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*Donald Davidson, Country Picking, and Agrarianism*  
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In 1979, Donald Davidson's Agrarian compatriot Andrew Lytle ended his address to the Philadelphia Society on a rather melancholy note. Lytle pondered the failure of the Southern Agrarian movement at the New Orleans meeting, "I've often asked myself: Why was it that so few people listened to us, although most were sympathetic. The kind of life they knew was at stake. I think the reason of their seeming indifference is this: Nobody could imagine the world they were born in, had lived in, and were still living in could disappear. Well, it has." It is true that most Americans no longer farm for a living. Most no longer leave concrete long enough to walk on dirt. In our age of urban sprawl and rampant materialism, powered by superficial notions of wealth and progress, few stop to smell the roses. Donald Davidson, Andrew Lytle, and their fellow Agrarians are well known to many for their polemical essays in favor of the Southern tradition. But at the root of it all, I think, is a plea for Americans to never neglect the human ability to appreciate the value of the local, the familiar, and the beauty of home. Nowadays, people move around a great deal. Home means something different than what it used to. Many live a seemingly rootless lifestyle, free from the proper connections to history, culture, and most importantly, religious faith. They cannot identify with a particular place, such as a family farm. We have state and regional identities still, and certainly a national American identity, but few good local identities. My reading of the Agrarians suggests that their primary concern was not with these large and abstract self-images, be it a Southerner, American, or whatever. They thought it best to identify first with a particular farm, or even a plantation. In the South, even to this day among older country people, someone might be referred to as the person living on the old Peabody place, the young couple down at the old Johnson place, or even the remnant of an antebellum plantation, Myrtle Hall, Kirkwood, Waverly. In the Southern countryside all kinds of local places possess local names. I know of many ditches, fields, trees, and ponds around my home in South Carolina called not by their biological name given by a scientist, but by their local name given by the people who look at these things as part of home. Although the primarily agrarian society that Lytle wrote about is in fact largely gone, the land and its traditions remain aesthetically appealing for those who will simply take time to notice.

This brings us to Donald Davidson, and his abiding interest in rural string music. Southern string music continues to exist as one of those traditions that has its roots in country life. It is in my mind one of the more uplifting, lasting, and beautiful art forms that we can still enjoy as part of America's rural heritage. I am not talking about the modern country music scene headquartered in Nashville. I feel satisfied the closest thing that comes to it now would be Bluegrass music. And I also feel pretty confident that this was the type of music, with banjos, fiddles, mandolins, and flattop guitars that played such a pivotal role in Davidson's only novel *The Big Ballad Jamboree*.

Davidson is best known for his stalwart defense of Southern conservatism. But in his novel, set in 1949, reads like a frolicking foray through the Blue Ridge Mountains. He combined the arts of Southern literature and rural balladry. During his career, Davidson developed interests in oral traditions, the Old World balladry of the British border country, and the history of shape-note singing commonly found in country churches of the Old South. He was certainly familiar

with the development of the Nashville country music scene. For goodness sakes, he taught writing and literature at Vanderbilt, within hollering distance of the Grand Ole Opry. All the while his polemical writings sounded the death knell of Southern agrarianism, musically inclined rural folk, primarily from the upland South of Tennessee, Virginia, and the Carolinas, traveled to Nashville in hopes of beginning a career as a country music recording artist. As country music developed commercially from 1920 to 1960, the songs told stories about rural life. In a rather ironic sense, the music became preservative. Although becoming increasingly commercialized, the themes remained old, traditional, and if I may say so, agrarian. The music served as a way to preserve a piece of Southern agrarian society, as a way of inspiring and heartening old-fashioned people. The lyrics spoke to a particular audience, and reminded folks about what appeared as a more stable past capable of instructing an unsettling present. I think this is the way Davidson responded to country music, as a creative art form that at times brought to a precise recollection a curious familiarity with a bygone world. The songs told of beauty remembered. Andrew Lytle once referred to memory, through recollection, into song, as the classic inheritance of the Western world. Viewed from this perspective, Davidson's interest in country music appears anything but provincial. It is another way for him to preserve what Russell Kirk would have called the permanent things.

*The Big Ballad Jamboree* is a story of two young country singers who experience a prolonged courtship. They are from the mountains of North Carolina. Danny McGregor and Cissie Timberlake, both from the little community of Carolina City, have known each other since childhood. They play and sing music together in a local country band called the Turkey Hollow Boys, a singing group with dreams of making it big in Nashville. As the novel progresses, Cissie becomes interested in attending college in New York City, and eventually a graduate program where she decides to write a thesis about the Southern ballad tradition. After earning her undergraduate degree, she travels back to the Carolina Mountains, intent upon recording the sounds and music of the old-timers in the area. All the while Cissie is exploring her options as a professional academic, Danny, who she left behind in North Carolina, continues traveling with the Turkey Hollow Boys. He also saves his family farm from being sold to the government as part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Davidson shows through both Danny and Cissie's characters the conflict between an old and newer way of life. Danny dreams of farming the MacGregor place, marrying Cissie, and leading an agrarian lifestyle. He also wants to play music, but is troubled by the commercialization of it. He desires to make a name for himself, but the question of authenticity always lurks in the back of his mind. While Cissie and Danny are working together to collect recordings of the mountain people, the Turkey Hollow Boys receive an offer from a Nashville promoter to travel extensively and play a few dates at the Grand Ole Opry. Danny is faced with a real predicament. He wonders how the traveling and commercial recording will impact his ability to stay on the farm, work the land, and marry Cissie. In the end, Danny and Cissie think it is time they were married. She would get a job teaching music at the local state college, he would travel on occasion with the band. Together they can find a way to adapt the old ballads to the new country music industry. Cissie suggests that Danny could make a weekend run to Nashville every once and a while to play the Opry, while living on the farm the majority of the time.

