in any other city that is using Uncle Sam’s funds. So every citizen here is bragging: white and black are cheering for the continued success....

This will make history for the colored artist, that is, if anyone is keeping the current progress of our group. Please make note that the Negro is making history every day, not only in New York or Chicago, but all over the country.

And all three major Los Angeles newspapers ran glowingly favorable reviews when *Run, Little Chillun* first opened at the Mayan Theater in the summer of 1938: “has great power and beauty, and casts a new light on the creative genius of the Negro,” wrote the *Times*;

³⁷² Los Angeles *Boulevard Record*, “Latest Opera Triumphs are Slated Here,” August 6, 1937, box 49, NARA; Federal Music Herald, “‘Aida’ Heads July List,” June, 1938, entry 825, box 39, NARA.

the *Evening New* concluded that *Run, Little Chillun* was not just light amusement, but “is the other part of the American Negro, the deeper, more elemental and less understood character”; and “Entertainment, action and beautiful and appropriate music are representative factors,” was the conclusion of the *Examiner*, adding that “a large audience greeted the premiere with lavish applause.”³⁷³

According to the officially released synopsis, *Run, Little Chillun*, or *Across the River*, is set in a town in the deep South. There, an “exciting soul saving contest” is going on between the members of Hope Baptist Church and a mysterious sect, calling themselves The New Day Pilgrims. The protagonist of the story is Jim, the preacher’s son, who is lured into the cult but near the end of the performance is won back to his faith and his Baptist wife. Two of the most remarked upon scenes were the performance of the Pilgrim’s moonlight dancing scene, described as “a wild and strangely beautiful combination of jungle voo-doo chanting and dancing, embellished by a sprinkling of modern swing” and the Baptist meeting where Jim comes back to his church.³⁷⁴

“Ticket scalping, masquerading under the guise of ‘service charges,’ is the latest development in the sale of ... ducats to ‘Run, Little Chillun,’” reported one newspaper, as the performance continued to play to capacity audiences. The musical would eventually become a cultural phenomena itself; a total of five African American churches in Los Angeles designated one Sunday a month as *Run, Little Chillun* Day. The public’s

³⁷³ Clarence Muse, “A-Talkin’ To You,” Los Angeles *Eagle*, May 11, 1939, box 53, NARA; Grace Kingsley, “Dramatic Musical Play Offered By Colored Cast,” Los Angeles *Times*, May 23, 1938; Leo Simon, “Combined Federals score in a Negro musical,” Los Angeles *Evening New*, May 23, 1938; Florence Lawrence, “Lovely Singing In ‘Run Little Chillun’ Drama,” Los Angeles *Examiner*, May 23, 1938, all box 50, NARA.

³⁷⁴ “‘Run, Little Chillun’: Synopsis,” container 1068, the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

eagerness for *Run, Little Chillun* would eventually take the production further up the coast to the Alcazar Theater in San Francisco before returning once again to Los Angeles. Though a joint venture with the FTP, acting state FMP director William Dean wrote Sokoloff: “Almost one-half of the playing time was devoted to singing, featuring the Music Project’s Colored Chorus, which, for the past four years, has been under the direction of Carlyle Scott.” So fervent was the crowd response to the Chorus that on more than one occasion during the first act and again in the second act the audience actually stopped the performance; continued applause after specific songs would hold up the action until an impromptu encore was given.³⁷⁵

Despite its unparalleled success, as with most other FMP productions involving African Americans, the reporting of *Run, Little Chillun* often reflected many of the ethnic assumptions of the day:

Success of the Negro musical drama, “Run, Little Chillun,” has been ascribed by many – and probably rightfully – to the joyful nature of the Negro, the joy that lies so near the surface of every Negro soul and emerges so readily....

And:

Acting comes as naturally to the Negro temperament as the singing of a spiritual. The ease with which these tyros speak their lines is a pretty conclusive proof of the old truism that every Negro was born with a sense of the theater in his blood.

A Bay area newspaper concluded that there “is something about a play about Negroes, done by Negroes, that automatically makes it a success.” Most of the reviews also commented in some manner upon the “wild, barbaric dancing” of the Pilgrim Orgy

³⁷⁵ *People’s World*, September 19, 1938; *San Francisco Examiner*, August 28, 1938, both in container 1068, the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; W. L. Dean to Nikolai Sokoloff, July 23, 1938, Central Files State: California, box 923, NARA.

Scene, acknowledging what was generally accepted as the natural lascivious character of the show's performers. *Run, Little Chillun*, would remain, however, the longest running and most enthusiastically received production of any of the New Deal cultural programs.³⁷⁶

And the involvement of African Americans in the educational units of the FMP in the West also was substantial; instructors with a background in choral singing and a knowledge of the slave spirituals proved particularly in demand. In Portland, for example, interest remained quite high throughout the duration of the programs. Compared to other western states, such as Oklahoma, the FMP in Oregon did not employ nearly the number of educators. Yet, despite its small size monthly reports from the state director consistently related that the efforts in musical instruction were quite well received. He stressed that “this is particularly noticeable in the case of the colored teacher, who is achieving wonderful results out in that section of the city where his people congregate.” Requests for additional instructors from the African American community – the education units remained strictly segregated – also appeared regularly in the state narrative reports.³⁷⁷

In the early spring of 1938 the New Mexico director Helen Chandler Ryan sought music instructors with a similar grounding in the African American spirituals; she could not locate musicians with such an expertise in her state, and requested they be transferred from a neighboring program. By May of that year she reported that “the two colored

³⁷⁶ “Stage Play Bares Negro Character,” *Oakland Tribune*, January 23, 1939; San Francisco *Chronicle*, January 29, 1939; Claude A. La Belle, “WPA Group Does Fine Choral Work, Barbaric Rites vs. Primitive Baptist Worship is Basis of Play,” San Francisco *News*, January 13, 1939, all in box 52, NARA.

³⁷⁷ “Federal Music Project of Oregon Narrative Report for Month of October, 1937,” entry 804, box 3, file “1937 Oregon Narrative Reports,” NARA.

instructor-directors from the California loan project have arrived.” One was sent to Los Cruces and the other to Roswell. “Reports show that classes have already been started among the negroes,” wrote Ryan, “and that fine response and enthusiasm have greeted this new work.” Local newspaper reports confirmed that the cooperation between the California and New Mexico Music Project directors had indeed occurred, and that the communities of Roswell and Los Cruces were quite fortunate to be the recipient of this music instruction. In the class of Mrs. Carrie Daniels, a graduate of the New England Conservatory of Music, there had been enrolled 112 children and adults. The next month the Roswell newspaper announced that “as soon as possible the chorus will sing negro spirituals in some place large enough for the white people of Roswell to attend.”³⁷⁸

In Las Cruces Mr. Walker, the other music teacher on loan from California, instructed and organized performances for ‘The Colored Community Singers.’ An August performance at the Mission Theatre in Las Cruces included renditions of “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Green Pastures.” A review congratulated Walker for having “developed an outstanding negro chorus for Las Cruces, especially in the Negro spirituals.” Mr. Walker also arranged musical programs for several African American schools in Las Cruces. An up-coming Christmas performance at Booker T. Washington School, according to a newspaper announcement, “will stress the folk songs of the Colored race.” The subsequent concert included not only spirituals, but several cowboy

³⁷⁸ “Federal Music Project Narrative Report, May 1938,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; “A Report of the Federal Music Project Activities, March 15 – April 9, 1938,” entry 803 and 804, box 1, file “1938-1939 Activities Reports,” NARA; Roswell *Record*, “WPA Federal Music Projects, Roswell, Fine Stringed Instruments, Negro Spirituals,” June 13, 1938, entry 826, box 72, NARA.

songs, readings of several Paul Laurence Dunbar poems, and concluded with “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” described as the “Negro National Hymn.”³⁷⁹

In Albuquerque, Mrs. C. Forrest Allen directed the Federal Glee Club of the WPA Music Project, a chorus of thirty-five African American vocalists. “Soft Negro voices will sing spirituals and southern melodies,” announced a local newspaper of a coming concert, “interspersing their program with such dances as the Susie Q and the Big Apple before the patients at the U. S. Veterans’ Hospital.” In addition to Stephen Foster compositions such as “Beautiful Dreamer,” “I Came From Alabama,” “Those Golden Slippers,” “Dixie,” and “Come Where My Love Lies Dreaming,” the group also performed a wide selection of spirituals, including: “All God’s Chillun Got Wings,” “Go Down, Moses,” “Deep River,” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”³⁸⁰

The performance of black spirituals under the auspices of New Deal music was not a regional phenomenon; the antebellum African American folksongs as performed by the various FMP Negro Choirs and Colored Choruses appeared in all sections of the country through the duration of the WPA programs. Scholars for decades had recognized the artistic and social significance of black spirituals; as early as 1867 a compilation of plantation lyrics and melodies entitled *Slave Songs of the United States* was published, and stands as a watershed in the preservation and awareness of these musical treasures. By the early 1870s the Jubilee Singers, a school-based choral of Fisk University, had become a musical sensation. Their performances in the cities of the North were met with astonishing success, and a tour of Europe that included England, Wales, Scotland,

³⁷⁹ Ibid., Helen Chandler Ryan Collection; *Las Cruces News*, “Negro Folk Song Stressed at School Program,” December 16, 1938, entry 826, box 72, NARA.

³⁸⁰ *Albuquerque Journal*, “Sick Veterans to Hear Program by Choristers,” December 13, 1937, entry 826, box 72, NARA.

Holland, and Germany procured both critical praise and unprecedented financial rewards for the new University. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the FMP sponsored black spirituals of the 1930s and early 1940s involves not only the vast audiences attracted but the appreciation they garnered nation-wide – including from the states of the old Confederacy.

The aching beauty and artistic power of the black slave spirituals in the period following the Civil War were not, however, accepted at face value. Indeed, numerous early commentators pointed out that it was specifically the intellectual limitations of black people – and the resultant emotional compensations – that made the spirituals possible. The Anglo-Saxon personality, it was held, lacked the ability to express the simple emotions of happiness and warmth that emanated naturally from those of African heritage. The review of the FMP performance in San Francisco that “no one sings Negro Spirituals as convincingly as the darkies do” echoes this sentiment. But such notions were not universal in the music projects. Indeed, what distinguishes the public perceptions of the WPA sponsored performance of black spirituals from the earlier reactions was the rejection of many of these presuppositions. The influences of the Harlem Renaissance and the more enlightened notions about race that emanated first from the political Left – and were eventually adopted by the Popular Front and New Deal coalitions – created a cultural landscape more readily open to the consciousness raising necessitated by the Civil Rights movement several decades later.³⁸¹

³⁸¹ Eric Lott addresses this phenomena in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), building upon the discussion of the “romantic racialism” interpretation of the spirituals as put forth by George M. Fredrickson in *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (1971; reprint , Middletown,

Perhaps no activity specific to the regional West better exemplifies the contradictions, paradoxes, complexities and triumphs of African American artistic expression in the music projects than two separate presentations involving the work of the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. In collaboration with the Theatre Project, the FMP of Seattle produced *An Evening with Dunbar* which FTP director Hallie Flanagan would later remember as representing “an entirely new pattern for the theatre” which was “good enough to be copied all over the country.” And the composer and conductor William Grant Still set to music the poetical lyrics of Dunbar in the highly acclaimed *The Afro American Symphony*. Along with *Lennox Avenue*, Still’s *Symphony* proved to be the most popular and critically well-received native composition of the Music Projects, and arguably the most famous work of Still’s career.³⁸²

Paul Laurence Dunbar stands as a powerful and original, yet ultimately tragic and controversial, American literary figure. The son of escaped slaves from Kentucky, Dunbar was born north of ‘The River’ in Dayton, Ohio in 1872. Dunbar initially worked as an elevator operator while simultaneously producing an astonishingly prolific and varied literary output that included four novels, four books of short stories, fourteen books of poetry, and numerous songs, dramatic works, short stories, poems and essays in a variety of periodicals. At the time of his death Dunbar stood as his country’s first African American literary figure to achieve a national and international reputation, had earned a handsome living from his writings that appealed to both black and white audiences, and moved in the circles of “polite society” which included no less than President Theodore Roosevelt. Invited to recite at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago

Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).
³⁸² Flanagan, 308.

in 1893, he met Frederick Douglass, and Dunbar followed the address of the renowned abolitionist with a reading of his poem “Colored Soldiers.” Impressed, Douglass called Dunbar “the most promising young colored man in America.” He eventually worked briefly at the Library of Congress and traveled to England to recite his works on the London literary circuit.³⁸³

Despite these impressive accomplishments Dunbar lived a professional and personal life of profound angst and frustration, ultimately succumbing to the effects of alcoholism, depression and tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three. A review of his second book, *Majors and Minors*, by respected literary critic William Dean Howells launched his national career, but with this notoriety came an immense obligation. For though Howells praised his work written in the Standard English of the romantic period, it was Dunbar’s dialect poems – which recreated the African American folk-speech of the pre-antebellum plantation South – which the critic found extraordinary and essential. For Howells, Dunbar stood as the father of an “authentic” literary tradition that the critic based upon an assumption of the poet’s “pure” African lineage. Asserting that the literary contributions of mulattos lacked this authenticity, the critic viewed the presumptive absence of miscegenation in Dunbar’s ancestry as evidence of his credibility. Howells concluded: “there is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and that this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by

³⁸³ Herbert Woodward Martin and Ronald Primeau, eds., *In His Own Voice: The Dramatic and Other Uncollected Work of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002), xxiii.

Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English.”³⁸⁴

It was within this intellectual climate that the poet lived and produced his art. “I’ve got to write dialect poetry,” complained Dunbar to a friend, and he added, “it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me.” At times Dunbar would even “perform” his poetry as a minstrel show, replete with banjo and other vaudevillian trappings. Subsequent generations would dismiss Dunbar as an “accommodationist,” or worse, a contributor to the stereotype of the “happy darkie” of the plantation South. Though his influence upon Langston Hughes and others of the Harlem Renaissance is undeniable, his literary reputation suffered a tremendous drubbing in the 1920s. The rise of the NAACP and the “New Negro,” the popularity of Marcus Garvey and the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, caused many African American intellectuals to view the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar as anachronistic at best.³⁸⁵

Depression-era blacks on the West coast, however, still found much resonance in his self-described “broken jingle” verses. In the late 1930s it was Dunbar rather than Hughes whom the Seattle WPA employees chose to perform in concert. His compassionate tone and fluent rhymes had entered the language of the generation; his short, tragic biography quickly recognizable. The 1930s west coast African American proletariat identified with Dunbar’s poems of joy and tragedy, oppression and freedom, which they recited and sang at home, at work, and at church. His eclectic themes ranged from the exuberance of romantic love, and its resultant frustrations, to the exaltation of life and the sorrow of the

³⁸⁴ Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, (published 1896, first paperbound printing Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1984), xvi-xvii.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

death of children. Only in contemporary times have scholars “forgiven” his supposed transgressions, though it is impossible in the twenty-first century to fully comprehend the burdens against which Dunbar struggled. Many now recognize the sardonic anger and irony in his verse that seems to have escaped previous generations.

An Evening with Dunbar opened at the Metropolitan Opera house in downtown Seattle on October 31, 1938. Advance ticket sales surpassed any previous WPA artistic venture in the state of Washington. Because the black working-class community of Seattle was already largely familiar with Dunbar and his work, the initial consideration of the Federal One performers was to present a chronological narrative of the poet’s life in verse and song. The limitations of staging and other problems, however, proved this structure untenable. The eventual presentation consisted of five separate scenes which included a choral prelude and epilogue. The three middle scenes were thematically presented with a character playing Paul Laurence Dunbar. The poet would observe and comment, but not participate in the action.³⁸⁶

The program credits the Federal Theatre for the production, but adds: “The musical program of AN EVENING WITH DUNBAR played by the W.P.A. Band through the courtesy of Dr. Nicolai Sokoloff....” A total of six Dunbar poems had been set to music by Howard Biggs, who worked alternately for both the FTP and the FMP. It is altogether appropriate that the FMP set Dunbar’s poems to melody. Intrinsicly musical, much of Dunbar’s work must be read aloud for full effect, if not sung out-right. One dialect poem, for example, “A Negro Love Song,” clearly stands as an early example of rap or hip-hop:

³⁸⁶ For extended discussion of *An Evening with Dunbar*, see Witham, pg.97-103

Seen my lady home las' night,
Jump back, honey, jump back.
Hel' huh han' an' sque'z it tight,
Jump back, honey, jump back.

The contemporary Dunbar scholar Herbert Woodward Martin writes of this verse:

“Rhythmically, this line sounds like a Bach ground for one of his inventions.” Paul Laurence Dunbar, according to Martin, “seems to have been the best at verbalizing the oral tradition in black American literature.”³⁸⁷

The five poems performed by the Federal Music Project Band were “A Banjo Song,” “A Prayer,” “Angelina,” “Life,” “The Sun,” and “Goodnight.” It is curious that several of these selections represented Dunbar’s dialectic poems; the poet himself had learned this ante-bellum plantation language second-hand, and for Seattleites of the 1930s the speech was recognizable only as an artifact of another time. Consequently, some of the dialect was modified for the production to aid in the understanding. Also notable is that the opening poem set to musical composition was “A Banjo Song.” No item of American physical musical culture evokes such a strong, though often erroneous, identification with a specific class, race and region as the banjo. By the 1930s, the instrument was anathema to the adherents of the modernist elements in the Harlem Renaissance. And though the history of the instrument is as evocative and mysterious as the sound it emits, the banjo remains disagreeable to various segments of the population to the present. But its inclusion of “A Banjo Song” as the opening piece of the Federal

³⁸⁷ “An Evening With Dunbar,” [Playscripts Files, 1936-39], container 641; “The USA Work Program WPA Presents An Evening With Dunbar,” [Production Title File, 1934-39], container 1006; both located in the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Selected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Herbert Woodward Martin, (New York: Penguin Group, 2004), xvi.

Music Project's presentation in Seattle tells us much about 1930s African American society.

“The instrument proper to them is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa,” wrote Thomas Jefferson of the slaves at Monticello. But by the end of the Civil War the freedmen were anxious to shed all vestiges of past conditions of servitude, and the instrument fell into disfavor among African Americans. Poor whites of the rural South took up the instrument, and it became a standard prop for minstrel shows and other racist characterizations. By the late Victorian era, the instrument emerged as the rave of the Northern bourgeoisie, and no parlor room was complete without a banjo. “No longer just a nigger instrument,” asserted one advertisement. According to the Sears, Roebuck & Co. Catalogue in 1897, the “banjo is a popular instrument. It deserves to be.”³⁸⁸

Perhaps no literary expression better captures in verse the haunting, joyous yet mournful sound, that “half-barbaric twang” of the banjo, than Dunbar's poem. Published in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* in 1896, the FMP band included several examples of the instrument in its musical performance of all eight stanzas of “A Banjo Song,”:

³⁸⁸ For extended discussion of banjo see Cecelia Conway, *African Banjo Echoes in Appalachia: A Study of Folk Traditions*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995); Philip F. Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); and especially Karen S. Linn, *That Half-Barbaric Twang: The Banjo in American Popular Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991). Mark Twain, who gave the Gilded Age its name, once stated that a “gentleman is a man who can play the banjo, but doesn't.” A devotee of the instrument himself, however, Twain wrote on another occasion: “When you want genuine music – music that will come right home to you like a bad quarter, suffuse your system like strychnine whiskey, go right through you like Brandreth's pills, ramify your whole constitution like the measles, and break out on your hide like the pinfeather pimples on a picked goose – when you want all this, just smash your piano, and invoke the glory-beaming banjo!” And Pete Seeger has expressed his conviction that if the world is to survive into the next century, “banjo will have had something to do with it.”

Oh, dere's lots o' keer an' trouble
In dis world to swaller down;
An' ol' Sorrer's purty lively
In her way o' gittin' roun'.
Yet dere 's times when I furgit 'em,--
Aches an' pains an' troubles all,--
An' it's when I tek at ebenin'
My ol' banjo f'om de wall.

Oh, de music o' de banjo,
Quick an' deb'lish, solemn, slow,
Is de greates' joy an' solace
Dat a weary slave kin know!
So jes' let me hyeah it ringin',
Dough de chune be po' an' rough,
It's a pleasure; an' de pleasures
O' dis life is few enough.

An Evening with Dunbar received rave critical reviews from both press and audience:

“Thunderous was the applause...” reported a local paper, “...a thing of beauty.” The *Seattle Star* described *Dunbar* as “a masterpiece both musically and dramatically.” And beneath the headline, “An ‘Evening with Dunbar’ Smash Hit; Negro Repertory Players Outstanding,” readers learn that a “new high was set” as “the entire company was commendable” with “each member playing his or her part to perfection.”³⁸⁹

But underscoring the approval were the same racial stereotypes encountered by the Oakland Negro Choir and other African American presentations of the music projects. “The show throughout is melodious, presented chiefly in the mixed chorus manner of singing for which the Negro is so famous,” observed one review. And another concluded that “the company offers cheering compositions and singing that are more than a credit to

³⁸⁹ Burke Ormsby, “To Give ‘An Evening With Dunbar,’” September 29, 1938, *People's World*; Bertha M. Lewis, “‘An Evening With Dunbar’ Smash Hit: Negro Repertory Players Outstanding,” November 4, 1938, *The Northwest Enterprise*; Ken Lightburn, “Negro ‘Folk Opera’ Has Opening; ‘Evening With Dunbar’ Filled With Music and Comedy at Met,” November 1, 1938, *The Seattle Star*; all located in {Federal Theatre Project Clippings: Washington}, box 121, NARA; also Witham, 101-103.

Seattle talent – done as only the Negro can do them.” And the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* reported:

... of humor there is aplenty ... in the unaffectedly joyous antics of several budding character artists and other bits that ring true to a typical funsome Negro – because the entire offering is arranged, acted, sung and played by negroes, giving vent to their natural flair for “play actin’” and to their natural love of idolization.

As with other reviews of African Americans involved in FMP activities, accolades are not accorded based on hard work or accomplishment, but natural ability. Such assessment again served to marginalize and denigrate what Federal Theatre director Flanagan viewed as one of the finest productions in the country.³⁹⁰

William Grant Still’s *Afro-American Symphony*, composed in 1930 and performed by Federal Music Project orchestras in Southern California, also integrated the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Prefacing each of the four movements of *Afro-American Symphony* with excerpts from Dunbar’s poems, it is the composition for which Still is today best remembered. The symphony combines themes from a variety of African American musical forms within a European symphonic structure. “The completion of the *Afro-American Symphony* ... marks the crowning achievement of Still’s self-consciously ‘racial’ period,” writes biographer Catherine Parsons Smith, who continues that “it is and has been the single most influential expression of his aesthetic of racial fusion.”³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 114. This discussion of Still’s *Afro-American Symphony* draws from Smith’s analysis as well as contributed essays to same volume: “The Formative Years of William Grant Still: Little Rock, Arkansas, 1895-1911,” by Willard B. Gatewood, “‘Dean of Afro-American Composers’ or ‘Harlem Renaissance Man’; The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still,” by Gayle Murchinson, as well as Judith Anne Still’s *William Grant Still: A Voice High-Sounding*, (Flagstaff, Arizona: The Master-Player Library, 1990).

Symphony No. 1 “Afro-American,” as it is fully referred, represents the first symphony written by an African American and performed for an American audience. It also stands as the first symphony of any kind that included the banjo. Composed for full orchestra, the symphony also utilizes the uncommon instrumentation of celeste and harp. One excerpt or small stanza from four separate Dunbar poems are incorporated into each movement to serve as epigraphs to illuminate Still’s purpose for the symphony. The first movement musically invokes the Blues, and utilizes the final stanza of Dunbar dialect poem “Twell de Night Is Pas”. In his notebook Stills titles this movement Longing, and the passage suggests the desires and frustrations of plantation slavery:

All my life long twell de night has pas’
 Let de wo’k come ez it will,
 So dat I fin’ you, my honey, at las’,
 Somewhaih des ovah de hill.

For the second, or what is traditionally the “slow” movement, the symphony moves to the structure and melody of the Blues to an African American Spiritual. The word Stills chose for this movement was Sorrow, which is lyrically expressed by the first stanza of Dunbar’s five stanza poem “When I Gits Home.” Both music and poem express the deep sadness of an oppressed people giving way to profound yearning for the next world:

It’s moughty tiahsome layin’ roun’
 Dis sorrer-ladden earfly groun’,
 An’ oftentimes I think, thinks I,
 ‘T would be a sweet t’ing des to die,
 An’ go ‘long home.

The third and briefest movement – which Still calls Humor – is the most suggestive and cryptic of the entire symphony. Here, as Smith demonstrates, the entirety of Dunbar’s poem reveals how Stills “used the ‘minstrel mask’ to reflect his sense of racial doubleness.” From the eighty-eight line, eleven stanza poem “An Ante-Bellum Sermon,”

a powerful yet nuanced delineation about the Emancipation and citizenship of African American slaves, Still references only one rather insignificant couplet:

An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,

It is the use of these two comparatively minor lines from the epic and important Dunbar poem that provides the “humor” and slyness of the movement, and places the composer in the role of Trickster. In this movement the music transforms from the original Blues theme to other forms of African American music such as ragtime and jazz. The banjo is here used for the first time in any symphony.³⁹²

The only poem in the *Afro-American Symphony* not in dialect comes in the fourth movement which Still calls “Aspiration.” Musically, the movement begins with a hymn-like section, concluding with a vigorous and spirited finale. Originally Still intended to use the final stanza of Dunbar’s “Ode to Ethiopia” as the epigraph:

Go on and up! Our souls and eyes
Shall follow thy continuous rise;
Our ears shall list thy story
From bards who thy root shall spring,
And proudly tune their lyres to sing
Of Ethiopia’s Glory

But eventually the printed score would include the better-known fifth stanza of the eight-stanza poem:

Be proud, my race, in mind and soul;
Thy name is writ on Glory’s scroll
In characters of fire.
High ‘mid the clouds of Fame’s bright sky
Thy banner’s blazoned folds now fly,

³⁹² Smith, 126. An interesting aside involves the accompanying countermelody that very closely resembles George Gershwin’s “I Got Rhythm,” which premiered only a week before Still began drafting the *Afro-American Symphony*. Many have maintained that Still, who spent much time with Gershwin, indeed composed the melody.

And truth shall lift them higher.

The *Afro-American Symphony* proved quite popular in the Music Projects, and was regularly performed in Los Angeles and San Diego. Though it had been premiered in Philadelphia, the piece found its largest appeal west of the Mississippi; the third movement of Still's *Afro-American Symphony*, as performed by the Kansas City Philharmonic in 1938, had such an effect on the audience and musicians that the conductor had to temporarily halt the concert and repeat the movement. A typical review on the West coast came from Los Angeles *Times* music critic Isabel Morris Jones: "The memorable concert closed with Still's 'Afro-American Symphony.' The effect of this symphony is more impressive each time it is heard. The 'blues' are raised to an emotional dignity in this work that commands respect."³⁹³

And a San Diego review two years later expressed disappointment that an appearance by Still as guest conductor did not include his *Afro-American Symphony*; the concert had been performed on previous occasions and produced much enthusiasm. Nikolai Sokoloff, recently resigned as national director of the FMP, had accepted a position as conductor of the San Diego symphony and Federal orchestra and introduced William Grant Still as guest conductor at the summer series at the Ford Bowl. Following the performance of his new "Symphony in G-Minor" Still stated that the composition "points musically to changes wrought in a people through the progressive and transmuting spirit of America." The subsequent review, however, expressed what had by then become quite familiar observations of African American productions:

³⁹³ Isabel Morse Jones, "Moderns United in Federal Concert," May 13, 1937, Los Angeles *Times*, box 48, NARA.

It is far less “racial” than his Afro-American symphony, the composer evidently striving to portray music of the present era of uncertain living – somewhat superficial in aspect, but occasionally registering deeply. But we had the feeling that he had deliberately controlled himself in writing this work rather than allowing the music ... to express itself as desired.

The clear implication is, again, that the “racial” symphony proved more “natural”, less superficial than Still’s latest composition.³⁹⁴

William Grant Still stands as an anomaly and, as Dunbar, a tragic figure of his generation. Both of Still’s parents were college graduates, exceptional at the time for African Americans. The circumstance of his birth accorded Still membership into Du Bois’ elite designation of the “Talented Tenth,” but also earned him entry into what Andrew Ross has called “surely one of the most disparaged social groups in all of modern history,” – the American black middle-class. William Grant Still fled the East for Los Angeles in 1934 seeking refuge from aspects of the contemporary art world and a political milieu that he did not embrace. “By leaving New York City,” writes Gayle Murchinson, “he distanced himself psychologically as a well as geographically from the interconnected aesthetics and politics of white modernist composers and black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance.” The regional West presented a “safety valve” and escape for the composer’s art and discontent.³⁹⁵

³⁹⁴ Sally Brown Moody, “Sokoloff Wins Favor; Presents Negro Composer,” August 2, 1939, San Diego *Union*, box 54, NARA.