Davidson's novel, like any juicy tale, is a love story. Love played a prominent role in Southern agrarianism: love of the land, love of God, love of family, home and hearth, love of the past. Families are the basis of any good civilization, and it is only proper that Davidson should have employed Danny and Cissie's story as the central plot from which he developed the novel's

themes of love, place, and tradition. It is a happy story. As far as we know, they lived happily ever after. Danny is not the kind of man who thinks about deep intellectual and philosophical ideas, and neither is Cissie for that matter. They both come from simply country backgrounds, and recognize the importance of their past. Davidson created several stage performance scenes where the audience responded to Danny and Cissie's music. The reader gets a sense that the audience sometimes laughs, sometimes cries, but is always uplifted in some meaningful way. The reader also senses that these performances, particularly the performance of old ballads, brought the past to life for those listening audiences. Davidson revealed the power of music as a preservative tool. In the South, Davidson hoped, music might help assure that old times there are not forgotten.

Davidson included the lyrics of many actual ballads within his text. And the way he included them, as separate indented blocks, allows us to read the lyric as a poem. You would think it was a poem if the story had not told you it was a song. That's what a good ballad is, poetry that can be sung. The Agrarians, as poets themselves, understood full well that poetry is one of the finest products of an established civilization. Davidson was trying to show that there is nothing provincial about this music at all. It is rather the polished and creative culmination of a vibrant rural culture.

If I may, I should like to reiterate the theme of this panel by first quoting from Davidson's agrarian essay "A Mirror for Artists." Davidson, "The South has been rich in the folk arts, and is still rich in them- in ballads, country songs and dances, in hymns and spirituals, in folk tales, in the folk crafts of weaving, quilting, furniture making. Though these are best preserved in mountain fastness and remote rural localities, they were not originally so limited. They were widespread; and though now they merely survive, they are certainly indicative of a society that could not be termed inartistic." For Davidson, the rural South witnessed its art in the everyday actions of close-knit families, the revealed knowledge of religious faith, and the fellowship of strong communities. I think Davidson's summation was quite right: the rural art forms, including traditional music, were at one time more widespread. Even now in my own experience, the old-time arts of country life are generally appreciated and understood by an older generation. It is the young people, often of my own generation, that know little to nothing about America's rural heritage. The greatest Southern writers, indeed American writers, and even songwriters, have never neglected the local. In fact, those are the places from whence all real beauty must be found. William Faulkner and Eudora Welty found it in Mississippi, Flannery O' Conner in Georgia, and Fred Chappell and Wendell Berry are still finding it in North Carolina and Kentucky respectively.

Davidson and the Agrarians were often labeled provincials, as people lacking vision and perspective. It was a common charge then, and I still hear it today. Davidson's compatriot Allen Tate responded to this challenge by arguing that Southern agrarianism, finally, existed as a defense of Christendom. Tate wrote this, "Regionalism without civilization- which means with us, regionalism without the classical-Christian culture- becomes provincialism; and world regionalism becomes world provincialism." Davidson clearly maintained an unadulterated regional identity. But like Tate, he thought the South possessed a powerful civilization, and one best suited for country living. For him, the continuation and even commercialization of romantic balladry, gospel hymns, and traditional rural string music could possibly provide a unique way for modern America to preserve important portions of that pastoral and religious civilization. It was a civilization that Davidson feared would all too quickly become part of the past.

We know about Donald Davidson the writer and literary critic, but we should also take a look at his interest in the performing art of country music. I maintain that Davidson's career as a man of letters and his studies of balladry and music were all part of the same effort: that is, to save something of the agrarian South for posterity, and to explain what is valuable in the Southern tradition. Andrew Lytle, in the aforementioned 1979 address to this society, said that the agrarian South had disappeared. Nonetheless, Davidson's hopes for country music witnessed some fruition. That same decade when Lytle delivered his address, Dolly Parton sang songs about her Tennessee Mountain home. Tom T. Hall became known as the storyteller from Kentucky. And Loretta Lynn toured the country as the coal miner's daughter. Music is powerful, all one need do is slow down long enough to listen.

If I may be so bold, I should like to conclude by expressing my suspicion towards the term sophistication, supposedly the opposite of the term provincial. Sophistication is a condition commonly preferred by modern man, and eagerly sought by many as an appropriate human attribute. I often hear the terms provincial and unsophisticated used interchangeably as if they are of a similar definition, when in fact to be unsophisticated is for the agrarian a fundamental value. Actually, it is a fundamental value for any truly Christian-oriented conservative. To sophisticate in a basic sense simply means to modify deceptively, to divest of originality and authenticity. In short, it is an intentional action whereby something is transformed, not by necessity into a better substance, but by deception into something it is not. It is a lie. If agrarianism is to be labeled unsophisticated, I can think of no better accolade. We should be careful in our use of the term sophistication, and particularly the largely incorrect notion that the pursuit of it is a worthy goal. The Southern agrarian argument teaches that much of what is lasting and valuable in American civilization stems from its unsophisticated, unadulterated, genuine and rich rural legacy. And finally, what they feared, Donald Davidson included, was a falling away from that heritage, and a decline into barbarism.