³⁹⁵ Gayle Murchinson, “‘Dean of Afro-American Composers’ or ‘Harlem Renaissance Man’: The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still” in Catherine Parsons Smith, ed., *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 37; Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 76, quoted and discussed in Ingrid Monson, “The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender, and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48 no. 3 (Fall 1995): 396-422. Still’s reputation grew controversial with his

The attraction to Dunbar's poetry within the FMP was also regionally based in the West, specifically along the Pacific Coast. The poet's appeal in these music projects stands in contrast to the unpleasant references – the plantation, banjo players, “happy darkies” – his dialect poetry conjured in the minds of his more “sophisticated” east coast detractors. Yet many of his critics during the Harlem Renaissance – as with much of the literati during his lifetime – seemed to ignore the anger and irony evident in much of Dunbar's work. His *Lyrics of Lowly Life* contains what has ultimately become Dunbar's most famous poem, “We Wear the Mask.” Though a most poignant elucidation of white-black relations at the dawn of the 20th century, the work was somehow overlooked by William Dean Howells as well as the later critics of the 1920s who harbored such disdain for Dunbar's dialect poetry:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, –
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

This act of black Americans “wearing the mask” is suggested by Du Bois when he writes of “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”³⁹⁶

The “mask” was transposed, of course, with the performances of the black-faced minstrels, which found expression throughout the New Deal music projects of the Depression-era; the racist characterizations were not a regional phenomenon, but were

later embrace of anticommunism and eventual compliance with HUAC investigators, the motivations of which have probably never been adequately explained.
³⁹⁶ Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, (published 1896, first paperbound printing Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1984), 167; DuBois, 16-17.

executed in programs across the country. So ingrained was the image of blackface by the 1930s that minstrelsy can probably best be analyzed as a precognitive form, but not in the Geertzian sense of a story – such as a cockfight in Bali – that a people tells about themselves. Rather, writes Eric Lott, the minstrel shows demonstrate “an encapsulation of the effective order of things in a society that racially ranked human beings.”³⁹⁷

Social ranking and the corresponding sense of separateness it induces clearly were evidenced in a variety of ways in the performances involving blacks in the Music Projects of the New Deal. Analogous manifestations of this occurrence can be found throughout African American history; antebellum blacks, for example, often expressed their own languages and folkways only privately, between the hours of “sundown to sunup.” A similar scenario is presented in what is perhaps the single most affecting passage in Langston Hughes’s entire list of black miseries referenced at the beginning of this chapter:

Misery is when your own mother
won’t let you play your new banjo
in front of the other race.

It should be noted that the underscoring of “other” is Hughes’ own, the verse written just prior to the renewed emphasis the word would connote in the psychological and feminist realms. In simple, child-like terms, the passage captures the essence of the “doubleness” demanded of the African Americans, a sense of the separation induced by a society that ranks its citizens by ethnicity, as well as the reluctance to fully express one’s self artistically or emotionally at the risk stereotypes.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁷ Lott, 6.

³⁹⁸ Hughes, n.p.

In the wake of the election of its first African American president, the myriad subtleties that have historically characterized race relations in the United States may not have vanished but have quite clearly transformed. While generations of dreams deferred have in many ways been realized, an appreciation of present circumstances demands an awareness of past experiences. It necessitates an understanding of an earlier time: of its celebrations as well its conflicts, its accomplishments as well as its failings, its gracefulness and its coarseness. The music projects of the New Deal in the West reveal a society generally open and enthusiastic to the presentation of its cultural diversity, though also steeped in the prejudices and ethnic stereotypes of the age.

The object here is not to pass judgment upon those of the Depression generation and the motivations and attitudes of their time. Rather, it is to consider how through a critical understanding of these events, the actions of our *own* time may be perceived in an equivalent three score years and ten. For Hispanics of the Southwest, the opportunities facilitated by the music projects and the employment of the various *Tipica Orquestas* represent a constructive outlet for musical expression within their community and greater familiarity in the larger society. The performance of European classical forms, often written by contemporary native composers, reached audiences never before exposed to symphonic orchestra music. And the importance of the presentation and acceptance of Jewish musical traditions and productions, as well as those of the various Christian denominations, cannot be overemphasized; these achievements are particularly relevant given the abhorrent acts being perpetrated abroad during the 1930s stemming from an aggressive and pervasive religious intolerance.

African Americans in all regions of the country found musical expression through the WPA music projects. In the South, black spirituals enthralled audiences, though their reception often came filtered through the entrenched racial presumptions of the time. And though the musical presentations in the West often lacked the modernist or avant-garde aspects that characterized specific WPA productions in the East, in many ways this regional variation allowed for a wider freedom of expression. Perhaps less self-conscious of a past that those of the Harlem Renaissance often sought to dismiss or transcend, performances such as *An Evening with Dunbar*, *Run, Little Chillun*, and William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* found a welcome and enthusiastic reception in the West.

And, there were banjos.

CHAPTER 7

THE “BALLAD FOR AMERICANS”: THE MUSIC OF THE POPULAR FRONT

Asked about the attitudes of the American Left, and specifically the CPUSA, toward the Roosevelt administration, Pete Seeger broke into song:

Franklin Roosevelt told the people how he felt
We damn near believed what he said.
He said, “I hate war and so does Eleanor
But we won’t be safe ‘til everybody’s dead!”

The song could be found on a record – long out of print – of the Almanac Singers, a topical folksong group that included Woody Guthrie, Millard Lampell, Lee Hays, and Seeger (who at the time was performing under the pseudonym “Pete Bowers”). Later in the interview Pete Seeger, a man of genuine humility, acknowledged having made many mistakes throughout his long, eventful life. Of this specific song he said, “Should I apologize for that? I think so.”³⁹⁹

Though its position would later change, early on the CPUSA vehemently opposed the Roosevelt presidency. “Throughout 1935 and 1936 the Communists kept up their attack on the New Deal,” writes historian Richard Pells, “asserting that the Democrats were as much the agents of business, fascism, and war as the Republicans.” Such circumstance did not, however, discourage the administration’s right-wing opponents from regularly accusing the President himself of being a radical. In actuality, Franklin Roosevelt was not an ideologue of any stripe; he sometimes appeared uncomfortable even as a liberal,

³⁹⁹ Pete Seeger telephone interview, May 18, 2008. Asked if the purpose of calling himself “Bowers” was to protect his father’s position in the Roosevelt administration, Pete Seeger said it was actually in keeping with a leftist tradition; going back to the 19th century, it had been “a very widespread practice to use a pseudonym.” In a later conversation, however, he described the use of the pseudonym as “a foolish attempt to keep my father from getting into trouble,” Pete Seeger telephone interview, October 1, 2008.

and clearly was no radical. During his first one hundred days in office, due to the crisis of the Depression, Franklin Roosevelt wielded more authority and less political opposition than possibly any president in modern history. His administration did not act, however, to nationalize the collapsed banking system – a move that would have received little resistance – but rather implemented a “bank holiday.” Such policies of pragmatic yet bold reform would be the hallmark of the New Deal policies. But the Roosevelt administration did not (unlike the new “totalitarian” regimes abroad) attempt to stringently control all artistic utterance. Though the vast majority of its productions avoided controversy, Federal One would prove to be one aspect of the WPA to be consistently open to charges of radicalism.⁴⁰⁰

The original idea of a massive work-relief program for the artist can be traced to a letter President Roosevelt received in May 1933 from his Groton and Harvard classmate, George Biddle, himself a distinguished artist and later supervisor for the Federal Arts Project. Biddle cited the success of the Mexican mural movement that Diego Rivera told him was possible only because President Obregon allowed Mexican artists to work at plumber’s wages in order to depict on the walls of government buildings the social ideals of the Mexican revolution. Roosevelt expressed interest, but cautioned Biddle that he did not want “a lot of young enthusiasts painting Lenin’s head on the Justice Building.” Nevertheless, some of the programs’ most striking accomplishments, including many of the Federal Art Project’s finest murals, contained notes of social protest. Even Biddle titled his own fresco for the Justice Building “The Sweatshop and Tenement of Yesterday

⁴⁰⁰ Richard Pells, *Radical Visions And American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years*, (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 295.

Can Be the Life Planned with Justice Tomorrow.” Overall, however, only a relatively small portion of the Federal One output would exhibit any political sentiment whatsoever. Nonetheless, soon after their creation the Art, Theatre and Writers’ Projects came under attack and were closely monitored to guard against any form of radical expression; only the Music Projects would be spared this scrutiny.⁴⁰¹

By the summer of 1938 the newly formed House Committee on Un-American Activities chaired by Congressman Martin Dies fueled and consolidated political antagonisms toward Project One. Described by first-hand observer Jerre Mangione as “a free-swinging Texan with a passion for headlines,” Dies would gain the admiration and support of New Deal opponents when he fingered both the Writers’ and Theatre Projects, and to a lesser degree the Art Project, as his primary quarry. “His melodramatic charges of Communist activity and propaganda,” writes Mangione, “put his committee on the front page of every American newspaper and gained him the support of every Republican, conservative Democrat, and philistine who had long been outraged by the New Deal’s propensity for experimental ventures.” Within one year the activities of the Dies Committee led to the abolition of the Federal Theatre Project by an act of Congress, and restrictions on the remaining aspects of Federal One.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰¹ George Biddle, *An American Artist’s Story*, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1939) 268-69, 273.

⁴⁰² Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996, ix; the special committee was originally established in May of 1938 to investigate German American involvement in the spread of Nazism as well as the growth of the Ku Klux Klan. Not long after its creation, however, chief counsel Ernest Adamson announced that “the committee has decided that it lacks sufficient data on which to base a probe” into Nazi activity. The investigation concerned with Klan activity also was soon suspended; “After all,” said committee member John E. Rankin, “the KKK is an old American institution.” See John Joseph Gladchuck, *Hollywood and Anticommunism: HUAC and the Evolution of*

Many contemporary historians, recognizing the exaggerations of the Dies Committee about both the numbers of Communists involved in the WPA cultural projects and political radicalism of its performed works, have emphasized Federal One's general *lack* of radicalism. Certainly many of the partisan assaults on the WPA art projects were less motivated by concerns about internal subversion than by an effort to derail the New Deal programs – as well a gain certain notoriety and publicity for the accusers. Fueled by an increasing consolidation of political forces aligned against the Roosevelt administration, the transcripts of the Dies Committee activities reveal an investigation steeped in gossip and innuendo. Much of the testimony of the resultant proceedings can be characterized as nothing short of preposterous.

Led by the charismatic and ebullient Hallie Flanagan, the Federal Theatre elicited considerable attention from Martin Dies and his organization. As a star witness the committee relied heavily upon the testimony of one Hazel Huffman, a disgruntled ex-employee. Huffman identified herself as a registered nurse, having but one night's previous experience on Broadway prior to her position with the FTP. She appeared before the committee as an authority on un-American activities, this expertise apparently derived from her practice of going through other people's mail. During her several days of testimony, Huffman expressed particular dismay with the Theatre Project's production of the Sinclair Lewis play *It Can't Happen Here*, on the grounds that "it was anti-Fascistic to the extreme." Another witness provided testimony – as "evidence of Communist activity" in the project – that a young black man who she had never met

the Red Menace, 1935-1940 (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Frank Rich and Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (Chicago: Nation Books, 2002).

wanted to “date her up.” Yet another described a party where “Negro youths danced with white girls” as proof of leftist subversion within the FTP.⁴⁰³

Flanagan desperately sought to speak out or testify in defense of the Project, against the advice of friend and ally Eleanor Roosevelt who believed that the national director’s participation in the proceedings would only lend them credibility. Her eventual appearance proved abbreviated and incomplete, the Dies committee most interested in the director’s travels to Russia and the impact of what she learned there on the WPA program. “The Committee,” Flanagan would later write, “was giving more time to the discussion of the Russian theatre than Federal Theatre had in the four years of existence.” Perhaps the most telling questioning came from Congressman Joseph Starnes of Alabama. In the course of her testimony, the congressman presented a magazine article in which Flanagan described a theatre production as having “a certain Marlowesque madness.” Flanagan later recalled the exchange:

“You are quoting from this Marlowe,” observed Mr. Starnes. “Is he a Communist?”

The room rocked with laughter, but I did not laugh. Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional Committee had so pre-judged us that even the classics were “communistic.” I said, “I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.”

“Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get proper references, because that is all we want to do.”

“Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare.”

⁴⁰³ Adam Lapin, “Letter ‘Un-American’ To Dies Probe,” August 20, 1938, *Daily Worker*; “Actress Sees ‘Communism’ In WPA Theater; Cite Interracial Friendship as ‘Red Activity’ Before Committee,” August 20, 1938, *Chicago Daily News*, both in “{Federal Theatre Project} Press Clippings Relating to Dies Committee,” entry 845, box 125, NARA.

Director Flanagan's testimony ended abruptly when the gavel fell for lunchtime recess. Against her objection, she would not return to make a final statement; Henry Alsberg, director of the Writers' Project, would testify when the proceedings resumed.⁴⁰⁴

Flanagan bemoaned the fact that “[out] of a project employing thousands of people from coast to coast, the Committee had chosen arbitrarily to hear ten witnesses, all from New York City, and had refused arbitrarily to hear literally hundreds of others, on and off the project, who had asked to testify.” Newspaper reports of Federal One programs had always been far more sensational in New York City and other east coast cities, and the activities of the cultural projects there often the most avant-garde and provocative in the country. “Communism on the Stage” announced a not untypical banner headline for the New York *American* in 1936. This and other tabloids accorded Flanagan the moniker “the Red Lady,” and Mayor LaGuardia became “the Little Red Flower of radicalism.” For one WPA presentation it was reported that the Mayor had “thirty of his policemen on hand to suppress any patriotic disorders” so all the “alien-born and alien-minded conspirators, all the blood Red radical revolutionists, may be happy and safe.” But by director Flanagan's estimation, only about five percent of the productions of her project contained any element of social commentary.⁴⁰⁵

Reports in the West and Southwest had been much more measured, and largely approving of the FTP and its performances. Even in Martin Dies' home state, the Dallas *News* had editorialized early in 1936 that “now is the time for the Federal Theatre to

⁴⁰⁴ Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1940), 341-42.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 342; “Communism on the Stage,” March 27, 1936, New York *American*; “WPA To Stage New Red Play, In Soviet Steps, Class Hatred Is Staged With Taxpayers' Cash,” n.d., both in “Federal Theatre Project } Press Clippings General,” entry 846, box 127, NARA.

make itself felt in Texas.” For the state’s centennial celebration, the paper was “interested in importing the West Coast revue, produced in Los Angeles, and ‘Macbeth’ in Negro interpretation as revealed in Harlem.” Additionally, “the Federal Theatre has an open-air theatre where it should be, at the WPA building on the Exposition grounds, which should permit the impulses of Government-financed drama to flourish.” And with the demise of the Theatre Project in 1939 the *Galveston News* concluded that “the house acted too hastily when it abolished the federal theater project in appropriating work-relief funds for the fiscal year....”⁴⁰⁶

In California, newspapers pounced on Congressman Starnes’ confusion of playwright Christopher Marlowe: “Buy Him a Book” editorialized a San Diego paper. And a Fresno *Bee* editorial wrote beneath the headline “Dies Committee Member Makes Himself Ridiculous”:

The incident cast a revealing light on the intellectual and educational equipment of the Alabama congressman who thought that a man dead 300 years was a living Communist leader.... But this incident does not stand alone. It is a part of a pattern which the committee itself has woven almost since the day of its inception – with its equally asinine attempt to smear the Red tinge on even so conservative an organization as the San Francisco Commonwealth Club; its absurd willingness to believe that Shirley Temple had some sinister connection with subversive activities; and its readiness to act as a sounding board for every nincompoop critic of the Roosevelt administration.

Throughout the West, where the FTP performances typically involved the presentation of Shakespearean and other classic plays, the response was similar. The actions of the Dies Committee so incensed Gail Martin, for example, that the

⁴⁰⁶ John Rosenfield, “The Passing Show,” June 24, 1936, *Dallas News*; “WPA Theater Project Abolished, June 19, 1939, *Galveston News* both in “{Federal Theatre Project} Press Clippings,” entry 844, box 121, NARA.

former music critic for the *Deseret News* and present Chairman of the Utah State Institute of Fine Arts wrote directly to Franklin Roosevelt.⁴⁰⁷

“The Federal cultural projects of the WPA have been among the most splendid achievements in American history,” Martin wrote the President. Further, an “overwhelming majority of us think that the recent action of Congress in destroying the Theater Project and in limiting Federal sponsorship of the other arts projects was one of the most unjustified and dastardly actions ever taken.” Martin urged the President to rectify this “ghastly mistake” if there was any way to do so, and suggested taking immediate steps to set up a permanent Federal Arts Project “so that the progress of culture in this great democracy may be continuous and unbroken.” Martin continued that he “did not know how our dear friend, the Honorable Clifton Woodrum will ever be able to justify himself at the Last Judgment. Some time, we hope to meet him in a hotter place and tell him exactly what our opinion is.”⁴⁰⁸

Earlier histories of the FMP and the WPA Music Programs are correct in maintaining that the musical productions contained less radical expression than the other WPA cultural projects. This phenomena can actually be explained quite succinctly; “The least explicit of the arts,” writes Charles Alexander, “music was predictably the least affected by the Left movement.” Previous accounts are incorrect, however, in arguing that Federal Music entirely avoided the radicalism of the Depression-era. Both Findley and Bindas discount the influence of the newly invigorated Marxian aesthetic upon the FMP.

⁴⁰⁷ “Dies Committee Member Makes Himself Ridiculous,” *Fresno Bee*, December 16, 1938, “{Federal Theatre Project} Press Clippings Relating to Dies Committee,” entry 845, box 125, NARA.

⁴⁰⁸ Gail Martin to Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 15, 1939, “Central Files State: Utah,” box 2666, NARA.

“The Federal Music Project escaped almost completely the charges of radicalism that beset the other Arts Projects on Federal One,” Findley correctly writes. She is incorrect, however, in her subsequent conclusion: “Extensive research on the FMP ... has revealed almost no such expression.”⁴⁰⁹

Bindas also maintains that the radical ideas of the 1930s had little impact on the music projects. He concludes that “the FMP’s leadership remained essentially conservative.” In this last point he is not incorrect, but in the statement exists a tacit assumption that the national leadership served as a monolithic force. Certainly, Nikolai Sokoloff was responsible for the appointment of regional directors, as well as the approval of state directors. But this framework allowed, especially in the West, a latitude of musical expression which included, though clearly less overt than the other projects of Federal One, occasional radical expression. Further, these radical or progressive themes oftentimes melded unobtrusively with then contemporary nationalist impulses.⁴¹⁰

The suggestion that Sokoloff maintained a vigilant antagonism toward leftist expression in the music projects is not supported by historical evidence. Correspondence with the national director reveals an occasional concern with explicit radicalism within the ranks of FMP, particularly on the East coast. Chalmers Clifton, regional director of the eastern states, wrote to Sokoloff soon after the formation of the FMP quoting a memorandum he had received from Frances McFarland, director of the educational section of the FMP in New York City. Mrs. McFarland inquired:

Can you get a ruling from Washington regarding supervisors and other workers who stir up insubordination and insurrection on the projects?

⁴⁰⁹ Charles C. Alexander, *Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 171; Findley, 273.

⁴¹⁰ Bindas, xiii.

Some of our work is being badly disrupted by the agitation of communistic and radical leaders.

No response from Sokoloff appears to exist.⁴¹¹

Years later in an oral history interview a former Music Project administrator was asked if there were specific types of music played as the result of Federal sponsorship, or if the Federal government in any way attempted to direct what music was performed.

FMP supervisor and coordinator Hilton Rufty responded:

Oh, no. I think we were given a quite free hand. The only restrictions that I remember were the display of the usual WPA sign, in some way, to show the fact that it was presented under this auspices. But if you mean whether or not we were encouraged or forbidden in setting forth things like the “Internationale” or subversive music of that nature or patriotic music, like “God Bless America,” I don’t think we had [from the government] any decisions.

Numerous other accounts support Rufty’s recollections, though some censorship of musical presentations appears to have taken place at a more local level.⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Chalmers Clifton to Nikolai Sokoloff, October 16, 1935, box 382, NARA. Inexplicably, Kenneth Bindas maintains that Sokoloff *did* respond to this correspondence. In his 1988 Ph.D. dissertation, Bindas, writes: “The National Director told Clifton to release from active participation anyone disrupting the FMP’s activities.” (pg. 46). In the subsequent 1995 book the Sokoloff response transforms into: “The national director told Clifton to fire anyone involved.” (pg. 11). Neither reference quotes Sokoloff directly. The citation for both Bindas accounts reads: “Clifton to Sokoloff, October 16; Sokoloff to Clifton, October 26, 1935, Analysis, Box 370, WPA Files, 211.1” It is Box 382 which contains the Clifton letter in a file appropriately labeled “Nikolai Sokoloff”; Box 370 of the WPA Central Files contains wholly unrelated materials of the WPA National Advisory Committee in the years 1940-43. It should also be noted that a copy of all Sokolff’s responses were uniformly appended with staple to the originally received letters; no such copy or evidence of a staple mark exists on the Clifton letter. Further, on October 26, 1935, which Bindas maintains to be the date of the Sokoloff response, the national director was away from the office and assistant Alma Munsell responded accordingly to other correspondences. The alleged reference is critical to the Bindas contention of FMP administrative anti-leftism, and was noted by all scholarly reviews.

⁴¹² Hilton Rufty, “Tape recorded interview with Mr. Hilton Rufty, Federal Music Project, at the home of Miss Adele Clark in Richmond, Virginia, November 16, 1963,”

The American Federation of Musicians – which had early on challenged Sokoloff's preference for classical music – took a strong stand against radicalism both in its own ranks and within the FMP; from here seems to have stemmed the primary antagonism against leftist expression in the music projects. The roots of the Union's objections were more financial than political, as the leadership consistently and vehemently opposed any perceived obstacle to the collection of dues from its members. The president of the Musicians' Union when the FMP began was Joseph Weber, and in 1940 the leadership went to James C. Petrillo. President of the Chicago local of the musician's union since 1922, Petrillo held considerable sway with the various regional AFM organizations well before his ascendancy to the national position.

And James Petrillo's methods of persuasion proved quite effective. Remembers Ernst Bacon, director of the San Francisco FMP:

Petrillo was the most glamorous figure in the union, because he was the most – he was from Chicago, which, of course, has a vast reputation for crime and desperate measures, and he himself was considered a very dangerous man to cross. As one friend of mine said one time, if you cross Petrillo, you might be seen floating down the canal next week.

Florence Kerr, when she was first assigned as WPA administrator of Federal One, describes how she naively went to see Petrillo with concerns about the relationship between FMP and the AFM. "I was young in the job," she recalled, "and I didn't know enough not to do things that I thought of doing, so instead of clearing it all over the lot, I pinned my hat on one day and went over to see Petrillo." Kerr would later find out the degree to which Petrillo was "the object of fear and detestation" among so many, both outside and within the music profession. The AFM leader's priorities were clear: "He

interviewed by Richard K. Doud, transcript location Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC.

wanted to get as many of his union members in the music project as possible so they could keep paying union dues, and so forth.” Several thousands AFM members would be employed by the FMP. The strong anti-Communist stance of the Musicians’ Union influenced initial Project policy; the AFM had in 1935 called for a purge of all Communists in its ranks, and attempted to ban members from playing *The Internationale*.⁴¹³

Concerning official policies toward radicalism in the FMP, San Francisco FMP director Ernst Bacon did recall that Harle Jervis “apparently was exercised about the matter, because I think she wrote me, or told me, that I must get rid of the Communists, which of course I wouldn’t do because as long as they were doing their work properly, I had no cause for that. The fact that they were of another belief was not my concern.” Bacon did not mention any such directive from Nikolai Sokoloff, with whom he maintained a consistent correspondence throughout his tenure with the FMP.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹³ Ernst Bacon, “Interview with Ernst Bacon by Marion Knoblauch-Franc,” April, 23, 1982, Institute on the Federal Theatre Project and New Deal Culture, George Mason University Oral History Program, George Mason University, 24-25; Florence Kerr, “Oral History Interview With Forence Kerr Interviewed By Harlan Phillips,” transcript location Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 16. In post-War II popular culture James Petrillo and his fearsome reputation became widely recognizable among the American public. In 1950, for example, the Warner Brothers cartoon short *Hurdy-Gurdy Hare* starring Bugs Bunny depicts the animated rabbit employing a (presumably non-union) monkey as a street organ grinder. In the final scene, Bugs strolls away with a wheelbarrow stuffed with cash and jokes rather sheepishly, “I sure hope Petrillo doesn’t hear about this!” Another reference came the same year in the burlesque revue “Everybody’s Girl,” in a scene involving two anti-nudist street preachers. One of the preachers informs his partner that the devil has “two horns,” and the other responds, “Two horns? Brother, we’ll have to speak to Petrillo about that!” The AFM president’s most famous exploits, known as the *Petrillo Bans*, came in 1942-1944 and again in 1948 when union musicians were prohibited from making commercial recordings in order to strong-arm record companies into giving better royalty deals.

⁴¹⁴ Bacon, Knoblauch-Franc interview, 23.

Ernst Bacon also described how on another occasion “the Commies” came to him wanting to involve Music Project employees in a labor strike they had been organizing. “People aren’t getting enough money,” the agitators told him. Bacon concurred with the Communists about this point, and believing that everyone had a right to their opinion said, “Go ahead, address them.” Bacon drew the line at speaking to the FMP workers in the practice hall, however, as it was “not for any political purpose.” But if the radicals chose to set up a soapbox at the door, Bacon told them they could address the whole group as they came and went. Bacon assured the agitators: “The fact that the Musicians’ Union is not very favorable to you – in fact, dislikes you very much – does not influence me at all, because I do not share their viewpoint.” Ernst Bacon’s memory of the incident and the directive from Harle Jervis confirms again that anti-Communist sentiment within the FMP stemmed primarily from the Musicians’ Union, and was not always followed. But, whenever controversies concerning alleged radicalism did arise, it was nearly always attached to AFM involvement.⁴¹⁵

Such was the circumstance in the summer of 1936 when Frank D. Pendleton, president of the Los Angeles Musicians’ Union, expressed to national director Sokoloff displeasure with reports that Dr. Dillon Polson, leader of a Colored Concert Band in Southern California, was voicing controversial opinions to FMP musicians during rehearsals. Regional director Ussher assured Sokoloff “that the colored conductor who has been indulging in anti-Union and communistic propaganda is being dealt with in

⁴¹⁵ Bacon, Knoblauch-Franc interview, 23.

accordance with the nature of his remarks.” It was, Ussher continued, his understanding that Polson would be removed from the project.⁴¹⁶

The dismissal of Dillon Polson was met with considerable consternation from prominent members of the Los Angeles African American community; among these was Esther T. Greenly, the President of the Educational Department of the California Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs. Greenly wrote lengthy letters to both Harry Hopkins and President Roosevelt defending Polson as a “man of good repute, cultured and refined,” who had taken fifty untrained men and “made first class concert musicians out of them.” Greenly argued that “the unions have made an inroad at the heads of various set ups and are slashing the throats of all who do not belong.”⁴¹⁷

The complaint to the President was forwarded to Sokoloff who responded immediately to Ms. Greenly, assuring her that “if any injustice has been done in this case, it will be immediately remedied.” A telegram to state director Jervis the same day stressed, with uncharacteristic urgency: “It is vitally important that you send me as soon as possible the reasons for the dismissal of Dr. Dillon Polson.” The subsequent investigation included interviews with most of the members of the Band as well as colleagues of Polson. At issue was not political radicalism, it turned out, but the persistent odd behaviors exhibited on the part of the bandleader.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁶ Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, August 12, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

⁴¹⁷ Esther T. Greenly to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, September 9, 1936, and Esther T. Greenly to Harry L. Hopkins, September 9, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

⁴¹⁸ Nikolai Sokoloff to Esther T. Greenly, September 30, 1936; Nikolai Sokoloff to Harle Jervis, September 30, 1936, both located in Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

According to witnesses the Caribbean born Polson was “a very peculiar man” who had a “psychic propensity,” and gave “five lectures every Friday morning during rehearsal time on spiritualism, astrology, sexual laws, and voodooism.” He would then “throw himself into a trance and talk with a member of the dance band that had been dead for a week.” Another respondent could not understand “how these subjects come under the heading of music,” and asked: “Why should a man compel both men and women to hear him talk about good semen?” Based upon the extensive investigation which took several months, director Sokoloff concluded the “dismissal was totally justified.”⁴¹⁹

The Dillon Polson episode speaks to a number of salient issues, not the least of which was the continued propensity of the Southern California project to attract far more than its share of eccentric personalities. And the urgent reaction of director Sokoloff to the letter of Esther T. Greenly forwarded from President Roosevelt suggests the administration’s concern about the possibility of racial discrimination in the FMP. But the unsubstantiated charge that the band director was “indulging in ... communist propaganda,” (no doubt a 1930s variant of “palling around with terrorists”) was reflective of a not uncommon practice of making capricious and ungrounded accusations of radical political activity.

Charges of leftist subversion in the East, particularly New York City, proved much more common and sensational, but were usually in direct reaction to some of the more provocative performances put on by the FTP. In the West, the accusation was often

⁴¹⁹ Warner Van Valkenburg to Alexander Stewart, October 23, 1936, Albert Baker to Alexander Stewart, October 22, 1936, Ronald E. Wharton to Alexander Stewart, October 22, 1936, Leslie King to Whom it May Concern, October 22, 1936, W. B. Woodman to Whom it May Concern, October 21, 1936, Mark Carnhan to Alexander Stuartt, October 21, 1936, Nikolai Sokoloff to Dillon Polson, February 27, 1937; all located in Central Files State: California, box 918, NARA.

simply tacked on arbitrarily to a laundry list of complaints (lurid descriptions of supposed sexual improprieties also served this purpose well) against some perceived antagonist. For the most part, the allegations amounted to no more than the ax grinding of disgruntled ex-employees, fanatic anti-New Deal rightists, or any of an assortment of incurable malcontents. More often than not these accusations also came with equally frivolous charges of Jewish conspiracies and favoritism in the Project, and sometimes a virulent anti-Semitism.⁴²⁰

A case in point involves the dismissal of William de Zanco from the Los Angeles music program in the spring of 1937. Through his wife, de Zanco angrily disputed the reasons for his dismissal in a series of letters to President Roosevelt and other WPA officials. Included among de Zanco's accusations against FMP misadministration were charges of radical activity in the FMP, non-American conductors as well as "un-American" hiring practices and performances, and the complaint that "Jews, atheists, and other non-Christians" controlled the Project. The subsequent twelve-page response from state director Jervis and conductor Usigli, "The Refutation of claims made by Mrs. de Zanco," provided the following conclusions:

#6. Concerning "Americanism"; we call attention to the great number of American compositions presented by Mr. Usigli while serving with the Federal Music Project. These now number fifty-two. In addition, Mr. Usigli was precursor in the field of musical work relief, having founded and supported the San Francisco Chamber Symphony in 1932 and 1933. This fine group was devoted to the presentation of American music.

⁴²⁰ "One of the ugly aspects of the anticommunist movement," contends Harvey Klehr in *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade*, pg. 87, "was that 'communist' was sometimes understood as a code word for 'Jewish' or 'homosexual.'" Such implication by word association was less prevalent throughout the Pacific coast FMPs, where there seems to have been little attempt to obscure or encode not only anti-Semitism or homophobia but *any* bigoted or scurrilous accusation.

#7. There may be some persons with the Project who have Fascist or Communistic viewpoints, and there are surely some who are not Christians. However, there has been no evidence of dissension or lack of morale for reasons indicated by Mr. de Zanco.

The response supports again the conclusion that there was no “purge” of radical thinkers in the Project. The overwhelming evidence is that the administration’s antagonism toward radicalism in its ranks stemmed not from the national director, but an effort to appease the musicians’ union, particularly on the west coast.⁴²¹

As discussed in chapter two, Marxian sensibilities profoundly impacted the intellectual climate and artistic world of 1930s America; contrary to the conclusions of subsequent histories, the FMP was not somehow impervious to this influence. In fact, the most commonly recognized tenet of modern Communism – “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” – appears to be echoed by WPA administrator Ellen Woodward as quoted in the California Music Project periodical *The Baton*:

Underlying all the policies for the rehabilitation and relief of unemployed music teachers – of all musicians on the project rolls, for that matter – there have been these thoughts:- “Music for everybody according to his desires and needs,” and, the retraining of musicians for the contribution of their gifts to the community at large rather than as a personal expression to be enjoyed by a fortunate few.

The third report of the Federal Music Project in 1938, which was met with the approval of if not largely written by director Nikolai Sokoloff, repeated verbatim the same injunction.⁴²²

⁴²¹ Harle Jervis and Gastone Usigli, “Refutation of claims made by Mrs. de Zanco,” September 28, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 921, NARA.

⁴²² Ellen S. Woodward, “Music For Everybody,” *The Baton*, March 1937, vol. 2, no. 3, pg. 3; “Federal Music Project 3rd Report,” 1938, box 383, NARA.

In addition to music project news and analysis, *The Baton* also ran a column called “Mirthquakes” that related humorous happenings surrounding the FMP and the other aspects of Federal One. The maiden issue in 1936 included the following anecdote:

“Would you produce a play written by a Communist?”
Mrs. Hallie Flanagan, National Director of the
Federal Theatre Project, was asked.
“If it was a good play,” she answered, smiling,
“we would produce one written by a Republican.”

Assuming the quotation to be accurate (certainly it suggests the characteristic Flaganesque pluckiness) the FTP director’s joke strikes at a relevant point. Beyond question there were some Communists employed by the Theatre Project, as on the Art, Music, and especially Writers’ Projects. But, there existed no legal prohibition at that time against the employment of Communists. The individual program administrators had no more authority to discriminate against them, if they met the qualifying conditions, than they had to discriminate against Republicans. Further, the historical record does not indicate that Communists, or those sympathetic with the goals of the CPUSA, dominated any of the Federal One projects.⁴²³

The “Mirthquakes” column in *The Baton*, as well as other aspects of the FMP periodical, captured the attention of more than one observer because of the politically provocative nature of some of the references. “Please allow me to compliment you on the first issue of the ‘The Baton,’” wrote prominent WPA administrator Frank McLaughlin to California state director Harle Jervis. “It is not only a fine job typographically, but contains everything that could be desired.” McLaughlin went on, however, to suggest “in the kindest spirit possible” that the “Mirthquakes” column be

⁴²³ “Mirthquakes,” *The Baton*, July 1936, vol. 1, no. 1, pg. 8; see also McDonald, 407n.

completely eliminated “unless the jokes and quips could be confined to music and allied subjects.”⁴²⁴

In addition to the anecdote involving Hallie Flanagan, other jokes poked fun at targets ranging from Benito Mussolini to the Republican Party to William Gladstone. “Anything that smacks of politics even indirectly,” wrote McLaughlin, “is dangerous.” One specific entry even took a light-hearted jab at the New Deal programs:

WPA Foreman: What kind of work can you do?
Applicant: Nothing.
Foreman: Good! Now I won’t have to lose any time breaking you in.

McLaughlin argued that such humor “simply pours ‘water on wheels’ of our opponents.” And following his dismissal as regional director, Bruno David Ussher took particular relish in castigating *The Baton*:

I think it is time that the waste of money in “The Baton”, so “classic” an example of colored news and suppressed news, is curbed. A letter begging a manager friend of mine for tickets, claims an “international circulation of 10,000” and at a time when Mr. Roosevelt wants to lay off hundred – thousands for the sake of the economy.

“Mirthquakes” would be removed after the second issue, but was replaced by a similar column of humor entitled “Sharps and Flats.” *The Baton* continued until the summer of 1937 and provided intelligent and at times provocative analysis of the Federal Music Project and its programs.⁴²⁵

Though much of the media in the West remained staunchly partisan, even mainstream press accounts of FMP performances reflected a class-consciousness and celebrated the

⁴²⁴ Frank McLaughlin to Harle Jervis, July 16, 1936, “Reports Concerning the Operation of the Federal Music Project in Various States,” entry 806, box 12, NARA.

⁴²⁵ Frank McLaughlin to Harle Jervis, July 16, 1936, “Reports Concerning the Operation of the Federal Music Project in Various States,” entry 806, box 12, NARA; “Mirthquakes,” *The Baton*, July 1936, vol. 1, no.1, pg. 8; Bruno David Ussher to Lawrence Morris, May 22, 1937, Central Files State: California, box 384, NARA.

sense of egalitarianism exhibited in the programs. “Was it purely coincidence,” one newspaper rhetorically asked of the Music Project production of *Hansel and Gretel* in Los Angeles, “that WPA opera was christened with Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale of peasant oppression, the dreams of hungry little children of a house they could eat, of separated families ... fears of the dark and tomorrow?” This was opera for the masses, and the sign warning “Drivers, chauffeurs, footman, not allowed to stand in the vestibule” might just as well have been draped, as these were the operagoers now occupying the seats of “the master and madame for 83 cents per chair.” The article concluded:

The time is past, at least for the present, when great and worthy music is the privilege of those in the upper income brackets who reside on the Seaboards or in the Metropolitan centers between them. The carriage trade no longer is the sole ruler of the concert and opera stage. When 40,000 persons gather in a city park to hear a Federal Symphony Orchestra in a single evening, it is clear that there exists a real hunger and eagerness for music among multitudes of the American people. This Federally-sponsored music, in fact, has touched every stratum of our diverse society.

Indeed, as there were no reservations, the “carriage trade had to wait with the laborer, the barber, the young man in the polo shirt, the musician who hadn’t sat down-stairs for years, the school girl who was seeing the Anderson fairy tale set to music for the first time.”⁴²⁶

And the musical *Run, Little Chillun* in Hollywood, California, attracted an equally varied assemblage of theatergoers from all classes, ethnic groups, and political persuasions. At a series of performances at the Mayan Theater one report told how society and film notables “rubbed elbows with the elite and not so elite of Central Avenue.” Further, “W.P.A. workers sit next to Republican dowagers whose millions

⁴²⁶ “From Federal Music Project Prepared at the request of Nathan Asch For *The Federalist*,” January 9, 1939, Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes,” entry 815, box 31, NARA.

can't buy them anything better than a fifty-cent seat, so that they are *compelled* to learn something about democracy – even if it smells.” The egalitarian sensibilities of the New Deal permeated assessments and reporting of WPA events, both by program administrators and general press accounts.⁴²⁷

As mentioned above, the suggestion of leftist political activities did not create the incendiary response in the West that it did in New York City or other areas in the East. One FMP narrative report from Oregon, for example, details the workings of the Portland WPA Band for the month and mentions three noonday concerts on the Plaza Block facing the Court House. The park space had become “the resort of hundreds of unfortunates and a meeting place for radicals of all types.” Oregon state director Fredrick Goodrich expressed satisfaction with the success of the series of concerts, and his seeming nonchalance concerning the radicals gathered in the downtown area reflects the standard response both in the press and FMP correspondence to the suggestion of such political expression in the West.⁴²⁸

And, for the most part, Goodrich and the other FMP administration in the West were willing to ameliorate whatever labor difficulties arose. A day before a combined Band and String Ensemble concert at the Municipal Auditorium, for example, the local Stagehands Union made a demand for the engagement of three stagehands. State director Goodrich conferred immediately with the Board of Labor Relations and agreed to the demands “in order to save embarrassment to the administration.” In actuality, the stagehands appeared to have a grievance against the Theatre Project rather than the FMP

⁴²⁷ Richard Sheridan Ames, “Uncle Sam’s Success Story, But ‘Run Little Chillun’ Runs Into The Red,” Beverly Hills *Script*, October 22, 1938, entry 804, box 50, NARA.

⁴²⁸ “Narrative Report – November 15, 1936: from Fredrick W. Goodrich for October,” 1936 Narrative Report Summaries,, entry 804, box 1, file 3, 1936, NARA.

and did not understand that the two maintained entirely different administration. In the end, no cost was charged to the FMP as a private sponsor absorbed the expense.

Goodrich trusted that “[s]ubsequent negotiations with the Stagehands Union will prevent any recurrence of such a sudden demand upon us.” Usually FMP administrators responded with seriousness to union demands, as they did to accusations of discrimination in the Project.⁴²⁹

Several Communist newspapers operated during the years of the FMP and subsequent WPA Music Programs in the West and provided editorial analysis often markedly different than the mainstream press accounts. The primary Communist daily paper in the West – *People’s World* – was printed in San Francisco and maintained a wide circulation up and down the Pacific coast during the pre-War years. Other left-wing or Communist publications in the West included the *Western Worker*, the *Labor Journal* in Arizona, as well as smaller circulation newspapers such as the Long Beach *Labor News* in Southern California and the *Labor Clarion* in the northern section of the state. And these publications appear to not have created the same controversies as similar newspapers of the Left on the East coast (such as the *Daily Worker*) where the CPUSA found far greater membership. “I am interested in the three-column picture of Negro children in Project class which appeared in the People’s World of July 21,” wrote WPA administrator Harry Hewes to the west coast FMP public relations director, clearly unconcerned about any

⁴²⁹ “Federal Music Project of Oregon Narrative Report for Month of October, 1937,” entry 805, box 3, NARA. In the East, FMP labor disputes were much larger and more common. On June 28, 1937, assistant William Mayfarth wrote director Sokoloff that on June 18 “there was a sit-in strike at the Theatre of Music of 65 administrative employees and 500 Music Project workers and members of the audience as a protest to the proposed dismissals. The New York ‘Times’ carried this on the first page,” box 380, NARA.

associative ramifications. The Communist press in the West provided consistently supportive reviews of Federal Music performances, and also expressed far more sympathy than mainstream press accounts with issues involving gender and race discrimination, as well as the occasional labor disputes.⁴³⁰

When, for example, Antonia Brico became the first female conductor of a major symphony while leading the FMP orchestra in San Francisco, many of the Bay area music critics responded with varying degrees of condescension and bemusement. Some of the male musicians in the orchestra, also, displayed both resentment and a lack of cooperation. A *People's World* editorial in September of 1938 of a "dime concert" that she conducted, however, reported that Brico "is gifted with a faith that can move mountains" and "can dominate the harmonic phalanx with the authority" of any conductor. The article described how some members of the orchestra had on an earlier occasion "showed their unbelief by playing in slipshod fashion in order to discredit the conductor. They resented the entry of a woman into their pet preserve. It was perverse and ungenerous and I hope [these] woman-baiters fell ashamed of themselves." *People's World* had for her premier two month earlier run a full-page cover story and photo of Brico with a banner headline applauding "Another Great Achievement to Her Credit." And the newspaper's music critic Sue Barry contributed several articles providing detailed biographies of the musician's life and struggles. Another *People's World*

⁴³⁰ Harry L. Hewes to Graham C. Dexter, August 18, 1939, "Correspondence of Harry L. Hewes, Project Supervisor, with Federal Music Project Officials, 1936-1940," entry 814, box 26, NARA.

editorialist asserted that “Antonia Brico is as excellent a conductor as the Federal Symphony has had in its 3-year career in the Bay region.”⁴³¹

And the *People's World* reports of African Americans performances in the music programs were almost entirely void of the prevalent stereotypes and racial characterizations of mainstream press accounts. “Perhaps the most wonderful example of liberated talent that the Project has brought to light,” editorialized one article about the Northern California FMP, “is furnished by the Negro choralists. Another group, the participants in ‘Run Little Chillun’ emphasize the truth to the point of triumphant demonstration.” A *People's World* review of the FMP opera *Gettysburg* saw important aspects of the performance that clearly evaded other music critics:

The struggle for the freedom of the Negro people has been a major part of the history of the United States, and is still going on. Negroes today are still faced with discrimination and in many places face violence and murder if they dare stand up for their rights. With the recent defeat of the anti-lynching bill, the composers are doing America a service in reminding the people that our forefathers went to war that men might be free.

And the Seattle joint FTP and FMP performance of *An Evening With Dunbar* elicited from the same Communist daily a full-page article and accompanying etching of Joe Staton, who was to be one of the leading actors and also played a substantial part in the development of the production. The preview described how a “summer of work, research and rehearsal by this group of intelligent Negro actors has gone into preparations for what the project is proudly calling its first really original folk-opera.” In contrast to most

⁴³¹ Redfern Mason, “The Music-Makers,” *People's World*, September 7, 1938, box 51, NARA; Sue Barry, “Fights Prejudice: Ambition Drove Antonia Brico to Success; Works to Establish Woman's Place in Music,” *People's World*, July, 1938, box 51, NARA; George Hitchcock, “Dr. Brico Leads Federal Symphony in Unusually Fine Performance,” July 20, 1938, box 51, 1938, NARA.

reviews of African American productions, the *People's World* credited the eventual success of the performance to hard work and intelligence rather than to “natural racial exuberance” or other such explanations.⁴³²

Though most frequent in New York City, labor disputes occasionally erupted with WPA workers in the West, and mainstream newspaper accounts usually showed little sympathy. The *Portland Journal*, for example, heartily applauded those FMP workers who continued to perform during a WPA laborers protest of an anticipated work lay-off: “Loyal musicians! Amid the WPA strike agitation in Oregon, members of the federal musicians’ project ... kept on making music.” During the infrequent occurrence of labor disputes within Federal Music, left-wing newspapers proved to be the sole media source to express sympathy for the disgruntled employees. In March of 1937, in response to increased personnel cuts, an uneven pay scale, and a general lack of support from WPA officials and the AFM, nine members of the Carmel FMP *Tipica Orquesta* addressed a resolution of nine demands to Harry Hopkins. Included among the demands were the “reinstatement of all workers fired or dropped from the Carmel Federal Music Project,” sufficient expenses and transportation for playing outside of Carmel, the “immediately stopping of dividing workers on music projects into groups of so called aliens and Americans” and “that all [musicians] be given the same scale of \$69.00 per month.” The Workers’ Alliance Local 75 of Monterey supported the musicians in their action.⁴³³

⁴³² Redfern Mason, “New Deal’s Music Projects Made Classics Popular, Enriched Nation,” *People’s World*, February 17, 1939, box 52, NARA; John Stark in *People’s World*, “Gettysburg Scene of American Opera,” May 5, 1938, box 50, NARA; Burke Ormsby in *People’s World*, “FMP To Give ‘An Evening With Dunbar,’” September 29, 1938, box 121, NARA.

⁴³³ Workers Alliance Local 75 to Harry L. Hopkins, March 30, 1937, Central State Files: California, box 919, NARA.

The local press united in their ridicule of the striking musicians: “It has been suggested that the Tipica ‘musicians’ be furnished with picks and shovels when and if they resume their ‘work.’”; “Nine members of the Carmel Federal music project continued to ‘fiddle around’ Wednesday”; “The entire affair was silly, but the capacity of the human being to attain stratospheric heights of foolishness appears to be infinite.”; “It is humorous because pickets are parading up and down Dolores street carrying ungrammatical posters and are using cannery tactics to win sympathy in an intellectual community like Carmel”; and “...the erstwhile Tipica orchestra are keeping time to a new rhythmic score – pick and shovel harmony”. More than one article suggested that the striking *tipica* members were dupes manipulated by outside provocateurs. “The disgruntled ... ‘musicians’ ... have humiliated their associates who are better men and women than the ‘managed’ radicals,” reported one newspaper, and continued:

At least the weaker members of this striking group were the victims of a fool demonstration that perhaps gave a sense of importance to some sorry communist agitator or some even sorrier unstable emotionalist. There is a good old Elizabethan phrase to apply to such people: “A pox upon them!”

Another paper concluded that the radical instigators couldn’t have cared less about the strike results: “If they had won – it would have been a feather in a red cap. And when they lose – nothing is lost that makes trouble.”⁴³⁴

Only the San Francisco *Western Worker*, a left leaning pro-union newspaper, supported the *tipica* musicians and other WPA workers demanding a continuation of

⁴³⁴ “Musicians’ Sit Down on Carmel ‘Job,’” Monterey *Herald*, April 12, 1937; “Strikers Fiddle As Sit-Down In Carmel Goes On,” Salinas *Index-Journal*, April 15, 1937; “Who Will Win?” *The Californian* (Carmel-By-The -Sea), April 21, 1937; “Tipica Sit-Down Strike Is Ended,” Carmel *Pine Cone*, April 23, 1937; Oakland *Tribune*, “Musicians Join Shovel Brigade,” May 4, 1937; Monterey *Herald*, “Strikers ‘Separated’ Very Silly Business,” April 15, 1937; all entry 826, box 48, NARA.

financially threatened New Deal programs. “The strike of WPA workers is over. Many gains were made in spite of the splitting tactics of the AFL unions,” claimed a report. The article contended that FMP supervisor Ernst Bacon had always antagonistic to unions, but when strike action became a possibility, he “made peace without delay” with the Musicians Local 6 in order to “use every method of coercion and intimidation to keep the musicians from joining their brothers.” The editorial warned: “Progressive sentiment among the musicians is growing, and the inertia which has made them bear patiently with such misleaders for a long time will be thrown off. House cleaning will take place, and the WATCH OUT....” Newspapers of the Left provided the most consistent support of WPA workers and the occasional labor difficulties, as well as expressions of sympathy and respect for women and minorities operating within the music projects.⁴³⁵

It should not be taken from the above, however, that supervisor Ernst Bacon specifically or Northern California newspapers generally harbored antagonism to musical productions involving progressive or even radical themes. To the contrary, the immense popularity and near unanimous rave critical press reviews for the FMP production of the musical satire *Take Your Choice* demonstrates the public acceptance, at least in the San Francisco Bay area, of provocative presentations of politically controversial topics. Opening at the Columbia Theatre in late 1936, *Take Your Choice* was created and directed by Federal Music Project supervisor Ernst Bacon and employees Phil Mathias and Raisch Stall. One typically enthusiastic music critic described the production as “so far above anything the Works Progress Administration has given in the theater to date, that it stands no comparison” and “the most ambitious creative work of local talent that

⁴³⁵ *Western Worker*, “WPA Strike Knifing Hit,” April 26, 1937, entry 826, box 48, NARA.

has been produced in the theater.” The musical revue played to capacity audiences (according to press reports) beginning Wednesday evening, December 2, with nine performances a week.⁴³⁶

Take Your Choice, or *The Metamorphosis of Eustace Jones*, supported a cast of eight principals, a chorus of 30, and a fifty-piece orchestra comprised of a symphonic ensemble and a swing dance band. The score included symphonic orchestral numbers and 20 songs, many in a jazz format. To complete the project, Ernst Bacon sacrificed a traveling fellowship to Europe in order to collaborate with Phil Mathias, who was formerly director of the Pine Street Players and a participant in the Jewish Theatre in San Francisco, and Raisch Stoll, who maintained a superb reputation as a jazz composer. The three musicians, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, “have put their heads together and given the town a good and gay show in two acts and 16 peachy scenes.”⁴³⁷

The opening scene of *Take Your Choice* introduces one Eustace Jones, the revue’s lead character and protagonist. The script describes the character as “a smallish young man, about thirty, of average appearance; kindly, unaggressive, with the average lack of knowledge and ideas concerning the forces that affect his life.” Jones works as a clerk in the employ of Samuel MacFordstein, a self-made machinery tycoon “with perhaps less than the usual altruism of his type.” MacFordstein is the President of the MacFordstein Steam Shovel Works, and on this day employee Jones learns that his situation will be

⁴³⁶ Ada Hanifin, “‘Take Your Choice’ Has Debut Here,” San Francisco *Examiner*, December 4, 1936, container 781, the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. also entry 826, box 47, NARA; “‘Take Your Choice’ Enters Final Week Next Monday Night,” December 24, 1936, entry 826, box 47, NARA.

⁴³⁷ “‘Take Your Choice’ Due Soon In S. F.,” *The Baton*, October 1936, vol. 1, no. 4, pg. 4; J. H. in San Francisco *Chronicle*, December 4, 1936, entry 811, box 24, NARA.

terminated. With “pollyannish gaiety” Jones is informed by his boss: “Many would say I was adding to unemployment / REALLY I’m giving you leisure for pleasure and enjoyment!”

In scene two, Jones walks dejectedly and jobless through the streets of San Francisco when “six girls in stylized walk” cross in front of him, pushing him back. Eventually six men in a similar gait push him in the opposite direction. The dozen FMP musicians then perform “The Office Workers Song”:

Happy, happy workers, we
In the hives of industry,
While with a smile
We fill the file
We’ll file until the files are full,
Each day the same old foolish game
A-filling files with Bull.

While the workers rush through a quick noon break and “munch a bit of lunch with the bunch” the boss would “take two full hours for lunch alone.” Returning promptly to work, the workers’ drudgery continued:

We support the drones
The lazy bones
Who drones and drones
Dictating notes in pompous tones
Into a dozen dictaphones.

A similar attitude of rather whimsical yet undeniable class antagonism pervades the performance of *Take Your Choice*. Eustace Jones remains a hapless dupe at the mercy of the complex forces unleashed in 1930s society.

Still walking down a San Francisco street, only hours after losing his four year old position, Jones sees before him a harmless steam shovel left near a recently completed excavation. An inner voice whispers to him that it was the machine that was actually

responsible for his misfortune. “It put you out of a job because it works faster, faster, faster than you can.” The voice asks, “are you going to sit idly by while machines suck your life-blood – or are you going to be a man?” Eustace Jones then attacks the steam shovel, and the inanimate machine suddenly springs to life. The iron jaws of the shovel open and clamp down on Eustace Jones, bystanders extricate him, and the scene ends with the victim lying severely injured in St. Vincent’s Hospital.

In the hospital Jones is bombarded with various medical opinions, provided by doctors named with thinly veiled political references. “Dr. Delano [Franklin Roosevelt] injected some new blood,” explains Jones to another doctor, “to replace what I lost.” Dr. Snoover [Herbert Hoover] protests: “The worst possible treatment!” But the patient confirms, “It made me feel a lot better.” “My job,” says Dr. Snoover, “is to cure you so you can help yourself!” Dr. Snoover sings in protest of Dr. Delano’s treatment:

My colleague’s use of panaceas
Introduced acute debility
Transfusions such as he has made
Bring premature senility

A chorus of “Right Students” joins Dr. Snoover, singing in unison:

His system has been overdugged
If he were in our hands
We’d graft upon him rug-
Ged individualistic glands.

A similar chorus of “Left Students” sing in support of Dr. Delano’s prescription:

He’s helped the patient to improve
As you all know within you
Clinical evidence indicates
Improvement will continue.

Eventually a third physician, a disciple of Dr. Marx [Karl], enters the fray:

Dr. Marx’s diagnostics

Prove that I'm his saviour
I'll make his nature over till
You won't know his behaviour.

Dr. Snoover then threatens the Marxist doctor:

You need a purge
I've got an urge
To smack you in the teeth.

Dr. Delano pleads with them both:

Gentleman! Gentleman!
While you fight
The patient may be dying!

As the three medical experts battled one another, Eustace Jones escaped from the hospital still wearing his clinical nightgown.

The next scene depicts an underground meeting of five men crowded together as in a football huddle. One character, who had been the "Leftist" in a previous scene, stands apart and serves as chairman. The characters are attributed letters as names, again with easily discernable references; "L." [Leftist], "AN." [Anarchist], the First "C." [Communist], the Second "C." [Communist] and "S." [Socialist]. The meeting suggests, certainly, the formation of the Popular Front coalition of progressive political forces in response to the rise of Fascism in Europe. "L." calls the meeting to order and sings:

Gentlemen! You realize
We're here tonight to make history
Gentlemen.....(pause) we must unite
But how – there's the mystery.
Formerly we haven't agreed upon a single item.
When a comrade's met a comrade
He would always fight 'im

The other members sing a song of agreement, and "L." continues:

Gentlemen, the time is here
For us to get together

The other guys have organized
We're in for stormy weather

“C.” then jumps up and sings several verses:

The time is ripe, electric
With a fervor really hectic
Let's support the dialectical solutions
The bosses will oppress us
If our strikes are not successes
And divided action messes revolutions.

The Anarchist appears to have been convinced by the Communist's logic, and sings his own song:

The present system's lousy
The present system's lousy
According to Marx
We're on the rarks
The present system's lousy.

Eventually Eustace Jones enters the scene, still in his clinical nightgown. “C.” asks him if he is aware that under the dictatorship of the proletariat there cannot be any unemployment. “Why drag in the dictatorship of the proletariat?” asks “S.” “C.” dismisses his “line of Utopian tripe.” “S.” calls “C.” a “Moscow Lunthead.” Jones tries to calm them, explaining he just got off an operating table. “According to Marx,” proclaims “C.,” “if you want to cure your ills, you must concentrate on the class struggle.” As in the hospital scene, all the characters start to fight, and Jones escapes hurriedly.

Other scenes include the “Temple of the Finger Twitchers” where the “Preacher” sees the disheveled Jones and proclaims: “Welcome, stranger, welcome into this fold of ours... for our temple will solve your problem – tune in with us and divine help will

come from on high!” And The Recruiting Sergeant in Scene Five explains to Eustace the benefits of military life:

Oh, Join the Army
It’s a glorious life
Oh, Join the Army
Where there’s freedom from strife.

Civilian life is most uncivil
It is filled with rioting
The lefts and the rights
Keep having fights
It’s really most disquieting.

In yet another scene “T. & C.” [Dr. Townshend and Fr. Coughlin] confront the bewildered protagonist:

C
.
We know, we know – young man, my Social Justice League is
your only saviour.

T.

And an old-age revolving compensation plan will certainly change
your behaviour.

In the final scene Eustace Jones, attending a lecture in opposition to “high-handed dialecticalpological bigotry,” spots the “Girl” and warns her: “Look out! They’ll get you too!” The “Girl” calms him, “Don’t let these people get you down, Eustace. Listen to them all, but do your own thinking. Why not have something to say about your own future?” The performance ends with Eustace Jones agreeing, “You’re right – why shouldn’t I?”⁴³⁸

⁴³⁸ *Take Your Choice*, container 781, the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. It should be emphasized that *Take Your Choice* was solely a Federal Music Project production, not a joint venture with the Federal Theatre Project.

The Bay area press unified in its exuberant approval for *Take Your Choice*. “A lot of talent ... was liquidated Wednesday night at the Columbia Theater,” wrote one critic, “when the Federal Music Project staged the world premiere of its musical satire, ‘Take Your Choice.’” Another San Francisco paper applauded the “satirical caprice, full of youth and audacity,” which “has been making musical history.” A third publication concluded that *Take Your Choice*, “holds too much promise to be passed over as merely ‘grand entertainment.’” Indeed, it appears every paper in Northern California chose to review the performance, and the appraisals remained excitedly positive: “The impressionistic stage settings are consistently excellent”; “The music ... is modern, virile, descriptive and satiric”; “San Francisco’s first outstanding contribution to the field of revue”; “brilliantly clever lines,”; “splendid rhythmic, melodic and satiric qualities,”; “can well be classed at the top of the list of contemporary creative offerings”; and “Your Uncle Sam, via the Federal Music Project, gives a view of the American scene that is mostly cock-eyed, but always satirically amusing and tuneful. The project’s first musical ... was vastly entertaining to a capacity audience.”⁴³⁹

State director Harle Jervis, attending the opening night of *Take Your Choice*, expressed nothing but pride and satisfaction with the performances. “It is one of the finest productions I have seen in California,” she stated categorically. “It is truly representative of the success that can be achieved,” Jervis continued, “when various units cooperate under intelligent supervision toward a common cause.” All press accounts,

⁴³⁹ John Hobart, “‘Take Your Choice’ Replete with Talent and Ginger,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 4, 1936, entry 826, box 47, NARA and container 781, the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. maintains 11 reviews of *Take Your Choice*.; “‘Take Your Choice’ Enters Final Week Next Monday Night,” December 24, 1936, entry 826, box 47 NARA;

audience reactions, and program participants echoed the sentiments of the California state director. *Take Your Choice*, originally scheduled as a four-week engagement, was extended and then eventually picked up by a private theatre troupe.⁴⁴⁰

Though the FMP press release for *Take Your Choice* describes how: “Right and left extremists, fanatics and cultists of all kinds, political, social and intellectual, are taken for a wild musical and satirical ride,” the left-wing sympathies of the production, though playful, seem apparent. Certainly the Socialist, Communist, Anarchist and Leftist characters are open to ridicule, but more so in reference to their incessant squabbling than any philosophical beliefs. “As a matter of fact,” Ernst Bacon acknowledged years later, “the man who directed my and Stoll’s musical comedy *Take Your Choice* was a Communist.” The program lists Phil Mathias as the director of the production, as well as being one of three music and lyric writers for the satire. Prior to the creation of *Take Your Choice* Mathias had developed an outstanding reputation in the Bay area as director of theatrical musicals. And the fact that he was also a Communist probably only meant that he could be trusted with such sensitive material. But unlike much of the CPUSA membership of the 1930s, Phil Mathias apparently did not adhere unbendingly to Party line. Mathias, according to Bacon, was not at all put off that the revue made sarcastic and biting fun of the Communists; certainly most Party members “would have been mortified” to be placed in such a position. In retrospect, however, Bacon remembered

⁴⁴⁰ “‘Take Your Choice Rated Outstanding Contribution,” *The Baton*, December 1936, vol. 1, no. 6, pg. 8. The brief Bindas reference to *Take Your Choice* (which incorrectly states its run as only from December 2 to December 7, and among numerous other inaccuracies mistakes the character of Herbert Hoover for Josef Stalin) concludes that the presentation “did not get the support of the project administrators” because “its political content made it a dangerous experiment,” page 51.

Take Your Choice as striving to “in every way underscore the sane attitude of our government, which was neither leftist or rightist. It was simply decent, that’s all.”⁴⁴¹

The lone unfavorable reaction to the production of *Take Your Choice* came from regional director Bruno David Ussher. In the months before the opening, Ussher informed assistant Mayfarth: “Regarding ‘Take Your Choice’, I will say only that I have urged Miss Jervis time and again to investigate the advisability of this satirical play with music.” Having attended opening night at the Columbia Theatre and aware of the sweeping endorsements the production garnered, Ussher characteristically entrenched his heels in disapproval. “The reviews were good, and very good, but to my own thinking, not those of critics looking at the matter seriously,” the regional director sniffed. Though Ussher’s critique came two weeks after the show’s opening and would in no way impact its continuance, he felt compelled to share his extensive negative reactions with the national director. A “blunt and obvious satire” that surprisingly appealed “not only to the mass mind but also to individuals whose professional standing or educational background would lead one to think, would be of a more critical or more subtle nature.” The rambling correspondence continues for many pages. Four months prior Ussher had requested a copy of the script, insisting upon alterations to the sections he found most objectionable. He expressed profound displeasure to Sokoloff that not all of his demands were met; indeed, his persistent inquiries prior to opening night were only “met with

⁴⁴¹ Bacon, Knoblauch-Franc interview, 13.

vague replies” both from the producers of the musical in San Francisco as well as state director Jervis.⁴⁴²

“Thank you for your letter,” Sokoloff responded curtly, “I have been interested to read your personal impression of Ernst Bacon’s Review ‘Take Your Choice.’” Sokoloff went on to explain, in answer to a separate question, that “in connection with the music, if this was written on WPA time, it naturally becomes WPA property.” The national director failed to mention a letter posted several days earlier from Ellen Woodward informing Dr. Ussher that “it is no longer possible to retain your services as Regional Director of the Federal Music Project.”⁴⁴³

The national administration’s reaction to the 1936 San Francisco production of *Take Your Choice* does not suggest a vigilant opposition to performances addressing controversial political topics. Though Sokoloff expressed a continued interest in and support for the work of the young composer Ernst Bacon, it was probably not the national director’s intention for similar musical reviews to become an FMP staple. Rather, at this early juncture in the Project’s development, Sokoloff intended classical symphonic presentations to become the mainstay of the various music programs. Within this structure, the question of overt political expression would be virtually moot. Only under the short-lived authority of Bruno David Ussher did the administration of the western regional music projects exhibit any degree of antagonism toward such expression. And, given the regional director’s seemingly arbitrary yet simultaneously inflexible

⁴⁴² Bruno David Ussher to William Mayfarth, November 27, 1936, Central Files State: California, box 919; and Bruno David Ussher to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 17, 1936, box 384, both NARA.

⁴⁴³ Nikolai Sokoloff to Bruno David Ussher, December 22, 1936, box 384; Ellen S. Woodward to Bruno David Ussher, December 17, 1936, box 384, both NARA.

assessments of many events, it is impossible to ascertain whether this inclination grew out of personal conviction, a response to AFM demands, or other considerations. Almost certainly the stance did not come as a directive from the national administration.

There does exist, however, specific instances of censorship within the Music Projects, especially in and around New York City. Elie Siegmeister – famed composer and member of Charles Seeger’s Composers’ Collective – contributed to the FMP in the East and South. The opportunity to have his works performed by the various music projects provided a tremendous boost to Siegmeister’s confidence and career; he recalled decades later his experiences with the WPA to be “very gratifying” and “it revealed to me that I was a composer. It’s that simple.” One of his first compositions performed by the FMP was “Choral Groups Worker’s Songs,” which integrated themes from folksongs such as “John Henry,” and was initially performed by the WPA Negro Art Singers in Atlanta. Siegmeister remembered the performance “as being quite wonderful ... they did my music very beautifully.” But he also had several of his compositions – such as “Poor Mr. Morgan,” which, he wrote after reading in the newspaper that J.P. Morgan paid no income tax while “the rest of us poor slob, the other 100 million in this country, had to pay taxes” – were not performed in the FMP because they were censored by local administrators. This and other songs, such as “The Three Brothers DuPont,” poked satirical fun at the privileges of wealth during the height of the Great Depression. “Of course,” Siegmeister caustically recalled, “if they had sung that, [it] probably would have meant the overthrow of the government, so they censored it.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴⁴ Elie Siegmeister, “Interview with Elie Siegmeister,” unpublished oral history, 1982, interviewed by Marion Knoblauch-Franc, Music Library, George Mason University, 60 minute tape transcribed, pg. 3.

Several WPA projects in the West active in the collection of folk and popular music, however, clearly did not experience administrative suppression of songs containing radical themes. The second of the seven volumes of the anticipated and well-received “History of San Francisco Music” series, constructed by the WPA History of Music Project, is entitled *A San Francisco Songster 1849-1939*. The third section of the volume, “Metropolitan Song,” contains a chapter called “Recent Proletarian Song.” The volume’s well-written and lengthy introduction seemed to speak to the evolution of the Composers’ Collective and other artistic organizations of the Left during the Depression era.

Though songs with social significance were nothing historically new, explained the volume’s authors, they experienced a rebirth of significance in the 1930s. Workers with knowledge and experience of the struggle for relief from oppression seldom had the opportunity to develop literary talents, which accounted for the general crudeness of the proletarian song, both in words and music. But those possessing musical talents – professional and artist groups – had recently by economic necessity driven “over to the side of the manual worker.” Though the resultant compositions often lacked the rhythm, vocabulary and idiom of the classes for whom they articulated distress, “time and association between the classes, formerly separate but now one by virtue of common problems, will remedy this.” The introduction concluded rather ominously by informing that with “the passing of each day these ballads of proletarian celebration, prophecy and protest increase” and as long as fundamental problems continue unsolved, “they will furnish theme and incident for future ballad-makers as they do for today’s.” The first

song listed in the chapter – “Red Vanguard” – was composed anonymously in 1933, and leaves little doubt as to its social and political goals:

Million masses now awaking
Banks a-roar and fists a-shaking
Bans of ancient bondage breaking
Waking to the Day.

Rally to the Red Vanguard,
Join us in the Red Vanguard,
One for all,
And all for one,
And all as one
United on the Red Vanguard.

All the nations, all the races,
Black and white and brown and yellow faces
Close the ranks and take the places
You shall win the Day.

The ballad continues for several verses, heralding “the new world in the making” and announcing that “everywhere the old is quaking.”⁴⁴⁵

Another song recounts the events of July 5, 1934 when two San Francisco strikers were shot and killed during a riot that erupted after ship and warehouse owners attempted to run trucks through the picket lines. The funeral a week later created the largest labor demonstration seen in the West up to that time. At least 20,000 workers marched up

⁴⁴⁵ *A San Francisco Songster 1849-1939*, History of San Francisco Music, Volume II, Works Progress Administration, Northern California, 1939, pg. 150. All seven volumes can be located at both the California State Library in Sacramento and the San Francisco Public Library. The various correspondences of Earl Moore and others suggest that while the WPA Music Program director was interested and engaged in the publications, the History of Music in San Francisco Series was administratively independent. Later volumes (the final vol. VII was completed in 1942) include the following: “Prepared with assistance of the Works Projects Administration of California; sponsored by the City and County of San Francisco.” It also appears likely that workers of the WPA Writers’ Program largely compiled the series.

Market Street. The event inspired the song “These are the Class War Dead,” and the WPA workers transcribed the lyrics for inclusion in the series:

Stop in your tracks you passer-by,
Uncover your doubting head,
The working men are on the way
To bury their murdered dead.

Stand back you greedy parasites,
With banks and bellies filled,
And tremble while the working class
Buries the men you’ve killed.

For this is our word to those who fell,
Shot down for bosses’ gain,
We swear to fight until we win;
You did not die in vain.

“Someday We’ll Pay Our Debts,” also in the chapter, is described by the writers of the WPA History of Music Project as “proletarian in expression, cadence, form and tone.” Though its “specific prophesies may mirror the hopes of what is now but a minority” the writer assures: “the descriptive detailed picture of poverty records the common experiences of workers of San Francisco and all other metropolitan cities” from early times to the 1930s:

All my life I’ve been in debt,
Never beat the system yet,
Though I’ve worked by blasted fingers to the bone;
Payday comes for working men,
Then they take it back again
To the music of the bargain-sale trombone.

CHORUS:

Bills, bills, bills are piling high, boys,
Cheer up comrades, there is hope
And someday we’ll pay our debts
With our worker Soviets;
We will give the boss what’s coming to him then.

There’s a Wall Street millionaire

Has a corner on the air,
And he'll bill the world for every wind that blows;
Every man or beast from birth
Every living thing on earth
Will be forced to wear a meter on its nose.

Toothpaste, furniture and shoes,
Laundry, groceries and booze;
Everytime you blow your nose you get the bill.
If you eat or quench your thirst,
Rockefeller, Ford and Hearst
Drop a dime they never worked for in the till.

The chapter introduction informs that “with each passing of each day these ballads of proletarian celebration, prophecy and protest increase.” A subsequent review of *The San Francisco Songster* in a local newspaper describes “a vitally interesting record of the history of music in this city from the time of its founding to the present year.”⁴⁴⁶

And the WPA California Folk Music Project – discussed in greater detail in the next chapter – also transcribed and recorded for posterity specific songs expressing class antagonisms. During a department store strike, which lasted for several months in San Francisco in 1938, the FMP recorded several resultant songs, including:

“The Working Class is Getting Sore”
(to the tune of Funiculi, Finicula)

Chorus

Listen! Listen!
Things have gone too far
Minds are waking, rumbling sounds afar
This has got to stop
Children starve while bankers hog the crop
The working class is getting sore!
The working class is getting sore!
Vote the people's ticket and we'll open up the door.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.; 152-53. *San Francisco News*, “Plea Is Made For WPA Music History Unit,” May 15, 1939, box 53, NARA.

Some think the world is made for man's enjoyment;
And so do I! And so do I!
Then why must there be wars and unemployment?
Exactly why? Exactly why?
The world is like a rich abundant warehouse
Enough and more! Enough and more!
It's owned by millionaires who call it their house.
And lock the door! And lock the door!

They say the world will meet with quick disaster
And go to weed. And go to weed.
Unless we let them roll in profits faster;
How sad indeed. How sad indeed.
They say we're getting red and communistic
Imagine that! Imagine that!
While they have notions Nazi fascistic
Beneath their hat. Beneath their hat.

The San Francisco department store strike was settled in late November of 1938. This song demonstrates again the volatile political climate of 1930s society, and the subsequent transcription of its lyric does not reflect an FMP reluctance to acknowledge Depression-era social strife. The actual *performance* of such explicit material, however, was not done under the auspices of the Federal Music Project or the WPA Music Programs.⁴⁴⁷

The “new nationalism” which developed during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt represents a merging of ideals from the Left, the expressed goals and attitudes of the New Deal administration, a response to the rise of Fascism abroad, as well as traditional sources. “With the advent of the Popular Front,” writes Charles Alexander, “the Communist Party sought to transcend cultural proletarianism.” The official policy of the Third International in 1935 – and endorsed in the United States by secretary Earl

⁴⁴⁷ “Miscellaneous correspondence relating to strike sings, 1937-1938,” carton 1, item 10, pg. 8, California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS11 v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Browder – shifted the ideological purpose of the Party as the vanguard of workers’ revolution to a focus on indigenous peoples’ culture. The response to the rise of Fascism abroad also dramatically altered the attitude the CPUSA maintained toward the Roosevelt administration; for the Communists, their previous stances against militarism were submerged by support for the expanding conflicts overseas. Indeed, the song by the Almanac Singers referenced at the beginning of this chapter would by the early 1940s be replaced by an entirely different topical song:

Now Mr. President, we haven’t always agreed in the past, I know,
But that ain’t important, now,
What is important is what we got to do,
We got to lick Mr. Hitler, and until we do,
Other things can wait....

Quit playing this banjo around with the boys,
And exchange it for something that makes mores noise.
So what I want is you to give me a gun,
So we can hurry up and get the job done.

The membership of the CPUSA, and other organizations of the Left, would by and large remain supportive of the Roosevelt administration throughout the duration War.⁴⁴⁸

What emerged from this unification of the Left and the New Deal constitutes a new nationalism, predicated upon a celebration of the country’s ethnic and cultural diversity, its folk history, as well the identification of “the people” against “the elites,” forging a powerful and enduring coalition. This new nationalism was not war inspired, but rather preceded and guided the United States through the subsequent world conflict. In *On Native Grounds* Alfred Kazin elucidates this reaffirmation of the American identity during the Depression-era:

⁴⁴⁸ Charles Alexander, *Here the Country Lies*, 209; “Dear Mr. President,” words by Pete Seeger (1942), tune: traditional (“talking blues”), Copyright 1993 by Stormking Music Incorporated.

There was suddenly a whole world of marvels on the continent to possess – a whole world of rivers and scenes, of folklore and regional culture, of heroic tradition to reclaim and of forgotten heroes to follow. America was here, now.

And cultural historian Warren Susman acknowledged at the time that the “search for the ‘real’ America could become a new kind of nationalism. [N]ot in terms of ideology or the rational implementation of philosophies, but in terms of myth, ‘folklore,’ and symbols.”

As much as any other aspect of Federal One, the music programs in the West capture the essence of these new nationalist impulses. In their performances and reception, the various musical groups, as well as educational units, consciously perpetuated these ideals. Those productions of the FMP and WPA Music Programs that embraced only the more traditional patriotic themes often met with less enthusiasm and success.⁴⁴⁹

And the awareness of Popular Front nationalism within the music projects of the West is not merely the construct of later generations of historians and other scholars; it was acknowledged and celebrated by the contemporary press at the time. In August of 1938 the San Diego *Union* published a particularly perceptive editorial entitled “Symphony Offers Cross-Section of America” that clearly spoke to the modern and invigorated patriotic sensibilities of the age. “This department tries to keep banners and bunting out of its column” the editorial began, and “it doesn’t wave flags.” The newspaper believed that officially stimulated nationalism in music only encouraged “the inflation of 2-cent artists into two-bit bureaucrats.” The article continued:

But the stars and stripes break unavoidably into a review of last night’s Ford bowl concert by the San Diego Symphony of the federal music project. That concert was more than music. It sliced a memorable cross-

⁴⁴⁹ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1942), 503; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973), 161.

section through the big, complicated, only half appreciated set-up which we casually define as American.

The German-born Julius Lieb and the African American composer-conductor William Grant Still shared the evening's podium responsibilities. The program began with a suite based on Omaha and Blackfoot Indian themes and the remaining items to be heard included a waltz by Sol Cohen, a nostalgic regional tone poem, and "a symphonic glorification of modern Harlem." The editorialist continued:

Consider in detail that list of productions and personalities. Then ask yourself in how many other countries these elements could have been drawn together in peaceful contribution to an evening's music under a summer moon.

The San Diego editorial pointed out that such considerations were not inappropriate for a concert review of the FMP, as they served to define the contemporary national musical environment. The native composer and musician needed to adapt to changes in the artistic landscape in order to succeed:

.If his talents can only feed on the traditionally sanctioned, the codified, the homogeneous, he is out of luck. But if he is tough enough and pliant enough to thrive on variety, on transition and mobility and rapid-fire experience, here is his place and his hour.

Original native scores constituted the whole of the evening's performances, including Charles Wakefield Cadman's popular "Thunderbirds," the witty "Cartoonia" suite by Scott-Bradley, and Still's anticipated "Kaintuck" and "Lenox Avenue" assisted by pianist Verna Arvey and the Los Angeles Federal Colored Chorus.⁴⁵⁰

Though keenly observed and finely articulated, the San Diego music critic's review of the FMP program at the Ford Bowl was certainly not unique; similar sentiments of the

⁴⁵⁰ F. M. in San Diego *Union*, "Symphony Offers Cross-Section of America," August 10, 1938, box 51, NARA.

new nationalism – spawned in part as a response to the rise of Fascism—were echoed in editorials up and down the coast and throughout the West, as well as state reports. In Portland, Oregon, the WPA band under the direction of Misha Pelz played the grand march of colors and the national anthem to celebrate the 1247 persons naturalized in 1938 – “the state’s largest naturalization class” with new citizens who “came from 35 countries.” The photo caption informed that there was “Only Americanism Apparent In This Throng,” and the corresponding article describes the inspirations for this Americanism, reflecting the sources of the Popular Front coalition:

A contrast to Monday night’s German-American Bund rally in New York’s Madison Square Garden, where Hitler was extolled and America reviled. The Auditorium was jammed with 100 per cent Americanism Wednesday night.

Governor Charles A. Sprague told the audience that their “new and controlling love is for America” and urged the new citizens “to exercise their right to vote as they please” and ensured them of their “freedom of speech and opinion.” Referring to the “totalitarian” states the Governor said, perhaps expressing something of the isolationist sensibilities of the time: “We had better let them work out their own destinies and content ourselves with making democracy work in this country. That is task enough for us.” And in September of 1939 in Southern California it was decided that “with the declaration of war, and the announced neutrality of the United States,” it was deemed necessary to change the original plans and perform “The Merry Widow” in substitution of the originally scheduled production. Indeed, “it was decided the ‘Student Prince’ might be considered by some as pro-German propaganda on the part of a governmental agency.”⁴⁵¹

⁴⁵¹ Kenneth Madden in *Portland Journal*, February 23, 1939; “Narrative Report for the Month of September, 1939, Southern California Project,” entry 805, box 6, NARA.

The new patriotic sentiments forged following the rise of Fascism only intensified with the entrance of the United States into the War. Many saw the WPA Music Programs as instrumental to this effort, and urged its continuance. In May of 1942 Aaron Copland, former member of the Composer's Collective and then president of the American Composers Alliance, wrote to WPA director Florence Kerr to protest against this curtailment of the music programs "and the worthwhile work that has been carried on for the past several years." Copland argued that the cessation of the Projects would be detrimental to the interests of composers of serious music in the United States, and important cultural experiences would be denied to the layman. He also asserted that musical expression was even more necessary than in peacetime, both as recreation for war workers and to impress upon the country that art is not a mere luxury.

Copland was especially concerned that the Music Copying Project – which published and distributed music written by American and South American composers – would be discontinued. "During this period," he continued, "cultural relations play a great part in diplomatic intercourse between our country and the Latin American Republics." In ending the lengthy correspondence, Copland asserted that:

This is not only a war of tanks and guns and bombers, but one of spiritual values as well. It is the task of our country to do everything in its power to offset nazi and fascist propaganda in South America. We shall certainly never succeed if we snub their cultural achievements because we do not wish to spend a relatively small sum on such a project. The high morale of our own people and those of South American countries will be as instrumental in winning this war as munitions and men on the battlefield.

The appeal of the famous composer spoke to the Popular Front zeitgeist of the War years, and the WPA Music Programs in the West (and the Music Copying Project in the East)

continued, exclusively dedicated to military and civilian morale. By this time, Charles Seeger had become Chief of the Pan American exchange in Latin America.⁴⁵²

No Federal Music Project production better exemplifies the disinterest in, even rejection of, conventional nationalism – what the San Diego music critic identified as “the traditionally sanctioned, the codified, the homogenous” – than the abject failure of the FMP opera *Gettysburg* in Los Angeles in 1938. The opera was accorded unprecedented publicity and funding. The FMP press release, five pages in all, announced that the opera, was the work of two Californian – Morris Hutchins Ruger, composer, and Arthur Robinson, librettist – and would be heard in the Hollywood Bowl on September 23 in its world premier. The action of the opera took place on a battlefield of Gettysburg near the cemetery where Pickett make his bloody charge. The Army of the South under Robert E. Lee retreated beyond the Potomac. The musical, according to the opening night’s program “was a vital theme for American opera.” *Gettysburg* was performed in three parts and eighteen scenes, and was conducted by FMP director for Southern California Gastone Usigli. All Los Angeles news sources, including the *Times*, (which encouraged its readers to attend this “epoch-making music drama”) the *Examiner*, (which announced that the performance would evoke the “hopes, fears, the high nationalistic feelings” aroused by the Civil War) the *Herald-Express*, and the *Evening News*, lent unprecedented promotion for the coming FMP production of the opera. The previews came, for the most part, directly from FMP press releases.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² Aaron Copland to Florence Kerr, May 15, 1942, box 386, NARA.

⁴⁵³ “From the Federal Music Project for release in afternoon newspapers, Saturday, September 17,” entry 815, box 30, NARA; “The Program ‘Gettysburg’ World Premiere,” The Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., container 1068. Though located in the LOC FTP

Despite the media blitz, the public response proved utterly dismal; an FMP production of the racially mixed *Aida* at a much smaller venue in Long Beach soon afterward attracted nearly double the number of operagoers. Indeed, the cavernous Hollywood Bowl was scarcely occupied, and the reviews from music critics for *Gettysburg* ranged from mediocre to miserable. “Federal Flop” is how the Los Angeles *Eagle* headlined its review of the opera in a not untypical assessment. And music critic Fay M. Jackson told her readers that with all the “fanfare and general whooping it up” the Federal Music Project created to promote the opera, the resulting performances:

... suffered a poverty of ideas. Right and left, one heard snatches of “Dixie”, chanting and more chanting of “The Lord’s Prayer”, something that smelled faintly of “John Brown’s Body”, of chromatics and other symphonic trappings. Of a sudden, Ruger seemed to have had a musical orgasm and the thing petered out to a thin peanut whistle.

Over it all was dropped a huge American flag – an unforgivable piece of business ostensibly designed to pull out the fullest degree of audience appeal and – applause. But, if applause there was, it was the Flag and not “Gettysburg” that saved the day.

Other reviews echoed in degrees: “contained too little action to be good drama and music somewhat below the standards demanded of good opera.”; another critic described how he sat in the “audience like a bump on a log and did not even realize when the opera had finished.”; the national magazine *Musical America* maintained that *Gettysburg*

collection, *Gettysburg* was wholly the creation of the Federal Music Project; “Federal Will Present New American Opera,” Los Angeles *Times*, May 1, 1938, box 50, NARA; “American Opera Set for May 10,” May 1, 1938, “Address Set to Music,” May 8, 1938, “‘Gettysburg’ Tonight,” May 8, 1938, all in Los Angeles *Examiner*, box 50, NARA.

brought little to “opera in general, and even less to American music.” Several reviews criticized the overt nationalism and religiosity of the performance.⁴⁵⁴

Clearly frustrated by the opera’s poor reception, state director and conductor Gastone Usigli wrote to Nikolai Sokoloff that he considered the performance of *Gettysburg* “an outstanding artistic success” but acknowledged that “financially it was a failure.” Usigli viewed the dismal response to the opera as a regional phenomena: “I never shared the optimism ... [of those] ... who were confident that they could fill the Bowl on that occasion, because previous experience has taught me how difficult is to sell to the people of the West anything which is new and American.” Regardless, the renowned conductor was still quite surprised by the shockingly low turnout:

... frankly, I would never have believed that, with the exceptional publicity we have enjoyed on this occasion, only 1,603 people would be lured to the Bowl on a balmy night to hear and see a work that had been so widely advertised.

To give a further illustration, while only 1,603 persons paid admission for “*Gettysburg*”, 2,894 did so last night for “*Aida*” in Long Beach....

The Southern California state director acknowledged “we are ‘making money’ with our standard repertoire and losing it with worthwhile enterprises like ‘*Gettysburg*.’” – the “standard repertoire” almost certainly being the more ethnically diverse and provocative performances like *Run, Little Chillun*, *Aida*, as well as the various *Tipica Orquestas*.⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵⁴ Fay M. Jackson, “Federal Flop,” in *California Eagle*, May 19, 1938, box 50, NARA, emphasis not added; “‘*Gettysburg* Makes Debut,” *Los Angeles Evening News*, September 24, 1938, box 51, NARA; Alfred Price Quinn, “Music,” *B’nai B’rith Messenger*, September 30, 1938, box 51, NARA; *Musical America* 57 (October, 1938): 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Gastone Usigli to Nikolai Sokoloff, September 27, 1938, Central Files: California, box 924, NARA.

While Chalmers Clifton, FMP director in New York City, appears to have shared Usigli's general assessment of the great American West as a land of rubes and philistines, he did not believe that the nationalistic opera would fare any better in the East. Weeks after the Hollywood Bowl performance, WPA supervisor Harry Hewes wrote to Clifton via Glenn Tindall, FMP information director, seeking advise on the presentation of *Gettysburg* at the Hippodrome in New York – a possibility which had been previously contemplated. “The belated reviews have just reached my desk,” Hewes conceded, “and they are none too favorable.” The New York City director responded without hesitation: “Inasmuch as ‘Gettysburg’ has not had favorable reviews, I see no reason for producing it in this sophisticated ‘milieu.’” Clearly, the traditional nationalistic and religious themes of the opera stifled its appeal regardless of region. *Gettysburg* would not be restaged in the East or anywhere else, and should be seen as the one abject failure of the FMP in the West.⁴⁵⁶

But if traditional nationalism rang hollow during the Depression era, the impact and acceptance of specific aspects of the Left movement on American artistic expression is undeniable. Indeed, so prevalent was the role of the Communist Party in the cultural life of 1930s America that it would have been truly remarkable for its absence in the FMP to the degree suggested by earlier histories. Musicologist Barbara Zuck provides a long-accepted explanation of the importance of the CPUSA during the Depression-era, a variation of which has been articulated by numerous scholars: “The Communist Party had an important sociopolitical function at this time in its organized agitation against groups fostering discrimination and racial hatred. Thus, political leftism in the 1930s simply

⁴⁵⁶ Harry L. Hewes to Glenn M. Tindall, October 20, 1938, box 0375, NARA; Glenn M. Tindall to Harry L. Hewes, November 10, 1938, box 0375, NARA. 16-5-3&4.

became a common framework in which the American intelligentsia expressed their idealism and humanitarianism.” Indeed, some of the artists of the era who gravitated to the Party actually maintained a rather marginal political interest.⁴⁵⁷

Yet, the “employment of young radical plebian artists and writers by the relief projects had profound effects,” according to Michael Denning, “greater than might be imagined given the relatively short life of Federal One.” The papers and oral histories of various FMP participants (such Ernst Bacon, Bruno David Ussher, Elie Seigmeister, and Florence Kerr) do suggest a degree of involvement of radical musicians in the programs. Most of these worked in symphony orchestras, but the FMP (according to Denning) also presented the work of a number of radical composers, such as Marc Blitzstein, Hann Eisler, and Ruth Crawford (the second wife of Charles Seeger). Denning also references Charles Seeger as an example of a “non-relief” employee of the Federal Music Project who permitted the cultural projects to become “a crucial site where alliances formed between the plebian radicals and the established artists and intellectuals who dominated the non-relief personnel.”⁴⁵⁸

But compared to the figures involved in other aspects of Federal One – such as Orson Welles, John Houseman, and Joseph Losey in the FTP, Benjamin Botkin in the FWP, and Berenice Abbott of the FAP – these alliances in the Music Project were limited. And the presence of Seeger as assistant director of the FMP did not necessarily constitute a radical influence. “The labor movement and political leftism, couldn’t make head or tail of it,” remembered Charles Seeger much later, “so I just gave up the whole thing in the early

⁴⁵⁷ Barbara Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 107.

⁴⁵⁸ Denning, 79

'20s, and practically gave up my interest in society in general.” But the relevance of the Communist movement in the music profession remained. “In those days, the Communists were the only ones in whom the arts had any political function,” Seeger continued, “Republicanism or the Democratic Party, why they would have laughed at you at the idea that there was any connection between music.”⁴⁵⁹

Inspiration for the Communist movement in the United States came less from Soviet Union than the long and renewable wellspring of American revolutionary idealism; its attraction for the young artists of the 1930s reflected a rebellious defiance and egalitarian commitment with origins to be found in the Declaration of Independence, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, the speeches of Lincoln, the writings of Thoreau and Whitman, and struck at the core of the American character. “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism,” exclaimed CPUSA General Secretary Earl Browder, and efforts were made in the 1930s to identify the country with its radical past. During the Spanish Civil War numbers of American Communists volunteered with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and literally put their lives on the line to defend the democratically elected government in Spain against Franco’s Fascists. Domestically, the CPUSA pursued a

⁴⁵⁹ “Interview with Charles Seeger conducted by Richard Reuss,” June 8, 1967, Indiana University, Bloomington, Archives of Traditional Music, tape 6 of 8, (no accompanying documentation or transcripts.) After leaving the FMP, Charles Seeger accepted a position as Director of Music for the Pan American Union Exchange. According to Pete Seeger, “He was in touch with symphony orchestra conductors and composers throughout Latin America – Brazil and Mexico and other places. The FBI caught up with him around 1951 and said, ‘Mr. Seeger, will you tell us about your relationship with the Communist Party.’ And he said, “Well, I’ll undress, figuratively speaking, about myself, but I am not going to tell you about anybody else.’ ‘Oh, No! If you are going to tell us about the Communist Party you must tell about everybody you knew in it.’ And, so, the next day he walked into the Pan American Union and resigned. Got a very small pension.” Pete Seeger telephone interview, October 1, 2008. .

strong stance against racism and was instrumental in the founding of most of the country's major industrial unions. Party membership peaked at 75,000 in 1938, but the affiliated International Workers Order and its 15 sections provided mutual aid and cultural activities to a membership that reached nearly 200,000.

In addition to the rise of Fascism abroad, the passage of the National Industrial Act (which sparked a tremendous upsurge in union organizing) at home also motivated the CPUSA to abandon its initial opposition to the New Deal and support the Popular Front movement. Franklin Roosevelt responded to this newfound approval from the Communist Party with quiet tolerance; he did nothing to publicly encourage or denounce the endorsement. The national membership in the CPUSA would drop precipitously, however, with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact in 1938; indeed, the Fascist threat had been met in an altogether unanticipated manner. And the Party would be relegated to near inconsequentiality in the post-War years, due to a multiplicity of developments including the Truman administration's loyalty oath program, a fuller awareness of the atrocities of Stalinism, as well as the general prosperity of the middle-class in the United States. But during the Depression and War years, the impact of the Communist movement in the United States remained vital, particularly for those involved in the cultural arts.

The fusing of nationalism and radicalism within the Music Projects reached its zenith with the west coast popularity of the performance of the "Ballad for Americans"; the composition also showcases the contradictions and misunderstandings of the Popular Front culture and its subsequent legacy. Originally titled "The Ballad for Uncle Sam" and written for the short-lived Theatre Project production *Sing for Your Supper*, the

eleven-minute cantata was composed by FTP employees John La Touche and Earl Robinson. Prior to his employment with the WPA, La Touche had worked and created various musicals under the sponsorship of the Theatre Arts Committee, and wrote songs for a variety of left-wing cabarets. Robinson had been a member of the Composers Collective organized by Charles Seeger, as well as the Workers Laboratory Theatre (WLT), which he was introduced to after joining the Young Communists League in the late 1920s.⁴⁶⁰

On November 5, 1939, singer Paul Robeson performed the “Ballad for Americans” in a coast-to-coast broadcast on a CBS network series; the song was such a sensation it was repeated on New Year’s Day in 1940, and a subsequent recording bounded to the top of the music charts. One of the most extraordinary bass singers in American musical history, Robeson’s voice could descend as low as C below the bass clef and his stage performances and renditions of African American spirituals were widely acclaimed. Robeson – Columbia Law School graduate, All-American football player, and the son of a run-away slave – was asked to perform the “Ballad for Americans” as an opening for both the 1940 Republican National Convention as well as that of the Communist Party USA. He did neither, though the song was performed for both the Republicans and the Communists by other singers. Bing Crosby also recorded a commercially successful version of the song, and in autumn of 1943, 200 African American soldiers (many of

⁴⁶⁰ Earl Robinson, “Transcript of Interview with Earl Robinson,” by John O’Connor for the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University, August, 1976. In addition to the “Ballad for Americans” Robinson also composed “The House I Live In,” made popular in the early 1940s by Frank Sinatra, and “The Ink is Black, the Page is White” performed by the rock group Three Dog Night in the early 1970s. Lesser known compositions written for the WLT include: “I Kissed a Communist. Was My Face Red!” and “May I Dance Without My Pants?”

whom had been members in the FMPs Negro Chorus in Oakland) performed “Ballad for Americans” in a benefit concert at the Royal Albert Hall in London.⁴⁶¹

The actual performance of “Ballad of Americans” suggests a variety of musical genres, from African American Spirituals’ “call and response” to then-contemporary musicals such as George and Ira Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Lyrically, “Ballad for Americans” appeals to traditional values and icons:

In seventy-six the sky was red
Thunder rumbling overhead
Bad King George couldn’t sleep in his bed
And on that stormy morn, Ol’ Uncle Sam was born.

Mister Tom Jefferson, a mighty fine man.
He wrote it down in a mighty fine plan....

Abraham Lincoln was thin and long,
His heart was high and his faith was strong.

combined with a progressive posture on race relations:

A man in white skin can never be free
While his black brother is in slavery

And, most prominently, the acknowledgement of the class, ethnic and religious diversity so in keeping with the Popular Front and New Deal sensibility:

Say, will you please tell us who you are?
What’s your racket? What do you do for a living?
Well, I’m an
Engineer, musician, street cleaner, carpenter, teacher,
How about a farmer? Also. Office Clerk? Yes ma’am!
Mechanic? That’s right. Factory worker? You said it.
Truck driver? Definitely!

And:

Are you an American?

⁴⁶¹ The Democrats opened their National Convention in 1940 with Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.”

Am I an American?
I'm just an Irish, Negro, Jewish, Italian,
French and English, Spanish, Russian, Chinese, Polish,
Scotch, Hungarian, Swedish, Finnish, Canadian, Greek and Turk and
Czech and double Czech American.

And that ain't all.
I was baptized Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, Lutheran,
Atheist, Roman Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Seventh Day
Adventist, Mormon, Quaker, Christian Scientist and lots more.

By 1940 it had become generally accepted in the California press that the “the Colored Chorus of Oakland’s FMP ... [is] ... the most interesting and professional of the Bay Area’s music activities,” and the “Ballad of Americans” would become something of a signature song for this choral made up of some thirty-five African American men and directed by Elmer Keeton.⁴⁶²

Most commonly called the “Negro Chorus,” the popularity of the their performance of the “Ballad” traveled along the Pacific coast of California. Newspaper accounts provide vivid descriptions of the performances. In anticipation of a performance in Santa Cruz in late October of 1940 by the Northern California WPA Symphony and the Northern California Negro chorus a local paper informed readers that the groups were “recognized as two of the most outstanding in the musical history of the West.” The highlight of the program for many “will be the singing of the stirring modern patriotic composition ‘Ballad for Americans’ with full symphonic accompaniment. It has been said of ‘Ballad for Americans’ that no other song quite like it has ever been written.” And the Santa Cruz *Sentinel* wrote that while the Great Depression brought the threat of complete discouragement to so many, there “emerged a truly American response in the

⁴⁶² “An All-Negro Cast,” California *Evening News*, June 28, 1938, box 50, NARA; also “Project Programs in San Francisco,” *Musical America* 58 (September 1937): 20.

field of music.” The composition had become “a hymn of a nation” ever since “the Northern California WPA Symphony first introduced the ballad to cheering Pacific audiences three months ago” and since then it had been “joyously received by more than 38,000 people” throughout the region. The review of one performance told how an “enthusiastic audience of 700 cheered” the “Ballad for Americans” which it described as “one of the greatest pieces of music to come out of America in the past 10 years.”⁴⁶³

An Oakland paper detailed a performance by the WPA Symphony Orchestra and 100-voice mixed chorus as distinguished by “its diversity of interest” which attracted “patrons of all forms of fine music.” It ranged from “spirituals which have long been the musical voice of the Negro of early America, forward to the modern composition which is rapidly assuming the status of a modern national anthem, The Ballad for Americans.” The San Francisco *News Letter & Wasp* repeated the sentiment: “Reports from the various parts of the country – received at the state offices of the Music Project – indicate that the Ballad has taken hold every where, that its popularity as a modern national anthem of the times is just beginning.” Another paper called the WPA presentation of the “Ballad” a “masterpiece of modern patriotic music” and another “the greatest piece of Americana.”⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ “Santa Cruz to Hear Two Big Music Group; WPA Symphony, Negro Chorus to Appear October 29th,” October 24, 1940, Santa Cruz *Mercury Herald*; “Small But Enthusiastic Crowd Hears WPA Symphony, Chorus,” October 30, 1940, Santa Cruz *Sentinel*, both box 138, folder 13, The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁴ “Diversified Program at Friday Night’s Concert,” October 24, 1940, Oakland *Piedmonter*; “WPA Symphony Orchestra Scores Hit With ‘Ballad For Americans,’” October 25, 1940, San Francisco *New Letter & WASP* both located in box 138, folder 13, The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress; “Symphony to Open Concert Series Thursday, All-American Program,” October 31, 1940, Watsonville (California) *Sun*, box 139, folder 1, The

A WPA monthly narrative report related the performance of the “Ballad for Americans” in response to a specific request from George Creel, the United States Commissioner, to sing the cantata at Golden Gate International Exposition. Presented as the integral part of a “gala all-American program,” the “Ballad for Americans” was performed to an audience of 3500 Fair-goers and “the Ballad which formed the climax of the concert brought the appreciation to a climax also. The applause was more than polite, it was vociferous.” Without question, the “Ballad For Americans” as performed by the WPA Music Programs on the Pacific coast became the single most requested aspect of the Federal One projects.⁴⁶⁵

Charges of appropriation (or at least a demand for acknowledgement) followed the announcement that “Ballad of Americans” was to inaugurate the 1940 Republican National Convention. According to press reports: “Republican Leader Hamilton was asked Saturday to give the WPA full credit for the ‘ballad of Americans,’ billed as the opening song for the party’s convention at Philadelphia.” Senator Sherman Minton, a Democrat from Indiana, directed Hamilton’s attention to the fact that the song was written for the WPA by former employees of the terminated Federal Theatre Project; Senator Hamilton had been an active member of the Dies Committee and the Committee to investigate Un-American Activities. “Will you be good enough to extend my

U.S. Works Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁵ “Report on Activities of the WPA Music Program,” January 1941, box 1, folder three, The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress.

congratulations to the arrangements committee for its good taste in music,” Minton further requested in a letter to the Republican chairman.⁴⁶⁶

The performance of the “Ballad for Americans” by the WPA music projects on the west coast would only increase in popularity as the nation was drawn into World War Two. It was particularly well received at military installations. A letter from Executive Officer Walter C. White of the Air Force at Hamilton Field, California, to state supervisor and conductor Nathan Abas wished “to acknowledge our appreciation of the fine program put on by the W.P.A. Symphony Orchestra and the Negro Chorus on Thursday evening.” The Negro Chorus, “with its fine voices, held the audience spell bound, especially when they sang the ‘Ballad for Americans.’” The prominent military leader stated that the “Ballad” was “quite appropriate” and the soldiers were “looking forward with great pleasure and anticipation to the next program that will be given here by the Music Project.” Another presentation at the Army encampment at Moffett Field also proved an unqualified success: “When the carefully planned concert reached its climax with a presentation of the exciting Ballad for Americans the soldiers stood in their places and cheered. San Francisco newspapers reported the concert in detail the next day and printed pictures of the enthusiastically approving audience.”⁴⁶⁷

In May of 1941 the Northern California Symphony Orchestra and Negro Chorus traveled a far distance for a performance at the 250th Coast Artillery at Camp McQuaide to perform for the men of the United States Army. “Details of the program were

⁴⁶⁶ “WPA Asks Credit for G. O. P. Song,” Santa Barbara *News-Press*, June 23, 1940, box 139, folder 2, The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁶⁷ Walter C. White to Nathan Abas, April 1, 1941; “The Northern California WPA Symphony Orchestra The Northern California WPA Negro Chorus,” February 26, 1941, Moffett Field, both Central Files State: California, box 926, NARA.

carefully worked out with Colonel Hardy and his aides and featured as a highlight the stirring, patriotic ‘Ballad for Americans’” read the report. Colonel Hardy introduced the “Ballad” himself to the capacity crowd of over 5000 service men, saying the “selection is of the spirit of America. Part is about our reverent approach to God. Part is the story of music of a country built upon faith ... faith that we can have peace and freedom and security.”⁴⁶⁸

The seeming contradiction between the creation and eventual popularity of the “Ballad for Americans” – written and first performed nationally by what would become blacklisted left-wing artists while military installations and large west coast audiences applauded it as a new nationalist anthem – was not entirely lost on the contemporary press. The San Jose *Mercury*, for example, wrote of the “amazing” song that had “struck a peculiar chord of timely appeal.” Indeed, the “liberty of which it sings ... has become a precious possession to most Americans in recent months.” The editorial also pointed out that:

Another ironic thing about the history of the “Ballad” is that its authors thought they were writing a radical composition. Instead it has turned out to be a rallying point for the country’s most patriotic and un-radical citizens.

The casual attitude of this California paper toward the origin of the “Ballad” illustrates again the general lack of controversy surrounding radical expression in the West during the pre-War years. The WPA performance of the song met with consistent approval from across the political spectrum; both Republican and Democrat papers left favorable reviews, and the Communist daily *People’s World* described a WPA music project

⁴⁶⁸ “The Northern California WPA Symphony Orchestra 250th Coast Artillery at Camp McQuaide,” May 8, 1941, Central Files State: California, box 926, NARA.

performance of the “Ballad” as “being played and sung in response to hundreds of requests from all sections of the ... Bay area” and that “a record audience is anticipated.”⁴⁶⁹

The “Ballad for Americans” and those associated with the song did not meet with the same appreciation in the post-War years. Because of both Earl Robinson’s and Paul Robeson’s involvement with the political Left, the song fell into disfavor during the late 1940s with the coming of the second Red Scare. “Ballad for Americans” was resurrected for performance at the nation’s Bicentennial celebration in 1976, and there also exists a well-known recording of Odetta performing the song at Carnegie Hall in 1960. By his own account, Robinson was blacklisted starting “in about 1948 and went clear on until 1960 and some echoes even up into the sixties.” The FBI, CIA and British SIS tormented Paul Robeson relentlessly using unconscionable tactics of intimidation and harassment; his films and recordings were banned, his football accomplishments stricken from the record books. Eventually, Robeson’s indomitable spirit gave way to anger and frustration, and then to mental illness. The world was denied his monumental talents. Paul Robeson’s parting words to the House Committee on Un-American Activities, to which he was called to testify in 1956, still resonate: “You are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.”⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ “Patriotism’s New Musical Outlet,” October 29, 1940, San Jose *Mercury*; “The Federal Symphony Will Play a Modern Program,” October 25, 1940, *People’s World*, both located in box 138, folder 13m The U.S. Work Projects Administration Federal Music Project, Music Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁷⁰ Earl Robinson, “Transcript of Interview with Earl Robinson,” by John O’Connor for the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University, August, 1976; Transcripts of Hearings, Robeson Archives, Howard University, as in Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, (London: Pan Books, 1989), 442.

The conclusion that Cold War repressions left a “cultural amnesia” in regard to the profound impact of Depression-era leftism clearly extends to the existing scholarship of the New Deal music programs. “Just as the radical movements of abolition, utopian socialism, and the women’s rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance,” Michael Denning writes, “so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture.” Some leading historians have dismissed the “Red decade” as aberration, a wrong-headed response to the rise of Fascism abroad and economic collapse at home. Others, such as Michael Gold, write of a “second American Renaissance,” when artists and musicians, writers and thespians, aligned themselves with a new proletarian esthetic and commitment to social change. Here, again, the limited histories of the Federal Music Project and WPA Music Programs – the single most auspicious components of the New Deal cultural efforts – have escaped serious considerations. Beyond suffering from amnesia, the chroniclers of these musical episodes reflect a persistent obstinacy to the recognition of radical influence in the WPA music programs.⁴⁷¹

Cultural historians and other commentators have for decades opined about the significance of “Ballad for Americans.” For many, the song came to represent the entire Popular Front movement and its many aesthetic forms. In his widely read 1947 essay, “The Legacy of the Thirties,” conservative critic Robert Warshow denounced the “mass culture of the educated classes – the culture of the ‘middle-brow’” who believed that “‘Ballad for Americans’ was an inspired song,” a development that led to a “disastrous vulgarization of intellectual life.” Not surprisingly, the adherents of the New Left a

⁴⁷¹ Denning, xviii.

generation later also often described the Popular Front cultural generally and the “Ballad for Americans” specifically as sentimental nationalism; New Left critic Stanley Aronowitz ridiculed the song as the “apogee” of a pop music that made the Left “the vanguard of commercial culture.”⁴⁷²

Warren Susman, less than sympathetic to specific aspects of Popular Front culture, takes an equally skeptical view of “Ballad for Americans”; Susman saw the cantata as “a special kind of pseudofolk ballad” that represented “the kind of new ‘folk’ material being created in the Jungian age.” The song was “a testament – as sentimental as Norman Rockwell’s *Saturday Evening Post* covers – to the unity in a way of life that involved all ethnic groups, creeds, colors.” But certainly the most disturbing critique for the old-time Popular Frontsters came from Sidney Blumenthal, who in 1986 linked the political rise of Ronald Reagan to that movement and the song that became its anthem:

Reagan echoed the spirit of “Ballad for Americans,” the Popular Front pseudo-folk song about “nobody who was anybody” and “anybody who was everybody” – “You know who I am: the people!” His mass cultural style of democratic *schwärmerei*, like that of the old liberal left he once championed, was pitched for ideological advantage. *Let America Be America Again*. Conservatism is twentieth-century Americanism.

The final phrase, of course, mimics Earl Browder’s earlier prediction of the eventual triumph of American Communism.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷² Robert Warshow, “The Legacy of the Thirties,” in his *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 36; Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 236; Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 205.

⁴⁷³ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 205; Sidney Blumenthal, *The Rise of the Counter-Establishment* (New York: Times Books, 1986), 284. The attraction for Ronald Reagan to the Depression-era Left may have at one point leaned more to the radical than liberal wing. According to authorized biographer Edmund

Keeping with the larger New Deal and Popular Front historiography, more recent assessments of “Ballad for Americans” have proved much more positive. “The *Ballad*’s essential statement,” writes Robert Cantwell, “is an affirmation of political and social entitlement against the backdrop of a sense of powerlessness, invisibility, and marginality compensated, as it was in the union movement, by dignity, strength, and inclusion in numbers.” Robbie Lieberman describes the ‘Ballad’ approvingly as “a cantata written by Earl Robinson and John La Touche that made use of both folk- and art music traditions while synthesizing the patriotic, egalitarian, democratic strains of Popular Front culture.” About the slogan, “Communism is twentieth-century Americanism,” Earl Robinson has said: “At the time, I bought that. I believe it is implicit in the ‘Ballad for Americans.’”⁴⁷⁴

Michael Denning argues that the song “should be understood not as an emblem of middlebrow patriotism, but as a synecdoche for the extraordinary flowering of the historical imagination in Popular Front fiction, film, music, and art.” The fact that the song was played at the 1940 Republican convention does not suggest, according to Denning, that the vision of Paul Robeson was little different from that of Ronald Reagan.

Morris (personally chosen by Reagan and second wife Nancy) writer Howard Fast told how the young Reagan, upon moving to Hollywood from the Midwest, “wanted to become a Communist.” The local CPUSA leadership asked around, “and word came back that Reagan was a flake” and “couldn’t be trusted with any political opinion for more than twenty minutes.” Reagan friend Eddie Albert was then “given ... the task of talking him out of it.” Albert “sat up all night persuading Reagan he’d be of more use to the Party outside than inside,” thus relegating the future president to fellow traveler status and salvaging his later political career. Though reluctant to discuss the matter, Eddie Albert did concede to Morris that “there were conversations of the kind you mention.” *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, (New York: Random House, 1999), 158-59.

⁴⁷⁴ Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 107; Robbie Lieberman, “My Song Is My Weapon”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 40.

Instead it represented what Kenneth Burke called “the stealing back and forth of symbols,” and that the time has come to reclaim those symbols, and “do justice to the difficult, unfinished and almost forgotten” work that began in the 1930s. At the time, *People’s World* wrote that millions hailed the composition as “the greatest American song,” one that trade unions, General Motors, the Republican convention, and the man on the street could all embrace and claim as their own. But perhaps an assessment of the song’s significance by composer Earl Robinson some years later best puts the “Ballad for Americans” into perspective – with a sentiment that could extend to the New Deal music programs in the West: “You know, the ‘Ballad’ really crossed all the borders and tied people together and made them feel good about America.”⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷⁵ Denning, 115; Earl Robinson, “Transcript of Interview with Earl Robinson,” by John O’Connor for the Research Center for the Federal Theatre Project, George Mason University, August, 1976.

CHAPTER 8

“THE FOLK OF THE NATION”: NO HORSES NEED APPLY

Soon after his appointment as deputy director of the Federal Music Project, Charles Seeger was chosen by the White House to prepare a special presentation for a group of visiting dignitaries. By this time Seeger had become “pretty much convinced” that the music of “the American people, what they call folk music ... was rather marvelous.” He had been “fortunate enough to meet Mrs. Roosevelt” on several occasions, “and this viewpoint was just what pleased her.” The First Lady was aware of his work with the Resettlement Administration, and when the King and Queen of England came to visit the Roosevelts, she contacted Seeger personally to draw up a program of American folk music to entertain them in the East Room of the White House afterwards. For the royal visit, Seeger brought to Washington some of the best folk musicians available. He had “Bascom Lamar Lunsford from Buncombe County, North Carolina; the Coon Creek Girls, who were hillbilly singers from a barn-dance radio show in Ohio; we had the Soco Gap Square Dance Team of eight couples; and I think a few others,” Seeger recalled.⁴⁷⁶

Seeger noted that a committee “who is always hanging around to manage things” at the White House objected strenuously during afternoon rehearsal about his choice of performers, particularly the heavy cloggers of the square dance team. “Mr. Seeger, we just can’t present this to Their Majesties. You’ve got to do something about it; the racket is unbearable.” Seeger ignored these exhortations, and the committee did manage to

⁴⁷⁶ Charles Seeger, “Reminiscences of an American Musicologist,” oral history, 1972, interviewed by Adelaide G. Tusler and Ann M. Briegleb, Music Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 267. In “Interview with Charles Seeger conducted by Richard Reuss,” June 8, 1967, Indiana University, Bloomington, Archives of Traditional Music, tape 6 of 8 (no accompanying documentation or transcripts).

“filter in some things that were out of key,” but “it was the folk music that gained the evening.” Seeger described the presentation of American folk music:

Well, as a technical man in the situation, I, of course, was not invited to the illustrious gathering, with its cabinet ministers, ambassadors, and senators and political bigwigs; but I was able to peek around the corner of the door and watch the faces of President and Mrs. Roosevelt and the king and queen and the celebrated personages around them, all wreathed in smiles; Vice-President Garner and some of the Americans who came from the country had their feet tapping. We were all taken in and introduced afterwards, and I was very much pleased – I was at the end of this long line of performers – Mrs. Roosevelt told the king and queen that I was the man who planned the program; and so I had an especially hearty handshake from them.

Charles Seeger’s enthusiasm for folk music profoundly impacted various aspects of the FMP. Though many of his experiences with the Project would prove contentious and he did not reflect back upon this period of this career with fondness, his influence was indeed more substantial than even he realized. His interactions with many Music Project administrators – including Sidney Robertson Cowell in California, Helen Chandler Ryan in New Mexico, Lucile Lyons in Texas, the folk music projects in Oklahoma and several others – demonstrate a continued involvement even after he moved on to other governmental posts.⁴⁷⁷

As a young musician and scholar, Charles Seeger’s preferences in music largely mirrored those of classical music scholars; “When he was a teenager,” Pete Seeger says of his father, “he felt – became convinced – that great classical music would save the world. That the genius of these European composers would show the entire world how to behave intelligently.” Indeed, Charles Seeger’s attraction to folksong developed some time later. While writing under the pseudonym Carl Sands for the *Daily Worker*, Seeger

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid.

argued: “Many folk songs are complacent, melancholy, defeatist, intended to make slaves endure their lot – pretty but not the stuff for a militant proletariat to feed upon.” And when Aunt Molly Jackson, the great Kentucky ballad singer and union organizer sang some of her songs at a meeting of the Composer’s Collective, Seeger remarked that the members of the collective were as unmoved by her fusion of traditional music and social protest as she was by their classically inspired compositions. Yet, the occasional folksong had already begun to enter the pages of various radical publications; in 1932 the *Red Song Book* had printed six Appalachian folksongs, including both lyric and melody. Folk music, Charles Seeger conceded, was acceptable if “it shows clearly a spirit of resentment toward oppression or vigorous resistance.” And Pete Seeger added that: “He knew that other people were into folk music, but he felt that this was, after all, the music of the past. And rather primitive. And he was interested in great music.”⁴⁷⁸

It was during this time that both Charles and Constance Seeger decided to tour the country with their three sons and bring “good music” (much the same “good music” of which Nikolai Sokoloff was an advocate) to the people. Recalls Pete Seeger:

My father told my mother “We can make a decent living simply playing at *soirees* for wealthy people, but why don’t we take our great music to the small towns and the countryside like Chautauqua does?” He, with the advice of a local carpenter, built one of America’s first automobile trailers, maple boards and brass screws and canvas top and a six foot draw bar, not pulled by horses, but pulled by a Model T Ford. He and my mother had a double bed at one end but to make it long for him – he was a six-footer – it let out an extra foot and a half. My brothers had small bunks on the other end overlapping each other and my cradle hung from one of the hoops. My mother had to wash my diapers in an iron pot.”

⁴⁷⁸ Pete Seeger, telephone interview, September 28, 2008; Carl Sands [Charles Seeger], “A Program for Proletarian Composers,” *Daily Worker*, January 16, 1924, 5.

The tour proved to be a financial disaster, but they did perform one large concert in Washington, DC. Constance's brother was a professional press agent (Sarah Bernhardt numbered among his clients). And his mother had admonished her son: "It's your duty to make your sister famous!" Pete Seeger recalls, "I had a grandmother who was over ambitious" but "my uncle got the Belasco Theatre and got Mrs. Coolidge, the wife of the vice-president, to be on the list of sponsors so they brought the trailer right on the stage."⁴⁷⁹

The tour continued south through Appalachia to Florida, and the traveling musicians were not always met with immediate approval. One winter morning in the Piedmont region of North Carolina the Seegers awoke to find their trailer surrounded by a half dozen or so angry local farmers. "We don't want no gypsies 'round here!" Pete Seeger, (who heard the story from his older brother) tells:

My father in his New England accent said, "We're not gypsies, we're musicians!" "You're what?!" And he brings out the organ and my mother the violin. "Well, I'll be goll durned!"

The encounter ultimately proved fortuitous; the family intended to return to New York City, but the deep snows made the trip through the mountains roads impracticable. "I've got a wood lot you can camp in if you want," offered Mr. McKenzie, one of the farmers. And for the three to four winter months the Seegers camped in the wood lot behind the McKenzie farmhouse near Pinehurst, North Carolina. Here occurred an event which deeply impacted Charles' musical sensibilities:

And one evening they took their classical music up to the McKenzies to show them what they ... did. And the McKenzies said, "Oh that's very nice. We play a little music, too." They took down banjos and fiddles and fiddled up a storm. And my father said, "For the first time in my life I

⁴⁷⁹ Pete Seeger, telephone interview, September 26, 2008.

realized the people had a lot of good music themselves. They didn't need my good music as much as I thought."

The experience profoundly altered Charles Seeger's view of what constituted "good music" and began a lifelong interest in folksong, ethnomusicology, and what was identified as "social music" at the time. "Thus we can see," Pete Seeger remembered his father saying, "the question is not 'Is it good music?' but 'What is the music good for?'"⁴⁸⁰

Precise definition to the term "folk music" has long confounded scholars and been the source of endless debate and controversy; general agreements, either popular or academic, are rare and misunderstandings abound. Illustrative is an exchange that took place in the mid-1930s between journalist Studs Terkel and blues singer "Big Bill" Broonzy on Terkel's radio program in Chicago. Broonzy, as legend has it, sang a particularly moving rendition of the traditional ballad "Alberta." Clearly impressed by the performance, though unacquainted with the composition, Terkel asked the bluesman "is that a folksong?" "I suppose," Big Bill replied, "I ain't never heard no horses sing it."⁴⁸¹

Broonzy's implicit definition of folksong as all non-horse music is, in some ways, as useful a description of the form as any. "Folk music is a particularly difficult concept to define," writes Bruno Nettl and Helen Myers, "because its style, cultural function, and relationship to other types of music have varied considerably during different periods in Western history." Folk music in the United States reflects the complex history and diverse ethnic composition of American society. Academic recognition of these native

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.; Pete Seeger, telephone interview, October 1, 2008.

⁴⁸¹ The quote has been alternately attributed to a variety of sources, including jazz musician Louis Armstrong.

musical forms, certainly, preceded the development of the Federal Music Project. In 1882 Theodore Baker published a scholarly study of American folk music, and in 1912 Teddy Roosevelt wrote a preface for John Lomax's groundbreaking *Cowboy Songs* publication.⁴⁸²

By the first decades of the twentieth century, many American colleges and universities had included the study of folksong in already established courses in musicology, and American folklore societies had already begun to gather folk songs. By the 1930s, John Lomax's son Alan had assumed the position as a primary proponent of folk music. According to Pete Seeger:

The word "folk music" was popularized by Alan Lomax, and I'm sorry, I think it didn't really make much sense. He tried to start off a folk music revival with his own definition of folk music. Italian-American folk music was not American folk music – that was Italian. And Russian-American folk music was not American folk music, that was Russian folk music.

Some scholars argue that if a song has a known author, it cannot be classified as folksong. "Because the original meaning of folk music," says Pete Seeger, "was something ancient and anonymous." Yet, others accepted topical and other contemporary songs into the genre. "If it was in the style, it was a folksong," Pete Seeger continued, and "I started making up songs and Alan called them folksongs, which I think is a, basically, too big a jump. But his father started collecting cowboy songs and he knew which cowboy wrote which song," and he thought: "These are good songs. People ought to sing them!" If not always necessarily ancient and anonymous, the eventual folksong

⁴⁸² Bruno Nettl and Helen Myers, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1976), 20.

efforts of the Federal Music Projects, with notable exceptions, dealt mostly with traditional balladry and older compositions.⁴⁸³

Much has been written about the connection between American folksong and the political Left, and beyond question the CPUSA strove to adopt the music as an exemplar of the Popular Front movement. Though some would argue that the music is inherently radical simply because it emanates from the proletariat, many traditional folksongs actually reflect a conservative or even reactionary perspective. And not all devotees of the music were of the Left; John Lomax – politically conservative, banker, dandy, folksong promoter extraordinaire – was probably more P.T. Barnum than V.I. Lenin. (Lomax and son Alan, whose leftism diametrically contradicted his father's ideas, would on more than one occasion engage in political exchanges so heated they nearly ended in blows.) Pete Seeger acknowledges that the public association between the Left and folk music actually derived largely from the work of himself, Woody Guthrie, and later Joan Baez. For many of the folksong advocates of the Depression-era, the music had no specific political significance; rather, it was simply believed they were good songs, and that people ought to sing them.⁴⁸⁴

And by the 1930s, there seemed even more compelling reasons to preserve these old songs and melodies; most had no written notation, and the only persons who knew many

⁴⁸³ Pete Seeger, telephone interview, October 1, 2008.

⁴⁸⁴ For discussion of folk music and the Left, see Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996); Robbie Lieberman, *My Song Is My Weapon: People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-1950* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Richard A. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000); and Dick Weissman, *Which Side Are You On?: An Inside History of the Folk Music Revival In America* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 2005).

of the songs were growing older. According to Alan Lomax, “Everybody in Washington was interested in folk music.” This included the President and particularly Mrs.

Roosevelt who:

...were the first prominent Americans even to take a position about it in public consistently, and the first Washingtonians ever to spend any money on it. The reason the Roosevelts, the Tugwells, and the Hopkinses were interested in folk music was, first of all, that they were Democrats ... and they wanted to be identified with it as a democratic art ... they saw that the country lacked a feeling of unity; they saw that there were conflicts between various kinds of racial, regional, and class groups in this country. They hoped that the feeling of cultural unity that lies somehow in our big and crazy patchwork of folksong, would give Americans the feeling that they all belonged....

Later scholars would argue that the New Deal sought to homogenize culture in the United States, to foster an illusion of consensus in a diverse American society. But the motivation of the Roosevelt administration in the encouragement of American folksong within the WPA derived from efforts of *inclusion* rather than homogenization; a desire to create a sense of belonging and security, not conformity and consensus. Lacking the support of the New Deal funding, much of the most treasured and vital traditional music of America’s colorful past would have been lost to the ages. Some of this music would find its way into various collections and anthologies, (such as the profoundly influential *Anthology of American Folk Music* edited by Harry Smith) which would subsequently influence generations of popular, folk, blues, gospel, jazz, country, and rock musicians.⁴⁸⁵

The involvement of FMP workers in the collection of folksong commenced soon after creation of the project. A 14-page report in late 1937, presumably written by or with the approval of Sokoloff, details the Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music. “When

⁴⁸⁵ Alan Lomax, “The Folksong Revival: A Symposium,” Benjamin A. Botkin, comp., *New York Folklore Quarterly* 19 (1963), 121.

the full and vital story of American culture comes to be written from a judicial perspective,” the statement opines, “the historian must absorb deeply, not only from the Federally sponsored program of assistance for the arts in 1935-37, but from the records and the manuscripts of folk songs and tunes that have been collected and transcribed by WPA Music Project workers in a dozen regions.” A sense of urgency existed among these workers; with the coming of paved roads, the radio and telephone, traditional melodies and lyrics seemed to be dying out. The FMP “ballad-hunters” felt compelled to gather these songs, hundreds of which had no written notation, “before the persons in whose memories they resided had passed on.” Many musicologists believed that increased technology would be fatal to indigenous music. Scholars also believed that the creation of new songs of land and work were disappearing. The traditional tragic and epic ballads, “instinct with meaning for the people who had cherished it closely,” had become “attenuated into the sentimental meagre popular song.”⁴⁸⁶

By 1937 teachers and musicians in the Federal Music Project had preserved more than 2500 manuscripts of folksongs and melodies. And while most of the songs collected were quite old, these workers observed a curious phenomena: New Deal laborers with the Tennessee Valley Authority had actually created new “work songs,” often predicated upon traditional melodies, rhythms, and emotional expressions. And in California, women employed in WPA Sewing Projects were also “‘making up’ work songs, alive with rhythm and descriptive narrative.” A sheaf of ten of these songs remains, one being written “by a ... woman [and] which is sung as the needles fly in the WPA workrooms”:

SEWING

⁴⁸⁶ “Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music,” entry 815, box 30, NARA.

I must sew carefully,
Thoughtfully, prayerfully,
Never sew swearfully,
Each pair a gem.

For knock-kneed and bony folks,
Real, plain and phony folks,
Highbrow and tony folks
Through days of strife.

I'll never have a chance
To find a sweet romance
Sewing on empty pants!
Gosh! Wot a life!

“Musical scholars agree,” the 1937 statement continues, “that the WPA musicians’ contribution to the records of early American music has been one of real and priceless value.”⁴⁸⁷

And in 1939 in Tucson, Arizona, Mexican-American Alfredo Marin sang a corrido-style song that, true to the tradition of this form, expressed lyrics of a topical nature. News about the possible suspension of Arizona WPA activities inspired a folksong heralded as “the Volga Boat Song of the Borderland” by the local newspaper. “Se Acabo el WPA (The WPA has Ended)”, by Alfredo Marin, was eventually recorded in Spanish for the Library of Congress’ Folk Music Archives. “The Trojan war had its Homer, the French revolution had it Carlyle – and the WPA has it Alfredo Marin,” exclaimed one journalist. Translated into English by Betty Bandel, the rather tongue in cheek lyrics would be reprinted in several periodicals:

The WPA has ended: I feel sorry for my race. Artisans, painters, pick and shovel workers (camellos) and tramps – to them all has come misfortune. Now there will be no rents paid, and no sacks of provisions which came marked ‘not to be sold.’

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

The WPA has ended. Many who are happy because they are now at work and are no longer vagabonding, will have their fur rubbed the wrong way. Now we will have cotton pickers and dish-washers. Now the bums are finished. The shoemakers will have to go back to their lasts.

The WPA has ended. They have sent people to the devil. Now there will be no more houses and cars paid for with government checks. Some people used to say they were sick and did not wish to work; others used to get drunk while the city footed the bill.

The WPA has ended. The people no longer have its aid. They will have to earn their own nickels and dimes to cure hangovers.

The Decca Company released a record of the song, with the *tipica* group “Los Madrugadores (Chicho y Chicho)” singing the tune to a plaintive guitar accompaniment.⁴⁸⁸

To be sure, Federal Music Project folksong collection was not strictly an antiquarian pursuit. Many of the songs of the nation’s bucolic past became both urban and contemporary; songwriters in Tin Pan Alley discovered merits in them which were suitable for their swing band compositions. “It Ain’t Goin’ to Rain” was picked up wholly both in its lyrics and music from the pioneer ballads of the far West. This “surrogate music” would then be performed on radio stations and in the nightclubs of the cities on instruments that were “scientifically calibrated, but the zest and the élan remain.” Folk music had for previous generations been a precious intimate possession. By the 1930s the broadcast, the automobile, and the spread of public education loosened the framework in which it was created and transmitted. The work of the Federal Music project transformed these cultural artifacts into vital contemporary musical expressions.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁸ Betty Bandel, “Nostalgic Folk Song Paints the Demise of Dear Old WPA,” Tucson *Star*, November 24, 1939, entry 826, box 42, NARA.

“No country in the world,” the report concludes, “ever had such a diversity of folk music.” Original sources for this wellspring of American traditional music arrived via the taverns and from the greens of seventeenth and eighteenth century England and the highlands of Scotland, were transported to the American colonies on the Eastern seaboard, and later over the Wilderness Trail into the West; other sources were traced to Spain and its colonial possessions in Mexico and Cuba, which would influence the music of the American Southwest; from the continent of Africa with its rich traditions of original syncopation and instrumentation; from the rituals of planting and harvest and war of the American Indians came the stirring melodies and chants and inspiring dances; from across the Pacific came songs of the Chinese immigrants.⁴⁹⁰

Certain works of Johanne Sebastian Bach, the Music Project workers discovered, were first published in the Moravian colonies of Pennsylvania. Other songs originated on the plains and prairies, while still others were the chanteys of those who sailed the clipper ships around Cape Horn. By March of 1937 Music Project workers in Mississippi had completed manuscript scores of 444 folk songs and tunes, and were holding manuscripts of 1441 others for notation correction. The largest number were the songs of African Americans – spirituals and other religious songs, social songs, work songs and shouts. Some FMP workers concerned themselves primarily with the collection of “occupational” or work songs. This folksong and lore included the melodies of the oil well drillers, stagecoach drivers, lumberjacks, canal boatman, river raftsmen, miners, and

⁴⁸⁹ “Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music,” entry 815, box 30, NARA.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

Conestoga wagoners. “Labor in the earlier days, it seems,” asserts the FMP folk music report, “was orchestrated to its own tempi.”⁴⁹¹

Even prior to his appointment as deputy director of the FMP, Charles Seeger maintained contact with the Project, and this no doubt inspired some of these early efforts in folk music collection. In late 1935, as the Federal Music Project was organizing, Seeger directed a letter to its new national director. Beneath the salutation “My dear Nicolai,” Seeger spoke of the “great pleasure to have met you again after so many years.” He also included a two-page description of the musical activities within the Special Skills Division of the Resettlement Administration (of which he was director) that he wished to forward to the regional directors of the FMP. Sokoloff’s response to “Mr. Seeger” several weeks later was approving yet professional in tone. Seeger would remain in regular contact with the FMP, through both Sokoloff and Dorothy Fredenhagen of the Education Music section, for the next several years. Seeking co-operation between the Federal Music Project and the Special Skills Division of Resettlement Administration, his concerns revolved around traditional music festivals in rural regions as well as the performance and transcription of folksong. For his part, Sokoloff forwarded to Seeger “The Preliminary Report of the Federal Music Project” and would occasionally direct musicians to Seeger and the Resettlement Administration when he believed their qualifications were not suited for the FMP.⁴⁹²

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Charles Seeger to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 6, 1935, and Nikolai Sokoloff to Charles Seeger, December 20, 1935, both in “Resettlement Administration,” box 381, NARA; Nikolai Sokoloff to Frederick J. Hokin, December 23, 1935, Central Files State: California, box 917, NARA.

By late 1937 the Resettlement Administration began experiencing congressional budget cuts, the Special Skills Division soon withered away, and Charles Seeger found himself without a position. In March of 1938 FMP assistant director William Mayfarth appealed to Sokoloff with the need to strengthen the Analysis Department of the Music Project as well as develop a new phase of the Federal Music Project “which as yet has not been touched.” Mayfarth sought to combine the work of the Analysis Department with efforts already underway of constructing a Composers’ Index. He also wished to expand efforts in bringing music to rural America. Mayfarth “had in mind a Mr. Seeger,” who “is eminently qualified to do this type of work.” Seeger had already conducted preliminary surveys, Mayfarth argued, as well as collected data and material concerning music in rural America while with the Resettlement Administration.⁴⁹³

Sokoloff was touring the western United States when the lengthy and varied correspondence arrived from Mayfarth. The suggestion of the Seeger appointment drew the national director’s first response. “In regard to Mr. Segar [sic] being in our Analysis Department: I don’t think he should be definitely appointed but rather on a trial basis, to see whether he is really useful and whether his contribution to our program is of value.” Sokoloff continued “I don’t want him to be appointed permanently, at any rate, until I am convinced of his worth to us....” “Naturally,” he emphasized, “this is confidential.” The prospect of the Seeger position on the FMP must have been weighing on the national director’s mind; the next day he again wrote to Mayfarth reasserting that “I have already advised you regarding Mr. Seeger.” Sokoloff acknowledged that “I have known Mr. Seeger for many years” but “he should be engaged only on a trial basis” so he would

⁴⁹³ William Mayfarth to Nikolai Sokoloff, March 24, 1938, box 382, NARA.

“know whether his contribution of experience and contact is going to be of real value to the Music Project.” Sokoloff confirmed “if he [Seeger] is willing to accept that, it will be all right.”⁴⁹⁴

Further complicating the issue of Seeger’s appointment was the fact that his wife, Ruth Crawford Seeger, had herself recently accepted employment with the FMP. An accomplished composer at the time of her assignment, Mrs. Seeger filled a vacancy with the Analysis Project assisting on the Index of American Composers. “If Mr. Seeger is added, Mrs. Seeger will have to give up her job in the Analysis Project,” wrote Mayfarth to Sokoloff. Charles Seeger’s assignment was delayed for several months but by the first week of July, 1938, he had begun making “a thorough study of the Education Project” as well as “contacting some of the outstanding folk music people.” Apparently, Charles Seeger’s position with the Education Project of the FMP did not conflict with his wife’s position with the Analysis Project, as she remained in this position for several more years.⁴⁹⁵

His time with the Federal Music Project proved frustrating for Seeger. Years later, he would recall, his work there “didn’t have any of the joy” of the Resettlement

⁴⁹⁴ Nikolai Sokoloff to William Mayfarth, March 29, 1938, and Nikolai Sokoloff to William Mayfarth, March 30, 1938, both box 382, NARA. Sokoloff’s misspelling of Seeger’s name seems curious given their long history (as well as the correct spelling evident in previous correspondences and in the letter of a day later), but such “mistakes” appear to have been endemic within the FMP. For example, following the termination of Dr. David Bruno Ussher, the former regional director addressed a series of scathing letters to various high-ranking officials in the Roosevelt Administration. Ussher believed that assistant director William Mayfarth had been partially responsible for his removal, and though the two had corresponded regularly for years, Ussher now routinely dropped the “h” in the assistant director’s surname.

⁴⁹⁵ William Mayfarth to Nikolai Sokoloff, April 1, 1938; William Mayfarth to Nikolai Sokoloff, June 27, 1938, both box 382, NARA.

Administration. The administration of the FMP also maintained a rather antagonistic attitude toward Charles Louis Seeger, most probably based upon philosophical differences, professional jealousy, or some combination of these. Seeger no doubt was aware of these differences; for example, he felt it necessary to inform Sokoloff in advance of an article he had written entitled “Grassroots for the American Composer” which was to appear in the April, 1939, edition of the quarterly “Modern America.” The piece “was written before I came into the Federal Music Project,” Seeger explained. (Though far from controversial, the article does herald the development of “Symphonic Jazz.” The new jazz form resulted from a close familiarity with its improvisational aspect, often referred to as “Swing.” Sokoloff would no doubt have been unimpressed with such a development.)⁴⁹⁶

Seeger’s professional reputation preceded his appointment to the Federal Music Project, and accordingly requests for his appearance and services were common. More often than not, these requests would be denied by the FMP administration. For example, the Washington Bookshop Association requested of Sokoloff to have Seeger participate in a panel on “What the New Deal Has Done for the Arts”; this discussion coincided with the current art exhibit “1938 – Dedicated to the New Deal” on display at the Bookshop in Washington, D.C. The response from assistant director Mayfarth confirmed the request but not the participation of Charles Seeger. Seeger’s involvement was denied “in view of the all-inclusive subject for your panel discussion” as well as “the fact that Mr. Seeger

⁴⁹⁶ Charles Seeger, “Reminiscences of an American Musicologist,” oral history, 1972, interviewed by Adelaide G. Tusler and Ann M. Briegleb, Music Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 261; Charles Seeger to Nikolai Sokoloff, March 17, 1939, entry 807, box 16, NARA; Charles Louis Seeger, “Grass Roots for American Composers,” *Modern Music*, vol. XVI, no. 3, March-April, 1939, 143.

has just recently come on the Federal Music Program and the music education branch.” (Of course, Seeger had been involved with the music of the New Deal even prior to the origin of the FMP when he served as director with the Resettlement Administration.)⁴⁹⁷

By January of 1938 Seeger’s position as assistant director in charge of the Music Education Program ended, and he would become the new regional director of the southern states with no change in salary. At the time of the appointment several of states in the southern region, particularly Florida, were embroiled in bitter administrative disputes. The FMP musical programs of the region usually performed well-known classical European compositions interspersed with the beloved songs of the “Old South.” Seeger’s primary objectives, however, were to investigate and report on the activities in Music Education on the Projects, to plan for teachers’ institutions, and “to formulate for the increased emphasis upon social music” – the last in response, certainly, to the directive from “the government” to which Sokoloff had earlier alluded. The southern region maintained a large portion of FMP teaching projects, and Seeger, it was believed, could further develop this part of the Program. Additionally, all of the Arts Projects in the South were to begin joint cooperation under the newly formed “Coordinating Committee on Living Folk Lore, Folk Music, and Folk Art – Federal Project No. 1,” which required “the type of supervision which Mr. Seeger can give it....”⁴⁹⁸

Within a short time of his assignment, however, the national administration continued its efforts to limit Seeger’s activities. Blanche Ralston, a prominent WPA administrator in the South region, directed a postal telegraph to WPA administrator Florence Kerr

⁴⁹⁷ Paul Kaye to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 25, 1938; William Mayfarth to Paul Kaye, November 28, 1938, both box 384, NARA.

⁴⁹⁸ William C. Mayfarth to Ellen S. Woodward, December 27, 1938, box 382, NARA.

within a month of Seeger's assignment stating how she "greatly deplore[d] decision" to disallow Charles Seeger's trip to Florida as she had recommended. Indeed, his assistance was needed in Project reorganization to assure continued efficiency, and Ralston could not understand the action to prevent Seeger's participation given the fact that his assignment to the region came from the national office. "Urge you reconsider and permit his visit there," the telegraph concluded. Later in the year, again bypassing the authority of director Sokoloff, Ralston wrote to Kerr that "while I am delighted to have Mr. Seeger in this region, and consider his services very valuable indeed, I am convinced that his contribution to the music project should be made on a national rather than regional basis."⁴⁹⁹

A subsequent letter from no less than WPA administrator Harry L. Hopkins – friend and confidante of Eleanor Roosevelt – to FMP administrator William Mayfarth stressed that following a "pleasant and profitable conference" he felt fully confident that Charles Seeger "will be able to work out a satisfactory solution of the situation in Florida." Therefore, Hopkins had "requested that he go to Florida immediately following his trips to North and South Carolina, which he is making at this time at your request." Regardless of such high ranking support, his various accomplishments prior to and within the music project, and public recognitions and requests, salary recommendations for Regional Directors of the Federal Music Project in March of 1939 show Charles Seeger to be the *only* administrator of the nine whose salary was to be cut; two remained the same, six

⁴⁹⁹ Blanche Ralston to Florence Kerr, January 31, 1939; Blanch Ralston to Florence Kerr, n.d., both box 382, NARA.

would enjoy substantial raises, and Seeger's annual salary dropped from \$3800 to \$3200.⁵⁰⁰

Despite his understandable frustrations, the folk music in the southern regions advanced on a variety of fronts during Charles Seeger's involvement with the FMP. In Louisiana, for example, a specially formed orchestra was organized exclusively for new arrangements of folk songs and folk dances. Social music was included in the activities of the Project as an added service to be given to the rehousing centers and the working class centers. In New Orleans a strong demand had been voiced by the public schools for instruction on the guitar and harmonica, and accordingly instructors "were supplied to ten schools and several asylums, and centers." Upward of 266 were soon enrolled. The New Orleans Federal Music Education Unit was also demonstrably strengthened; by June of 1939 the monthly attendance at the 436 classes totaled "1,883 whites and 1,586 negroes" with instruction provided on the violin, guitar, banjo and wind instruments, wood and brass.⁵⁰¹

Charles Seeger's presence on the Federal Music Project as director of the southern region buttressed a variety of folk performances throughout the section. Perhaps most notable was the annual American Folk Song Festival in Ashland, Kentucky. Though originating in 1930, prior to the New Deal, the Festival grew each season and reached an apex of popularity and notoriety in the late 1930s. Drawing several thousand persons by the end of the decade, the "Singin' Gatherin'" showcased music that had survived in the

⁵⁰⁰ Harry L. Hopkins to William Casimir Mayfarth, January 20, 1939, box 382, NARA; William C. Mayfarth to Lawrence S. Morris, March 14, 1939, box 371, NARA.

⁵⁰¹ Rene Salomon to Earl V. Moore, December 7, 1939; "WPA Sponsored Federal Project No. 1, Music Program Monthly Narrative Report for May, 1939," both entry 805, box 7, NARA.

Kentucky hills which some folklorists traced to the ballads and madrigals of seventeenth and eighteenth century England. In 1936 invited guests included Eleanor Roosevelt, Governor and Mrs. A. B. Chandler, as well as Nikolai Sokoloff. In a statement preceding the Ashland Festival in 1939 the FMP national director said:

When the full and vital story of the American people comes to be written the cultural historian must absorb deeply from the records and manuscripts of the songs and the tunes that we are to hear in Ashland on this June day. Both in history and as legend the vernacular music of these people of the Kentucky hills in whom the Anglo-Saxon strain has retained its purest line, resides the record of a culture that is indigenous and eloquent.

And the Federal Music Project, using money allocated to it by the Rockefeller Foundation, began a folk song collection project in Ashland under the leadership of Miss Jean Thomas. Several “mountain minstrels” were removed from the relief rolls and provided the music which was notated by trained musicians both in lyric and melody. Eventually, these collected songs and records were placed in the permanent possession of the music section of the Library of Congress.⁵⁰²

Also increased in the late 1930s by the southern region of the FMP was the considerable work done in gathering “spirituals, work songs, play songs, river songs, blues, jubilees, minstrels, hollers and shouts” of the African American musical traditions in Mississippi and North Carolina. In the spring of 1939 the Dillard University music club in Jackson, Mississippi, gave an “important Negro spiritual pageant.” The prelude episode of the concert presented “music of the Nago, Arida, Feeda, and Congo tribes” of Africa. Then the music “was ... traced to the complex vocal orchestration in which the

⁵⁰² “Spirituals, Hymns – White; American English Songs of the Southern Appalachian and Cumberland Mountains,” entry 820(FMP Records Relating to Folk Music), box 34, NARA.

spirituals are presented today.” The report concluded that: “City Negroes of the up growing generation have been somewhat contemptuous of the old songs. Recent performances of these songs over the radio have convinced them that it is smart to sing them.” Certainly the new emphasis in folk and “recreational” music altered the emphasis of the Music Projects in the southern region.⁵⁰³

Efforts to collect African American songs and spirituals also increased in the FMP during Seeger’s tenure as director of the southern region. Though the descriptions of the songs collected by music project employees were sometimes reflected the racial stereotypes of the period, the collections provide valuable reminiscences to the past. Explains a Mississippi Narrative Report: “Many singular, white haired old darkies with memories of other days behind them, have been found and interviewed by workers of the Federal Music Project of the WPA,” who have been “searching through the State for the unique Negro songs of a by-gone era.” One FMP worker discovered an elderly African American couple living “in an almost inaccessible place” near Tacona, Mississippi. “Uncle Pat” and “Aunt Lizzie” had suffered tremendously in the preceding Depression years, and were found “nearly starved and frozen.” Uncle Pat had been an influential member of the legislature during the Reconstruction era. Both were “nearly blind and crippled” and the FMP worker brought them clothing, blankets and food. On her second visit to the small cabin the worker was recognized by her voice.⁵⁰⁴

Though they had not attended church in years, the two regularly sang spirituals together, including “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Other songs of a decidedly secular

⁵⁰³ “From the Federal Music Project, A Digest of Studies into Vernacular and Indigenous Folk Music made by Project Workers; Negro,” entry 820, box 34, NARA.

⁵⁰⁴ “Music – Reviving Folk Songs; excerpt from Mississippi Narrative Report, October, 1936,” entry 820, box 34, NARA.

nature were remembered but Uncle Pat and Aunt Lizzie assured the workers that they had put aside “these foolish songs” since “gittin’ right wid de Lawd.” The FMP workers were quite interested, given the age of the two, in remeberences they had of the antebellum South. With prompting, the two performed one non-religious song about the white patrollers who kept slaves from staying out late:

Run, Nigger, run! De Patter-rollers ‘ll ketch you
Run, Nigger, run! It’s almos’ day.

Dat Nigger run’d, dat Nigger flew,
Dat Nigger tore his shu’t in two.

All over dem woods and frou de paster,
Dem Patter-rollers shot; but de Nigger git faster

Oh, dat Nigger whirl’d, dat Nigger wheel’d
Dat Nigger tore up de whole co’n field.

Certainly the dialects transcribed by the FMP worker should be viewed with circumspection; 1930s oral historians often exaggerated these. But, like the dozens of slave interviews conducted by the Writers’ Project, the songs and spirituals collected by the Music Project remain as invaluable links to a past which would be impossible for later generations to reconstruct.⁵⁰⁵

For the Federal Music Project in DeSoto County, director Martha Simpson describes efforts in her region to record African American spirituals. “Negro spirituals are truly interesting and truly difficult to write just as they are sung,” she asserted, “particularly as darkies seem never to sing them exactly the same way twice.” Her “chief helper” was seventy-five year old “Aunt” Belle Hill who “gave the other darkies of her neighborhood quite a dressing down” for their reluctance to sing for the music project workers. “Ef dey

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

was to tell yo' all yo' cud git dat relief by singin' dey'd be sich a crowd o' niggers to Mist' Tarver's sto' and sich a singin' de white folks 'ud haf to make yo' stop," wrote Simpson, attempting to transcribe Hill's southern rural dialect. Aunt Hill was recorded and photographed singing "It's a Leak in de Buildin'." Simpson also recorded two banjo songs from Mary Kirkwood, who although "age is unmistakably stamped upon her she assured me her gray hairs are the result of hard work and mistreatment." It seems "all de men" she had married had been substantially older and "had given her a heap of trouble."⁵⁰⁶

Another interesting contact made by Martha Simpson involved "an ancient black couple reared in Georgia "befo' de war." "Aunt" Mary told of keeping watch for "ol' Miss" against the coming of the Yankee soldiers and "Uncle" Judge reportedly said when "Gen'l Sherman's army come thu dar de Yankees was jes' lak blackbirds." He insisted that people "fo't fair den; dey don' fight fair now." It was Simpson's ambition – "as yet unrealized" – to find "some old levee darkie who worked and sang when the levees were built by mule and nigger power. Their ranks are thinning too." These contacts illuminate many things, including Depression era stereotypes as well as the willingness, perhaps, of African Americans to tell the FMP worker what she wanted to hear. But the accelerated efforts in collecting black folk song and spirituals in the southern states rivals the work of the Writers' Projects and their achievements with the vital "slave narratives."⁵⁰⁷

Despite his accomplishments, Charles Seeger would look back on his short tenure with the Federal Music Project as the nadir of what would be an illustrious career as a

⁵⁰⁶ "Federal Music Project #3256, DeSoto County Monthly Narrative Report, Mrs. Martha Simpson," entry 820, box 34, NARA.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

twentieth century American musicologist. Regarding Sokoloff as “a very competent Russian musician,” Seeger believed him to be “rather contemptuous of American musicians.” Further, Seeger remembered the “whole orientation of the Music Project was from the Europeophile music viewpoint” which looked down “upon these poor, benighted Americans who needed to be spoon-fed with ‘good’ music.” Seeger alluded in several later oral histories that he was under the impression he would be eventually become national director of the FMP; when this did not occur, certainly he must have been frustrated.⁵⁰⁸

By late 1939 the Federal Music Project became the WPA Music Program and Dr. Earl Moore replaced Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff as the project’s national director. Restructuring in all Federal One programs precipitated a prospective Library of Congress Joint Music, Art, Writers, and Historical Records Project. By February 10th of 1940 the venture would be underway. “Confidentially,” wrote Dorothy Fredenhagen, an assistant to the new national director, “Mr. Seeger seems to have taken to the idea of heading up this project like a duck to water.” It was Charles Seeger’s desire, however, to remain with the WPA Music Programs and be loaned to the Library of Congress when needed; Seeger’s salary had been raised to \$3800 (on the suggestion of a Mr. Howard Miller, a WPA official outside of Federal One) but the salary ceiling in the proposed joint venture would be \$3600. Also, Seeger would forfeit accrued leave time. Mr. C.E. Triggs, Director of WPA Community Service Projects and administrator of the new Joint Venture, “does not feel that Mr. Seeger should be given the choice of whether he wants to

⁵⁰⁸ Charles Seeger, “Reminiscences of an American Musicologist,” oral history, 1972, interviewed by Adelaide G. Tusler and Ann M. Briegleb, Music Library, University of California, Los Angeles, 261.

go or not,” wrote Fredenhagen to Moore; rather he “thinks it is up to you to decide what you want on your staff. Will you ... wire me your decision on this matter?” The letter was posted to Oklahoma City and director Moore responded the next day with a Western Union wire: “Feel Seeger most valuable to Program as Head of new Coordinated Project which Position he should accept with understanding he could be loaned to us for special work when necessary.” Later in the same correspondence Moore wrote that “New Mexico and Oklahoma ready to undertake research in indigenous folk music...”⁵⁰⁹

This rather lengthy discourse on Charles Seeger illuminates several things; first among these is the fact that Seeger perhaps underestimated his own considerable impact on the New Deal music projects and the proliferation of folk music. His appointment represented “the administration’s” insistence to interject more “social” music into the FMP. But no region of the country involved itself more with the collection and presentation of folk music than specific sections of the American West; Seeger’s initial interest in folksong may have come from the West, and his influence in the region (like that of John Lomax) would remain immense. The indigenous folk music research in New Mexico and Oklahoma, as referenced in Moore’s wire, gained viability following Seeger’s presence in the music projects, as would the extensive folk music collections of the Northern California FMP. These three locations would prove to be the dynamic centers of folk music collection and presentation in the country.

But Seeger’s dismay with the music projects in the Southeast extended beyond administrative differences. He recognized, certainly, the ethnocentric focus of some of

⁵⁰⁹ Dorothy Fredenhagen to Eral V. Moore, February 2, 1940; Dorothy Fredenhagen to Earl V. Moore, February 8, 1940, Earl V. Moore to Dorothy Fredenhagen, February 9, 1940, all box 385, NARA.

the Project's administration that disregarded the unique qualities of Appalachian Mountain folk music while revering its European roots, as well as dismissing altogether the contributions of other influences, such as those from Africa. Sokoloff's assertion at the Ashland Festival in 1939 that "the Anglo-Saxon strain" had "retained its purest line" in the Kentucky hills, suggests the issue at hand was not of a purely musical nature, but one of a social and ancestral hierarchy.

Sokoloff was not alone in his assessment of Appalachian folksong; similar sentiments found expression several years earlier with Annabel Morris Buchanan, organizer of an independent regional folk festival at White Top, Virginia. The affair had garnered national attention and the attendance included Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as Charles Seeger. Buchanan saw no inconsistency in demanding a 40-cent admission fee which most of the local people could not afford; though "Elizabethan frankness may be tolerated," she insisted, "vulgarity is barred." Further, her festival was "not concerned with products of the streets, nor of the penitentiaries, nor of the gutter" as "high standards cannot walk hand-in-hand with simon-pure democracy." Were the festival to succeed, its objective and primary focus was "not for the mountain people alone, not for one region alone, not for one class alone." Rather they "must be wrought slowly, carefully, measure by measure, for a *race*." These sentiments were certainly not unique; within the FMP "Relating to Folk Music" file can be found an article by Professor John Harrington Cox of the University of West Virginia that asserts:

Our American musicians all say that we cannot claim Indian or Negro melodies as American folk music since they are both of different races. We are descended from Anglo-Saxon stock and our folk music must necessarily be variants of the old English and Scotch songs sang generations ago in the Southeastern Appalachians particularly.

Certain conditions, the article continues, are favorable to the production of folk music: separated settlements, isolation, oppression, hardship, lack of education. Because the Appalachian mountain folks lived secluded lives, “the race is unmixed with any other nationality.”⁵¹⁰

Far Western representations of folksong often displayed a dramatically differing spirit and vision. The Federal Music Project of Colorado, for example, produced the Denver Annual Folk Festival which began with the first year of the FMP in 1935. The production of the festival was “the culmination of work throughout the year with many nationality groups” for the “pleasure and cultured enlightenment of several thousand people.” The festival presented opportunities for “various nationalities to meet together, and learn each to respect and admire the other.” At the 1941 festival: “Germans, Greeks, English, French, Swedes, Czechs, Russians, Italians, Persians, Turks, Rumanians, Mexicans, Spanish, Chinese, Portugese, Japanese, Negroes, Finns, Norwegians, Dutch, Irish, and others cooperate in the production of a spectacle *the like of which could be seen today in no other country than America.*” The narrative, which detailed the relation of

⁵¹⁰ Annabel Morris Buchanan, “The Function of a Folk Festival,” *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 1 (March 1937), 30. see also David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983) and his discussion, 180-252; “Folk Music,” entry 820, box 34, NARA. Professor Cox was incorrect in his assertion that “all ... American musicians” accepted his ideas of exclusivity. Musicologist Herbert Halpert wrote in an article “Federal Theatre and Folksong” in *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, vol. II, no. 2, (March 1938), that: “Scholars do not reject old English songs when sung by Negroes or descendants of non-English stocks; they find them interesting proof that culture is based on environment rather than racial descent.”

the Music Project to National Defense, concludes that the yearly Folk Festival served to “contribute to the making of loyal Americans.”⁵¹¹

The program for the Fifth Annual International Folk Festival two years prior reveals an equally cosmopolitan assemblage of talent. The festival, designated as “Weaving the Great Pattern of American Democracy,” suggests an intriguing mixture of ethnic, indigenous and patriotic themes. The festival opened the morning of May 19th with the Native American “Indian Dawn Call” and was followed by the “Pageant of the Flags,” presented by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The music and dance of Mexico, Japan and then Italy rounded out the first day. The “Negro” selection consisted of a performance of the “Evolution of Dance” and was accompanied by the W.C. Handy Male Chorus. The Darwinian theme continued later in the evening with the entire Denver Federal Orchestra performing the “Evolution of Dixie,” the product of a local composer and conducted by Federal Music Project state director Fred Schmitt. The piece was described as: “A Fantasia depicting the gradual evolution of ‘Dixie.’ Slowly thro’ ‘the Creation,’ ‘Dance Aboriginal,’ and ‘The Minuet’ the melody is developed until there emerges the immortal ‘Dixie.’ This, in turn, becomes a ‘Waltz’ then ‘Ragtime’ and at last ‘Grand Opera.’” Throughout the three-day affair the folk and national songs of Russia, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Ireland, Germany, Sweden, Spain, and Hungary would also be performed.⁵¹²

The presentation of traditional music from China, titled “Spirits Who Dance,” again returns to the evolutionary theme, which is also associated with the Confusion ideal.

⁵¹¹ “The Relation of the Colorado Project to National Defense,” March, 1941, Central Files State: Colorado, box 1004; *italics added*.

⁵¹² “Fifth Annual International Folk Festival” printed program, May 19, 1939, entry 821, box 37, NARA.

Performed by the Chinese Society of Denver under the leadership of Ester Chinn, the program provides details of the performance: “First part the awakening and development of a great country; Second part the peak of culture and beauty attained; Third part fear and sorrow, the spirits return to the temple, and hour for prayer.” Also of particular note – according to a subsequent newspaper account – was a particularly well-received presentation of the “Songs of Palestine.” Directed by Mrs. A. D. H. Kaplan the chorus performed:

1. Yiboneh Hamikdosh (May the Temple be Rebuilt)
2. Elijah Hanovi (Elijah, the Prophet)
3. Yah-Lell – An ode to the beauty of the night in the Holy Land
4. Kuma Echa – (Hora Dance) Interpretation, Mrs. David Musman

The festival ended with the “Pioneers,” a choral group of students from the University of Denver who performed “Early American Minuet.”⁵¹³

Throughout the West, traditional folk music often proved the most popular aspect of Music Project endeavors. The *Tipica Orquestas* would remain the most in demand in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico, and FMP sponsored folk festivals occurred throughout the year in larger urban areas of the state. Texas FMP director Mrs. John F. Lyons described in her June 1936, report that in San Antonio approximately 16,000 attended a festival of 24 separate folk music performances. “The ‘Folklorama’ that was given in San Antonio during Music Week,” wrote Mrs. Lyons, “was an achievement for the entire Music Project.” The folk music of over 30 nationalities, presented exclusively by persons residing in the San Antonio area, performed authentic dances and songs. Mrs. Hazel Petraitis, one of the teachers on the Federal Music Project, completed most of the

⁵¹³ Ibid.

work of arranging and compiling and editing the folk songs and dances for the Festival. Eventually Mrs. Petraitis compiled these songs and music for the dances into book form, with the original lyrics and original language, also translations, and the authentic music accompanying each. This work was completed with illustrations of the costumes and colors.⁵¹⁴

A similar folk festival and pageant, “Texas Under Six Flags,” was held in Fort Worth beginning Saturday, April 18, 1936, as part of the Centennial celebration. The presentation by the local Federal Music units included: a chorus of 1500 voices singing songs depicting various scenes of Texas’ past, arranged with folk dances to portray specific historical instances; a Mexican-American group of 100 presenting the period of Texas under the Mexican flag performing “Las Maninatas” and the “La Jarba” with a Mexican orchestra; An African American group of 400 voices performing folk songs and spirituals; a French group performing a choral arrangement of the “Huguenot Hymn” and the “Salve Sanctus” in Latin; a “pioneer” group performing “Will You Come to the Bower” which had been heard at the battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, “The Yellow Rose of Texas,” published in 1856, and “Oh, Suzanna” by Stephen Foster; a Cowboy Band performed “Roundup Time in Texas,” a well-known traditional square dance, and “Hold My Hat While I Dance, Josie”; fifty Native Americans performing the tribal chants of the Chippewa Indians in their native language to the accompaniment of tom-toms and other indigenous instruments.⁵¹⁵

In 1936 and 1937 three WPA units of the Federal Music Project in San Antonio transcribed records of early Mexican music and Mexican border and Texas plains songs

⁵¹⁴ “1936 Narrative Report Summaries – Texas,” entry 804, box 1, file 3, NARA.

⁵¹⁵ “Folk Music: Fort Worth, Texas,” entry 820, box 34, NARA.

for the permanent collection of the Library of Congress. John Lomax, whose folk music interest originated with his Texas “ballad-hunting” expeditions, directed the recordings. The first set of recordings were of the San Antonio *Tipica Orquesta* comprised of forty-five instruments, including bow and fretted strings, woodwinds and brass, dulcimers, and marimbas. E. Lazcano, a graduate of the National Conservatory of Mexico City, directed this portion of the recordings. Another group included eight young men known as “Los Abajenos,” who sang “Guapangos,” – Mexican folk songs – to the accompaniment of violins, mandolins and guitars. A third group of Anglo-American singers presented the old Texas range songs.⁵¹⁶

But the most intensive interest in folksong collection and presentation within the music projects were to be found in Oklahoma, New Mexico, and California. In Monterey and Carmel, California intensive studies and collection was made into the early Spanish colonial songs that had survived into the twentieth century. Music authorities identified in songs from the missions aspects of Gregorian chant, as well as the even older Ambrosian plainsong. A FMP musician “learned in the chiromeny and neums of the Middle Ages” began notating the fragments so the WPA choirs could sing them. Eventually, after the musical notations were completed, choral groups of the FMP presented the music in the San Francisco Bay Area, Sacramento, and Southern California.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁶ Ellen Woodward, “From the Federal Music Project Written for ‘The Baton,’; Folks Songs” February 12, 1937, entry 815, box 29; “From: Federal Music Project, May 14, 1936, entry 816, box 32, both NARA.

⁵¹⁷ “From the Federal Music Project A Digest of Studies into Vernacular and Indigenous Folk Music,” entry 820, box 34; Mrs. Andre to Mr. Hewes, “Theme on Spanish Composers, April 15, 1937, entry 815, box 29, both NARA.

And the immensely popular San Francisco Federal Dance Band regularly performed arrangements of folksongs for a wide variety of charity events and ethnic celebrations. On March 17th, 1939, for example, conductor Sam Stern and his orchestra presented a special St. Patrick's Day Irish Program for the members of the WPA Sewing Project at 21st and Harrison Streets. The program ranged from Irish ballads to American folk tunes and dance music. Over "five thousand women of all ages were present at this fine entertainment" provided by the Dance Band whose work in San Francisco "has become indispensable" to the many charities and institutions for which it performed.⁵¹⁸

The most extensive collection of folksong in California was the elaborate Federal Music Project efforts directed and organized by Sidney Robertson Cowell. Cosponsored by the Music Division of the University of California, Berkeley, and the Archives of American Folk Song (now the Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center) of the Library of Congress, the WPA California Folk Music Project drew from a variety of ethnic communities in Northern California. The vast collection includes 35 hours of folk music recorded in twelve languages representing a wide diversity of cultural groups and 185 musicians. The undertaking was one of the first ethnographic field projects to document European, Slavic, and Middle Eastern in a specific region of the United States.⁵¹⁹

Prior to her work as director of the Folk Music Project, Sidney Robertson Cowell served as music assistant to Charles Seeger in the Special Skills Division of the

⁵¹⁸ "Monthly Narrative Report Northern California June 1939," entry 805, box 6, NARA.

⁵¹⁹ Born Sidney William Hawkins in 1903 in San Francisco, she graduated from Stanford University in 1924 and married Kenneth Robertson the same year. She divorced a decade later and married composer Henry Cowell in 1941. Most present studies, though not all, reference her as Sidney Robertson Cowell.

Resettlement Administration in Washington, DC. While in this position she began to collect folk music in Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia using a modern, transportable audio recording machine to create acetate aluminum discs. By early 1937 Cowell was promoted to regional representative of Special Skills, Resettlement Administration. Here she recorded Swedish, Lithuanian, Norwegian, and Finnish music at the 4th National Folk Festival in Chicago. Cowell also made recordings of Warde Forde and his family in northern Wisconsin as well as Serbian, Finnish, and Gaelic music in Minnesota. In early 1938 Cowell received endorsement from the Music Division at the Library of Congress as well as 200 acetate disks for recording folk music in California. Following an agreement of co-sponsorship with the Music Division at the University of California, Berkeley, she applied for and received official WPA approval. The California Folk Music Project opened on October 28, 1938, at 2108 Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley and employed an average of twenty persons throughout its duration.⁵²⁰

From the beginning Cowell envisioned the California Folk Music Project serving as a model for a national folk music collecting program. With this goal in mind, the project proved widespread in application and range, extending far beyond the original audio recordings. Photo images, drawings and detailed descriptions of musicians and instruments were pains-takingly included. Also a variety of ethnographic techniques and

⁵²⁰ Warde Forde and his family later moved to California to work in the CCC camps at Shasta Dam, where they were recorded for the WPA California Folk Music Project; Cowell recalled in an interview (*Folklife Center News*, Fall 1989, Vol XI, #4, page 11-12) that the Federal Business office, charged with seeing to it that money appropriated by Congress was spent in accordance with congressional intention, did not see the relevance of a recording machine. Seeger's order for it was repeatedly delayed until Mrs. Roosevelt was informed of the dilemma and spoke to her husband, "who seems to have said: 'Oh, let them have their recording machine!'" to the legal people, and it finally arrived."

perspectives were utilized to adequately analyze the performers and songs.

Approximately a third of the recordings represented English language material, and the remainder a variety of largely European ethnic groups: Armenian, Basque, Croatian, Finnish, Gaelic, Hungarian, Icelandic, Italian (including Sicilian), Norwegian, Russian Molokan, Scottish, and Spanish.

In statements of work accomplished and in progress Sidney H. Robertson wrote that through WPA funding two needs widely felt among students of folk music and the history of California had been met. First, recordings had been conducted for deposit in the national collection at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, as well as at the University of California. Secondly, supplementary materials such as early printed matter and manuscripts necessary for the study of traditional music in California were photographed and deposited in central locations where they would be easily available to students. It was the conviction of Cowell that the folk music study “here undertaken for the first time” was of the “highest value, and could not have been accomplished without the aid of the Works Project Administration.” Further, “the material accumulated is of such importance that no research in folk music in the western United States can afford to ignore it.” The resulting collection serves as extraordinary demonstration of the vibrancy of folk music in Northern California during the Depression years, its traditions, and ethno-historical relevance. Its contents include songs of immigrants who arrived in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century through the 1930’s, earlier songs of California from the Gold Rush era, the Mexican War, songs from migratory

labor camps, the tunes of old medicine shows, ragtime, and well as San Francisco Barbary Coast songs.⁵²¹

A random sampling of the twelve cartons and nearly 300 individual items in the collection reveals a fascinating array of folksongs, photographs and descriptions. One FMP worker reported that with the cooperation of the Franciscans at the Mission Santa Barbara she was able to record “the singing, by five Indian women at Pala Mission in San Diego County, ... a ‘Hail Mary’ in Spanish” which had been handed down from their ancestors that most probably had “been taught by the original Padres about 1812.” And

the California Folk Music Project Records chronicles the rich ethnic and cultural diversity of late 1930’s and 1940 California; the extensive photo sets include images with captions such as: Mr. Jack Bakalian, Fresno, California, from Armenia, playing the dumbeg, which he bought in Syria; Joseph Adrosia, Fresno, California, illustrating his contention that the surna is a kind of bagpipe for which his cheeks are the bag; Russian Molekan Sunday School, Molekan Church, San Francisco, the first U.S. generation; and John H. Selleck, Coloma, El Dorado County, CA. A dance fiddler & 5-string banjo picker. Specific instruments photographed and described include the stringed “gusla” and the mjersnice (bagpipes) from Croatia, Herzegovia, as well as the stringed lirica and svirala (a wind instrument) from Dalmatia.⁵²²

⁵²¹ Ctn. 1, item 1, Statement of Accomplishment (Berkeley, California: January, 1940), and Ctn. 1, item 2, *Report on work in progress, California Folk Music Project* (July 20, 1939), California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵²² Carton 1, item 2, *Report on work in progress, California Folk Music Project* (July 20, 1939); Carton 7, item 235, “Photographs of 108 performers, and/or their instruments heard on Series E and M recordings, both in California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The Project workers also involved themselves in the transcription of contemporary songs. During a department store strike, which lasted for several months in San Francisco in 1938, the FMP recorded several resultant songs, including:

“The Working Class is Getting Sore”
(to the tune of Funiculi, Finicula)

Chorus

Listen! Listen!
Things have gone too far
Minds are waking, rumbling sounds afar
This has got to stop
Children starve while bankers hog the crop
The working class is getting sore!
The working class is getting sore!
Vote the people’s ticket and we’ll open up the door.

The world is like a rich abundant warehouse
Enough and more! Enough and more!
It’s owned by millionaires who call it their house.
And lock the door! And lock the door!

They say we’re getting red and communistic
Imagine that! Imagine that!
While they have notions Nazi fascistic
Beneath their hat. Beneath their hat.

Also included are a variety of songs from “dust bowl” emigrants and migratory labor camps. One FMP employee transcribed in Boomtown, California in December 1939, the lyrics of “I’m Goin’ Down This Road Feeling Bad and I Ain’t A-gonna be Treated this Way,” a song which found its way into John Steinbeck’s monumental *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), as well as John Ford’s movie adaptation released the following year. The writer observed that though variants of the song “have been sung for seventy years on

westerling high roads” since 1933 it had become “the song of migrant families who were tracted out of Texas, dusted out of Oklahoma and flooded out of Arkansas.”⁵²³

From the Arvin Migratory Labor Camp near Bakersfield, California, camp manager Tom Collins collected several songs and provided commentary for the FMP. Of September 5, 1936, he wrote: “The community sing this week was a magnificent demonstration of a community effort and cooperation.” The entire population of the labor camp attended; men, women, and children took part. There were “musical numbers, solos, duets, quartets, dialogues, singing en masse, jigs, etc....” But the song that “brought the old folks to their toes and brought encore after encore was ‘Eleven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat.’” Collins described the song as “the lament of the share-cropper” which had been brought from Oklahoma, but with some changed lyrics:

Eleven cent cotton and forty cent meat!
How in the world can a poor man eat?
Flour up high, cotton down low,
How in the world can you raise the dough?

Folks getting poor all around here
Kids coming reg’lar every durn year.
Clothes worn out, shoes run down
Old slouch hat with a hole in the crown

Back nearly broken, fingers all worn
Cotton going down to raise no more....

Many of these songs, which Camp Manager Collins donated to the Folk Music Project, expressed the migrants’ sense of anger and frustration.

Other songs, however, dealt with the more commonplace experiences of the migratory labor camp experiences. One long song, “Why Do You Bob Your Hair,

⁵²³ Carton 1, item 10, “Miscellaneous correspondence relating to strike sings, 1937-38, California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Girls?’” was inspired by a 15-year old girl recently arrived from Oklahoma with her family who “bobbed” her hair without parental permission. Days later from the stage three young women sang:

Why do you bob your hair, girls?
It is an awful shame
To rob the head God gave you
And war a flapper’s name

So don’t never bob your hair, girls;
Your hair belongs to men....

Such an upheaval did this haircut create that the older women considered banding together for prayer to save the girl’s soul, “although only her head was involved.”

Another song collected at the Kern Migratory Labor Camp in Kern County, California, in 1936 is titled “The Old Time Preacher.” Though comical, the song suggests a certain irreverence and perhaps even a rebelliousness against authority:

Pa bringed the preacher home from church to eat with us one day
Ma say, “Now all you kids must wait, so just run out and play.”
I remember how the preacher et for most an hour or two
And all us hungry kids must wait like grown up folks make you do.

The song concludes with the children peeping through a crack to see the preacher “loosenin’ his belt a notch” and promising that when they grow up they would “save some chicken for my kids.” Also included in the California Folk Music Project records are several issues of a newsletter from the migratory labor camp in Gridley, California. Published weekly by the campers and edited by Nathan Featherson, the newsletters contained more songs, news, gossip, and entertainment, no doubt, to make life in the migratory labor camp as tolerable as possible.⁵²⁴

⁵²⁴ Carton Ctn. 5 item 201, “Songs of migratory farm laborers collected by Tom Collins (camp manager) at the Migratory Labor Camp, Arvin, California (1936). 5 copies.

One complaint of the California Folk Music Project was that the project teachers working under Cowell's direction could not adequately perform the ethnographic work in an academically professional manner. The director, however, maintained that the FMP employees worked in their own regions and were able to approach the musicians as neighbors rather than interlopers. "Their notations," writes McDonald, "were regarded as a friendly act, and the minstrels were neither abashed nor impelled to show off." One should assume that the materials collected by the FMP represent the authentic voices of the participants.⁵²⁵

The WPA California Folk Music Project remains as a testament to the ideals, interests, and hard work of Sidney Robertson Cowell and the music project employees of the New Deal. When planning the project, Cowell conferred with an old friend and Librarian of Congress Luther Evans who believed, as did other WPA contacts, that such an undertaking should be initiated on a regional, state-by-state basis. The California Folk Music Project Records reveal, certainly, a work in progress; WPA funding was not renewed in 1940 and the Project disbanded entirely in 1942. Nothing has been added to the Project Records since 1942. At the time, Cowell was planning for the project to begin documenting the performance of non-Western – Asian was to be the next venture -- music in Northern California. "Cowell's success in the California Folk Music Project," the Library of Congress Digital Library astutely concludes, "fit well with the New Deal

[Probably given to Ms. Robertson as a gift], California Folk Music Project records, ARCHIVES WPA CAL 1; MUSI TS 11 v.1-12, The Music Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵²⁵ McDonald, 641. In a later conflict at the Library of Congress, Cowell used titles as a main entry for the catalog card of folk music performances, since this was the "one element of identification that the collector could practically always provide."

dynamism and creativity that generated similar cooperative efforts meant to document and validate the lives of exemplary, yet so unsung Americans.”

The Oklahoma Music Project also initiated important and substantial efforts in folksong collection, transcription, classification and recording soon after its creation in early 1936. Bee M. Barry (Pe-ahm-e-squeet), of Chippewa ancestry, a graduate of Haskell Institute, and previously employed as instructor of Indian culture at the University of Oklahoma, was charged with recording the music of several of the Oklahoma Native American peoples. A portable recording machine was purchased and adapted to make it suitable for procuring recordings on the reservations and in the Oklahoma hills where such technology was not available. “In this manner,” read a state report, “native music such as has never before been recorded was being secured.” As a result of these efforts, the music of the Cheyenne, Kiowa, Sac and Fox, Apache, Pawnee, Ottawa, and Osage tribes were preserved for posterity. “As a full-blood Indian population is speedily declining,” the report continued, “and it will be only a matter of a brief number of years before all the older Indians on ‘God’s Drum’ are memories, the necessity is to make a permanent record of their music.”⁵²⁶

And Marian M. Buchanan, assistant supervisor of the state teaching project, transcribed and classified over 200 folk melodies and lyrics found in the Oklahoma. This folk music collection, of both European and Native American origin, included historical descriptions, humorous comments, articles on Oklahoma folk music, and a wider analysis of American folksong. “Her work,” read a report, “has been declared the only research

⁵²⁶ “Report of Accomplishments Oklahoma Music Project Works Projects Administration; Folk Music Research,” Oklahoma State Library, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 31.

of its kind ever made.” The project aroused such wide interest and favorable reaction that the president of the University of Oklahoma commented that this was a project which he “could endorse wholeheartedly.” As a result, Buchanan eventually presented a series of radio programs over University station WNAD. The programs, titled “Hunting with Bow and Fiddle,” were given as a contribution of the Federal Music Project.⁵²⁷

Eventually, the University Press asked Marian Buchanan to write of book on the subject, and more than 400 copies of Oklahoma folk songs were prepared for publication. One grouping included 125 fiddle tunes with historical notes and directions for the proper tuning of instruments. The early state songs included “Haning’s Farewell,” which was described as the oldest authentic Oklahoma tune, and “Little Home To Go To,” brought into the Indian Territory from Illinois along the old Chisholm Trail. Other song topics included slavery, Indian fights, the American Revolution and a considerable sheaf growing out of “The Oklahoma Run.” Older residents of Greer County contributed “My Government Claim,” in which the caller sings:

Hurrah for Greer County, the home of the free,
The home of the bedbug, grasshopper and flea.
I’ll sing of its praises and tell of its fame,
While starving to death on my Government claim.

The collection included numerous songs about the “Run,” which the reader was informed, “are equally lusty and as close to the earth.”⁵²⁸

As with other states involved in folksong collection, the Oklahoma project was at first discouraged by the national administration to extensively engage in such work; within

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Ibid.; Dean Richardson to Nikolai Sokoloff, April 21, 1937, “Report of the Federal Music Project for Oklahoma, March, 1937,” Central Files State: Oklahoma, box 2334, NARA; “Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music,” entry 815, box 30, NARA.

one year, however, the directive would change dramatically. State director Dean Richardson wrote to Nikolai Sokoloff in the summer of 1937 that he had initially been “so thoroughly discouraged” in the preservation of native folk music that practically all efforts to this end had been discontinued. Now, however, Richardson confirmed that:

The Oklahoma Federal Music Project has been given a great deal of favorable publicity here in this state because of the research we were doing, and it pleases me greatly to be able to complete a work that was practically finished at the time we discontinued it.

A subsequent National Report written by Nikolai Sokoloff about the “Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music” spoke proudly of the “uncommonly interesting work in transcription and classification of indigenous music ... done in Oklahoma.” And the addition of Charles Seeger to the FMP substantially impacted folksong efforts in Oklahoma, as in other states of the Southwest. “We enjoyed very much Dr. Seeger’s visit and feel sure that he will have some recommendations to make,” director Richardson wrote to Sokoloff on one occasion. “I have been going over the matters he brought to my attention,” the state director continued, “and feel that we could establish at least four music centers in Oklahoma along the lines of the plan I outlined to him.”⁵²⁹

Though quite significant, the Folk Music Project represented but one aspect of the varied FMP activities in California and Oklahoma; the collection, teaching, and presentation of folksong in New Mexico, however, stands as the primary mission of the music projects in that state. “Probably no other section of the U.S.” claims a state FMP report, “is as rich in folklore as New Mexico.” And certainly no state possessed a more

⁵²⁹ Dean Richardson to Nikolai Sokoloff, July 28, 1937, Central Files State: Oklahoma, box 2334, NARA; “Federal Music Project Activities in Folk Music,” entry 815, box 30, NARA; Dean Richardson to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 21, 1938, and Dean Richardson to Nikolai Sokoloff, November 23, 1938, both Central Files State: Oklahoma, box 2335, NARA.

imaginative, dynamic, and capable Music Project director than New Mexico. Formally trained as an educator, Helen Chandler Ryan had as a young woman fallen under the spell of the haunting beauty of the folksongs of Spain and Latin America. Ryan also recognized the unique cultural, ethnic and political situation of her state. She saw in New Mexico “the richest field of indigenous folk music...in the United States” and as a result of seven years of hard work and dedication Music Project employees “planted seeds of music culture that have taken firm root and have blossomed and re-seeded in ground that has been only scratched.”⁵³⁰

Appointed on January 1, 1936, Helen Chandler Ryan served as head of the Federal Music Project in New Mexico, and in May of 1939 she became the director of the restructured WPA New Mexico Music Program. In September of 1942 the program became known as the War Services Program – Music Phase, and Ryan directed this program until its termination in 1943. From her administrative headquarters at 322 West Gold Avenue, in Albuquerque, Ryan oversaw a music project which received the attention and accolades of many admirers (including Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles Seeger) not only in New Mexico, but from across the nation and throughout the hemisphere.⁵³¹

“The fact that New Mexico has such a rich heritage of Hispanic-American folklore,” wrote state director Ryan, “which for lack of recording is being lost to present and future

⁵³⁰ “The development of music in New Mexico,”; “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico, January 1943,” both Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

⁵³¹ a letter from Seeger in 1941, while serving as Chief of the Music Division of the Inter-American Music Center of the Pan American Union, acknowledged and offered appreciation for the “dog-eared” copy of Spanish American Folk Songs forwarded to him from director Ryan.

generations, has prompted the setting up of folklore collecting and singing projects under W.P.A. Federal Music to help preserve almost forgotten tunes and verses for posterity.” Much of the project concerned itself with the preservation of “Spanish-American,” folk songs (derived from Spain, Cuba, and Mexico) throughout New Mexico, primarily by Hispanos, working as WPA employees. As in other regions of the United States, a sense of urgency enveloped these efforts, as many of these musical traditions were disappearing with the advent of new technology and societal alterations.⁵³²

The folklore projects operated in several manners. First, the FMP employees collected as many folk songs as possible from the older native residents of New Mexico. In several instances these singers were centenarians or older, which placed their births at over a decade prior to the acquisition of the region by the United States. Many of the songs dealt with historic events, while others were “romances” often presented in a humorous vein. No attempt to alter or embellish the melodies or lyrics was permitted. But this was not strictly an antiquarian pursuit; rather, intriguing differences were found in the same songs as they were performed in different sections of the state, demonstrating the changing and dynamic nature of folklore and song.

After the songs were collected and transcribed, stencils were cut, mimeographs were printed and distributed to FMP teachers. A typical table of contents proceeding the arrangements, score and lyrics would include a list of songs which had been mimeographed for use by groups together with the place the songs were discovered and

⁵³² “The Functioning of Folklore Projects Under Works Progress Administration Federal Music Project in New Mexico,”; “Inventory of the Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection; Scope,” both in Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

the original performer by whom the song was sung. The songs were then taught to classes to be performed individually as well as for the formation and performances of *tipica* orchestras, bands, glee, clubs, and choruses. The ensembles would perform publicly free of charge and for a variety of entertainment events. On several occasions large community singing groups were organized which spread the songs to even larger audiences. The folksong collection included both mimeographed and hectographed booklets of songs for adults, singing-games, children's songs, folk-dance tunes, as well as Spanish guitar method. *The New Mexico Song and Game Book*, in which the Writers', Art and Music Projects collaborated, and was sponsored by the University of New Mexico and the State Department of Education. The WPA Music Project made another publication, *Spanish American Singing Games of New Mexico*, available in 1940. And in 1942 another joint venture of the Art, Writers', and Music Projects released *The Spanish-American Song and Game Book* which reached the largest circulation of any of the distributions.⁵³³

This final publication was described in the one education journal as providing "opportunities for experiencing with one's own body the most endearing quality of the Spanish-American culture" through the "intimacy and simplicity of the relations between him and his saints, his burro, the animals he hunts for fur and food, and the pets of the household." Performance of the folksongs would afford a deeper understanding and the

⁵³³ "The Functioning of Folklore Projects Under Works Progress Administration Federal Music Project in New Mexico,"; "Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico January 1943," both in Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; Work Projects Administration Unit No. 3, *Spanish-American Singing Games of New Mexico*," revised 1940, available at Los Angeles Public Library, Los Angeles, California.

“good-neighbor policy will become a reality to the boys and girls of the United States when they find that the games of Spanish-speaking children are similar to their own.” Requests for the folk music of New Mexico came from sixty-two localities within the New Mexico, from twenty-eight states, the territory of Hawaii, and the Dominion of Canada and Ireland. They were sent as gifts to numerous public libraries, state and federal institutions and public schools.⁵³⁴

Public performance of Hispanic folk music became a primary component of the New Mexico music projects. According to final Evaluation Report the collecting and arranging of Spanish-American folksongs revived an interest in the musical performance and also “renewed a pride in the hearts of New Mexicans in their folk heritage so that folk-singing, -dancing, and -playing are now more popular with the young generation.” Further, “the seeds planted by the Project will continue to grow and flourish.” The *tipica* groups were particularly instrumental in the performance of folk songs, as both children and adult were taught to play stringed instruments and sing in such an ensemble. Some of these folk song performances were recorded by the folklore department of the University of New Mexico through the sponsorship of the Rockefeller foundation.⁵³⁵

The variety of Hispanic folk music collected and ultimately performed included “Alabados” which music scholars traced as an out-growth of Gregorian Chant and sung by the Penitentes, ballads known as “romances” in Spain and in the Americas as “Corridos,” “Indias” which combined dancing with singing, “Cuandos” which inevitably

⁵³⁴ “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico January 1943,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*; “The Functioning of Folklore Projects Under Works Progress Administration in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

ended with the question “Cuando,” and from all of these forms the “Cancion Popular” was performed. Certainly one of the best received FMP performances was “Los Pastores,” an ancient Christmas nativity and morality play, which evolved from several longer renditions under the supervision of Dr. A.L. Campa, head of the Folklore Department of the University of New Mexico. In 1938 a crowning performance of *Los Pastores* was performed under the guidance of music project teachers at Santa Fe’s historic Palace of the Governors.⁵³⁶

Though Hispanic music constituted the lion’s share of the folk music activities of the New Mexico Music Projects, various “Anglo-folk” ensembles also performed regularly throughout the state. And in both Albuquerque and Roswell several African American vocal groups performed Spirituals to enthusiastic response. Traditional Hispanic compositions remained preeminent, though experimentation with instrumentation and form regularly occurred. A 1939 newspaper report, for example, told of efforts to substitute the Spanish nylon-stringed guitar for the steel-stringed “cowboy” banjo. This “elevation of New Mexico guitar player” was the “aim of WPA music instructors.” The article asserted that the WPA Federal Music Project strove to raise the standards of the New Mexican’s most popular instrument. One instructor worked to reintroduce the “punteado” picking style as well as the almost forgotten “rasgado” method; both of these styles would gain popularity in the Southwest.⁵³⁷

⁵³⁶ “The development of music in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; Helen Chandler Ryan to Nikolai Sokoloff, December 10, 1938, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

⁵³⁷ “Elevation of New Mexico Guitar Player Aim of WPA Music Instructor; Spanish Instrument Substituted for ‘Cowboy’ Steel-Stringed Banjo,” Albuquerque *Journal*, March 17, 1939, entry 826, box 65, NARA.

Education represented an integral aspect of WPA music in New Mexico. “In order to keep alive these folk songs among our people,” stressed director Ryan, “singing groups have been organized under competent teacher-directors and these old songs are taught together with many more familiar ones.” Quite early in the music project’s development Mrs. Lucia Rael began teaching folk songs to both adult groups and children’s groups around Albuquerque. The groups eventually performed in a Folk Festival sponsored by LULACS. By March of 1936 Mrs. Rael had “120 people singing and is giving ... extra time now to some folk dancing with these groups.”⁵³⁸

The Spanish-American State Normal School in El Rito, New Mexico, also launched a strong folk-music program, employing one of the FMP teachers to direct it. Similarly, the New Mexico Normal University in Las Vegas employed Federal Music Project instructor Vicente Gallegos to present a series of productions featuring students performing Spanish, Mexican and New Mexican folk dances, songs and one-act plays. According to a local newspaper, for one performance “about 350 persons ... attended,” and the production “tended to illustrate to rural community teachers the advantages of folk-lore, songs and dances.”⁵³⁹

In Taos, functioning in the Government Vocational School, twenty people received instruction in folk singing and instrument playing. In Tularosa, forty people enrolled in a

⁵³⁸ “The Functioning of Folklore Projects Under ... Federal Music Project in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; Helen Chandler Ryan to Bruno David Ussher, April 30, 1936, Central Files State: New Mexico, box 1928, NARA.

⁵³⁹ “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico January 1943,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; “Folk Dances Are Feature Saturday Eve,” Las Vegas [New Mexico] *Optic*, July 10, 1939, entry 926, box 64, NARA.

similar program. And in Las Cruces the primary Supervisor of the WPA Spanish Folklore Project also taught folk music classes as well as transcribing, and arranging, cutting stencils and mimeographing the songs. As the music projects were ending in 1943, Barelas Community Center, situated in an impoverished section of the “Spanish-American” district, agreed to employ former FMP instructor-directors through the funding of Department of Inter-American Affairs of the University of New Mexico to continue the folk music program which began with the Music Projects.⁵⁴⁰

In March of 1942, under the auspices of the War Program initiated a month earlier, the Co-ordinator of Cultural Relations with Latin-America arrived in Albuquerque from Washington, DC, to organize a group patterned after the “Institutos de Relaciones Culturales” of Mexico and South America. The movement of the offices of the New Mexico Board of Education which was interested in the promotion of folk music. At the first meeting virtually every South American Republic was represented. The Supervisor of the program eventually gave a series of three lectures on folk music before the WPA Training Course for Teachers of Spanish in U.S. Army camps. The presentations were punctuated with folk songs and music of the Southwest which had been collect and compiled under the Federal Music Project. Musicians from the current Project assisted in presenting the variety of Latin-American music.⁵⁴¹

Approval of the FMP activities in New Mexico came from folk music aficionado Eleanor Roosevelt during a tour of the Southwest in March of 1938. Visiting a WPA

⁵⁴⁰ “Narrative Report,”; “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico January 1943,” both Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

⁵⁴¹ “Narrative Report,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

constructed community center in Los Lunas, New Mexico, the First Lady wrote in her syndicated column that upon entering the “charming building” an “orchestra consisting mainly of mouth organs with a guitar and another stringed instrument was playing American and Spanish songs. These Spanish-American people preserve their folk songs and also learn songs in English.” Mrs. Roosevelt later toured the Los Lunas Vocational School where WPA music instructor Mrs. Pearl Mims led the string and harmonica bands with a rendition of “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” Mrs. Roosevelt “expressed her surprise and appreciation of the welcome, and complimented the band upon its playing.” Later in the afternoon Mrs. Roosevelt met personally with Helen Chandler Ryan and expressed interest in the preservation of Spanish cultures as exhibited before her. Mrs. Ryan gave Mrs. Roosevelt copies of translations of old Spanish folk songs.⁵⁴²

Dr. Earl V. Moore, who became national director of the WPA Music Program in 1939, also proved a strong proponent of the folk music activities in New Mexico. During a tour of the western states in early 1940, Moore and his wife met for tea at Helen Chandler Ryan’s home with “about 30 guests interested in music and folklore” who had been invited to meet the director. Dr. Moore “expressed great interest in the collection of folk songs and singing games made by workers on WPA music projects,” and “commented on the educational significance of the work being carried on.”⁵⁴³

Throughout the life of the WPA music projects in New Mexico folk festivals occurred regularly across the state. The annual fiesta of San Felipe de Neri, for example,

⁵⁴² Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” March 12, 1938; “Band Greets First Lady at Los Lunas,” March 12, 1938, both Albuquerque *Tribune*, entry 826, box 64, NARA; “Mrs. Roosevelt Has Busy Day In New Mexico,” Albuquerque *Journal*, March 11, 1938, entry 826, box 64, NARA.

⁵⁴³ “Director of Federal Music Visits State; National Head Inspects Projects Before Going to Santa Fe, Las Vegas,” Albuquerque *Tribune*, February 6, 1940, entry 826, box 64.

took place in Albuquerque Old Town the last weekend in May each year of the Director Ryan's career, which continued a long-standing tradition. In 1937 the Old San Felipe de Neri Church celebrated its two hundred and thirty-third annual fiesta on Sunday, May 30, "with the day given over to fireworks, band concerts, WPA programs, and the dancing of 'Los Matachined,' Pueblo Indians' dances and other festivities." The Junior Community Band, the Childrens' *Tipica Orquesta* and the Folk Singing groups of the music projects furnished the major part of the entertainment for the three day long events. A Fiesta Committee, through various sponsoring agents, donated \$25.00 in 1938 toward the purchase of uniforms for the children playing in the Junior Band. The annual celebration drew thousands of people to Old Albuquerque from surrounding towns.⁵⁴⁴

Single festivals occurred regularly throughout the duration of the WPA music in New Mexico. As part of the Music Week activities in 1937, a Folk Festival at the University of New Mexico in May 1937 presented a WPA music directed program of nearly 100 persons performing folk songs. The presentations, which included the singing of the Folk Festival Quartet and the Lulacs dancing "La Cuna," were under the direction of Lucia Sanchez de Rael of the WPA music projects. In early May, 1938, "a colorful program of native folk songs and dances combined with selections from the classics," was presented at Vocational School at Los Lunas under the direction of Pearl Mims, WPA music supervisor for Valencia County. Following the program a fiesta was held in the patio

⁵⁴⁴ "Fiesta Plans Are Complete; San Felipe Program to Be on May 30," May 23, 1937, Albuquerque *Journal*, entry 826, box 64, NARA; "Narrative Report, May 1938," Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

where “Guitars twanged and fiddles played as boys and girls flashed in and out dancing ‘La Vaquerita,’ ‘La Raspa,’ and ‘El Schote.’”⁵⁴⁵

The largest and most elaborate presentation of folk music in New Mexico came with the Cuarto Centennial celebration in 1940. The yearlong event commemorated the entrance of Coronado into what would later become the state of New Mexico. Helen Chandler Ryan predicted that “the attention of the nation and the world will be focused here at that time.” She continued that the celebration was to be worked out in the form of authentic, historical pageants thus much could be done by this folklore project to help – both in the way of research for the authentic music which was sung at that time and in teaching the songs to the hundreds of thousands of people who would participate. By the time of the Coronado Cuarto Centennial Celebrations the Federal Music Projects of New Mexico collections constituted virtually the only printed Hispanic folksongs available; through the sponsorship of the Centennial Commission this music was widely distributed for use in Centennial Fiestas.⁵⁴⁶

The anticipation for the folk music festivals of the Coronado Cuarto Centennial Celebrations created much enthusiasm in the local media. “Conference on Coronado Celebration Folk Festivals” read a front-page headline in the Albuquerque *Journal* in late 1939. Below this was a three-column photo of Helen Chandler Ryan, Grace Thompson, head of the University of New Mexico Music Department, and Sarah Gertrude Knott,

⁵⁴⁵ “Quartet to Sing, Lulacs to Dance; Folk Festival Will Begin at 8 p. m.,” Albuquerque *Tribune*, May 4, 1937; “Give Folk Program In Patio of School,” Albuquerque *Tribune*, May 3, 1938, both entry 826, box 64, NARA.

⁵⁴⁶ “The Functioning of Folklore Projects,”; “Evaluation Report of Music Project in New Mexico, January 1943,” both Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

founder and director of the National Folk Festival in Washington, DC. In preparation Knott moved temporarily to New Mexico, “domiciled in the Coronado Centennial offices at Third and Gold,” perpetually “joyous with the great store of folk music and dancing available in the state.” Knott emphasized that “every locality will have its special festival” for the Coronado Cuarto Centennial which would culminate in a “grand spectacular Southwestern Festival” to close the year-long celebration.”⁵⁴⁷

In preparation for the Coronado celebration, Knott and Ryan also cooperated to organize a tri-state folk festival and conference in November of 1939 that included representatives from Arizona, Texas and New Mexico. Musical performances included a Las Cruces children’s choir trained to sing Gregorian chants of the early missionary period. The choir sang at the Texas Centennial celebration in Dallas, at the dedication of the Hot Springs courthouse, and also appeared in concerts at the Santa Fe Museum. Mela Sedillo Brewster, instructor in dance at the University of Arizona, led a number of students in a variety of Spanish-American folk dances. The conferences included discussions of cowboy traditions, legends and folk tales, Anglo traditions, Spanish colonial and New Mexico folk dances, as well as Anglo and Indian cultural traditions in the region.⁵⁴⁸

The efforts of the WPA music and writers’ projects in New Mexico to locate, preserve, and perform its rich Hispanic, Indian and Anglo folk music traditions command a significant chapter in New Deal cultural activities. In 1939 National Folk Festivals director Sarah Gertrude Knott toured throughout the country to observe the development

⁵⁴⁷ “Conference on Coronado Celebration Folk Festivals,” *Albuquerque Journal*, October 23, 1939, entry 826, box 64, NARA.

⁵⁴⁸ “Folk Festival Conference Will Draw Number of Persons From Three States,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, November 9, 1939, entry 826, box 64, NARA.

of traditional music in the various regions. Knott concluded “there is in New Mexico a finer integration of music project activities with the life of the people than in any other part of the United States that I have visited.” Certainly deserving of a wider appreciation, the accomplishments of Helen Chandler Ryan and other New Deal workers involved in the folk music projects in New Mexico stand as a fascinating and vital chapter in the musical history and development of the American Southwest. Knott also observed that the field of folksong “is such a large one, the surface yet so unscratched, and the people so hungry for the actual instruction as well as the entertainment and enjoyment which can be supplied through these channels that it is hard to visualize a cultural project more far-reaching in its scope and more satisfying to the general public than an enlarged music project.”⁵⁴⁹

Helen Chandler Ryan wrote in the final state report that: “New Mexico is the seat of European music in the United States and is the richest field of indigenous folk music,” yet the “music as an art has been slow in developing.” The importance of the intensive work in the various fields of folk music in New Mexico during the New Deal cannot be over-estimated and should be viewed as an unqualified success. The foresight, humanitarianism and determination of Helen Chandler Ryan stands as the primary catalyst for these varied and lasting accomplishments.⁵⁵⁰

In December 1941 – a month remembered in “infamy” for the Pearl Harbor attacks and the nation’s entrance into World War Two – director Ryan described a “most

⁵⁴⁹ “The development of music in New Mexico,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

⁵⁵⁰ “Evaluation of Music Project in New Mexico; January 1943,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

spectacular instance of Project participation” that occurred late that month in Albuquerque. There the supervisor of the local WPA Music Program arranged with the Mayor to provide entertainment for the annual Christmas party for the children of the city. The celebration was held on the Sunday afternoon proceeding Christmas day in Rio Grande Park. Early in the afternoon the Albuquerque Junior Band played several Latin-American numbers while the children gathered, and the supervisor directed a “Community Carol Sing.”⁵⁵¹

Then, the long lines of “preponderantly brown-faced, black-haired native children marshaled into place by the City Fire Marshall” passed through the gate to receive the Christmas treats; candy was given out to over 7,000 children, and as parents accompanied their families, the attendance was quite large. Ryan described the holiday celebration:

The day was beautiful and warm, flooded with the brilliant sunshine of our Southwest. The Spanish folk music instantly quieted the waiting crowd, and their faces lighted up with contentment and happiness. It was difficult to recall that war is raging around us, but easy to feel the bond of sympathy and co-operation that exists now between this country and our Latin-American neighbors, and to realize how strong a force is the native folk music shared by all the people in the southwestern part of the United States, with people in Mexico, Central and South America. What a great influence the Music Project....

In the same narrative report director Ryan noted that many requests for Project materials had arrived that month from libraries, schools and others across the country and throughout South America. From Charles Seeger, music director of the Pan American Union, came requests for folksong material from which he could write an article for their publication about New Mexico’s musical activities. The coordinator of Inter-American

⁵⁵¹ “Narrative Report Month of December,” Helen Chandler Ryan New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico.

Affairs also desired Project folk music publications to be sent as gifts of the United States Government to Chile “on the occasion of the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the founding of Santiago.” And, lastly, the United States Department of Justice requested folk singers of the New Mexico WPA Music Project to come to Washington, DC, and participate in their series of radio programs called: “I Hear America Singing.”⁵⁵²

⁵⁵² “Narrative Report Month of December,” Helen Chandler Ryan, New Mexico Federal Music Project Collection, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico; the title of this chapter, “The Folk of the Nation,” is taken from the song “Soul” by Van Morrison. As virtually every rock-era “superstar,” Morrison was profoundly influenced by the folksong collections of the New Deal period and the efforts of the Lomaxes and the Seegers to introduce the music to a wider audience. Of folksinger Huddie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter (who was released from prison on an attempted murder conviction after John Lomax petitioned the Louisiana Governor in 1934) Morrison has said: “Leadbelly was not an influence, he was *the* influence. If it wasn’t for him, I would never have been here.” Similarly, George Harrison acknowledged, “No Leadbelly, no Beatles,” and countless other rock musicians – from Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen to Janis Joplin to Keith Richards to Carlos Santana to Jimmy Page to Kurt Cobain – have expressed a similar debt to the American folk music that reached an international audience for the first time in the 1930s and 1940s.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

In a press release from the national administration of the Federal Music Project in early 1939 Nikolai Sokoloff wrote:

It is noteworthy that while elsewhere in the world music is being subjected to repression, and the free flow of musical utterance is being distorted or silenced, America is experiencing the greatest musical enrichment in its history. A point of irony resides in the fact that this debasement of music is happening in lands from which we have drawn our richest musical heritage.

Despite the implicit Eurocentrism of the national director's remarks, his observations are illuminating. It is in no small part because of the objectives of the New Deal and the development of the political force it served to create – and aided by the various aspects of the Federal One cultural programs – that the United States averted, in some form, the ideological influences of the various totalitarian regimes engulfing the European continent during the 1930s. While later scholars of the Theatre, Writers' and Art Projects have gone as far as crediting these programs for helping to “save democracy,” the contributions of the Federal Music Project have been conspicuously ignored in this regard. An honest appraisal of these musical episodes reveals that the FMP not only dwarfed all other cultural projects in terms of sheer numbers of employees and audience, but also buttressed the New Deal goals to broaden and unify Americans' changing perspective of themselves and their shared national heritage and vision.⁵⁵³

Recognizing and celebrating America's rich ethnic and regional diversity – what later generations would term “multiculturalism” – remained central to these New Deal

⁵⁵³ “From the Federal Music Project Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, Director,” February 1939, entry 815, box 31, NARA.

efforts. In assessing specific sectional Federal Music programs there is truly little room to question the accomplishments of these productions in presenting this cultural and musical diversity to an anxious and receptive citizenry. In a sense, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt represented the embodiment of a new idea for America's self image, of a new nationalism. While not denying the values of personal initiative and self-reliance which had become so closely associated with the American experience, the Roosevelt administration also recognized in the United States a heightened sense of community, of egalitarian awareness. President Roosevelt spoke to these yearnings when in 1937 he encouraged more financially secure Americans to:

Take a second-hand car, put on a flannel shirt, drive out to the Coast by the northern route and come back by the southern route. Don't stop anywhere where you have to pay more than \$2.00 for your room or bath. Don't talk to your banking friends or your Chamber of Commerce friends, but specialize on the gasoline station man, the small restaurant keeper and the farmers you meet by the wayside and your fellow automobile travelers.

No better spokesman existed for the populist sensibilities of the Depression and World War II generations than the man whom the American people elected four times to their nation's highest office.⁵⁵⁴

The presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and the Popular Front coalition of which he became the nucleus unified the jangling discords of 1930s society. The historical importance of Roosevelt rests on the fact that he left the nation – following a time of its most immense challenges – substantially the same as when he took office: grounded with a constitutional democracy, allowing for the protection of individual liberties and

⁵⁵⁴ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Radio Address to the Forum on Current Affairs," October 5, 1937, quoted in Basil Rauch, ed., *The Roosevelt reader: Selected Speeches, Messages, Press Conferences, and Letters of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 187.

dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal – but with a new cognizance of the pluralistic reality of American society. The New Deal’s administration, workers, and their varied achievements laid the foundations for the Civil Rights, Women’s Rights and other progressive movements in post-War American society. The productions and efforts of the New Deal music programs can clearly be linked to these later developments.

The balladeer Woody Guthrie sang in the memorable refrain of a song that served as an open eulogy upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt: “This world was lucky to see him born.” Similarly, the country was fortunate to have had the Federal Music Project and WPA Music Programs, as well as other aspects of the President’s New Deal initiatives that guided it through its most perilous hour. It is difficult, nigh impossible, to accurately assess the long-term influence of the WPA music programs on post-War American musical culture. But the temporal and societal impact of these productions in the 1930s and 1940s are indisputable. In the West, the music projects showcased the nation’s ethnic diversity to a wider public, while simultaneously confronting many of the political and social struggles of the era. And the reception and successes of these presentations were all the more remarkable given the heightened racial animosities and violence of the 1920s.⁵⁵⁵

In August of 1941 composer Igor Stravinsky sent a letter to President Roosevelt from his home in Hollywood, California. It was his desire, he wrote, “to do my bit in these grievous times toward fostering and preserving the spirit of patriotism in this country” and he had therefore composed a chorale arrangement of the “Star Spangled Banner,” which had a decade earlier been designated as the national anthem. The composition was

⁵⁵⁵ “Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,” words and music by Woody Guthrie (1945), Copyright 1962 by Ludlow Music, Incorporated.

intended as Stravinsky's gift to his adopted country, which he described as "my humble work to you as President of the Great Republic and to the American people." The presentation ceremony for the arrangement was scheduled for the Philharmonic Auditorium in Los Angeles on September 9, 1941.⁵⁵⁶

Soon, however, the White House was inundated with letters opposing the performance, most objecting more to the composer than the composition. Not untypical of these was a telegram from one Robert Hollinsheas, identifying himself as both President of the South Coast Music Association and member of the Texas Federation of Music Clubs. The tersely worded correspondence urged the President to prevent the "playing next Wednesday by WPA Orchestra" of the "mutilated version" of the national anthem "written by Russian Jew Stravinsky." Hollinsheas continued: "Loyal Americans of Southern California are up in arms as Patriotic Americans to prevent this atrocity."⁵⁵⁷

The White House referred the telegram to assistant director Florence Kerr, and Southern California WPA administrator Henry Armory commended her subsequent reply for its "appropriate tone" and the "splendid defense we have learned to expect from you in instances of this kind." Armory also wrote: "we are at some loss to understand Mr. Hollinshead's opposition, particularly since he had no opportunity to hear Mr. Stravinsky's version prior to its performance." In her response, Kerr had assured Hollinsheas that "we note your point of view regarding this arrangement." She continued

⁵⁵⁶ Igor Stravinsky to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, August 1941, box 387, NARA.

⁵⁵⁷ Robert Hollinsheas to The President, September 5, 1941, box 387, NARA.

that she would “point out to you that I am advised other groups of citizens of Southern California are enthusiastic about the arrangement.”⁵⁵⁸

Florence Kerr further explained that when an Act of Congress designated the song as the National Anthem in 1931, special arrangements for public rendition of the composition had not been forbidden. She ended her reply to Robert Hollinsheas by quoting a sentence from the letter Igor Stravinsky had addressed to President Roosevelt explaining his reasons for preparing the arrangement: “Searching about for a vehicle through which I might express my gratitude at the prospect of becoming an American citizen, I chose to harmonize and orchestrate as a national chorale your beautiful sacred anthem ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’”⁵⁵⁹

The presentation ceremony of Igor Stravinsky’s arrangement to the President commenced at 8:00 pm, on Memorial Day, as originally scheduled. The program began with the Posting of Colors by the local American Legion, followed by a welcome address from California Governor Culbert L. Olson. In addition to the presentation, those in attendance heard a reading of Abraham Lincoln’s “Gettysburg Address” as recited by actor Lionel Barrymore, renditions of patriotic and Hispanic songs from the WPA *Tipica Orquesta*, and several other performances. The first two verses of the new choral arrangement of “The Star Spangled Banner,”– which, the printed program informed, had been completed on July 4, 1941 – were harmonized and orchestrated by Stravinsky and

⁵⁵⁸ Henry Russell Amory to Howard O. Hunter, attention: Florence Kerr, September 10, 1941, box 387, NARA.

⁵⁵⁹ Florence Kerr to Robert Hollinsheas, September 8, 1941, box 387, NARA. In addition to Igor Stravinsky’s 1941 version for orchestra and male chorus the Library of Congress web-site presently identifies alternate versions of the anthem as: “Duke Ellington’s 1948 Cornell University arrangement, and Jimi Hendrix’s 1969 electric guitar version.”

included both the WPA Symphony Orchestra and the WPA Negro Chorus. The third and final verse, the program continued, included “Mr. Stravinsky, Choruses, Audience, and Orchestras.” Some time earlier Redfern Mason, a music critic for *People’s World* and a supporter of the Project since its creation, had witnessed a similar configuration of music during another WPA program in California, and reported:

Then, in the finale, came the turn of the chorus and admirably they responded to the demands made upon them. The singers of our great choral societies have had more experience, of course; but there was a wistful beauty about the WPA cohort that was sometimes infinitely touching. The very constitution of the chorus doubtless helped to that end. There were a half dozen racial groups, Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, negro and white, Nordic and Latin. But the music in the exuberance of its joy; its cry of the heart for that divine thing which we call liberty, fused all these disparate elements into one united organism.

The ethnic and religious diversity of the program of Igor Stravinsky’s choral arrangement for President Roosevelt and the American people was in keeping with this and many other New Deal musical presentations throughout the region.⁵⁶⁰

The music produced by the WPA programs in the West unquestionably reflected many of the societal prejudices of the time. But it was the New Deal emphasis on *inclusion* – a commitment that flowed from a variety of sources – that distinguishes these productions within a historical context. Indeed, participation crossed all barriers, and included black as well as white, men as well as women, poor and not, symphonic orchestras and *Tipica Orquestas*, African American spirituals, folksong and satirical political revues, and the range of musical expression. These cross-cultural presentations most often found origin as grassroots ventures and were encouraged by a Presidential

⁵⁶⁰ “Program For Presentation Ceremony Of Igor Stravinsky’s Arrangement of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ To The President Of The United States,” box 387, NARA; Redfern Mason, “Redfern Mason Boosts Project,” reprinted in *The Baton*, June 1937, vol. 2, no. 6, pg. 6.

administration that enthusiastically embraced its constitutionally mandated responsibility to “provide for the general welfare” within a society where each citizen is assured of his or her own pursuit of happiness. It was because of these efforts that on that Memorial Day in Los Angeles in 1941 – as with so many of the WPA musical programs in the West – the audience in attendance could clearly hear America singing. And, more so than at any previous time in the nation’s history, the varied carols could be heard.

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