

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

A lot of ground has been covered here in the name of John Fahey and American music. Some perspective on the main idea that lies within this research may need to be reiterated. Despite all the various threads that have been introduced and crossed, the focus of this research has been to ascertain the voice of American music in the twentieth century, a single task that is not simple to accomplish. The idea that a cultivated national voice in music is inextricably linked to the folk, or vernacular, of a country creates many problems if this is the approach used to define music in the United States. By examining the subjectivity surrounding folk definitions, it becomes clear that it is impossible to define a unified vernacular for the whole of the country. Instead, as was illustrated through Fahey's example, a process that utilizes individual and separate vernacular is a better way to define a cultivated music. Fahey serves as a supreme example because he came of age during a time when the real effects of recorded sound were beginning to fully take hold—post World War II. And it is recorded sound that has played, and will continue to play, a formative role in shaping the opinions of the populace at large. In addition to Fahey's place on the timeline, his extra efforts single him out as a person who, without any "formal" musical training, assembled disparate vernacular from the same medium, records, and came up with a unique and idiosyncratic cultivated style that by the example of process alone, speaks for countless Americans. The music of the United States cannot be defined unilaterally. It also cannot be passed off as an amalgam of styles, or worse yet as a "melting pot." The music in the United States has no singular voice, sound, or style. It exists only in approach and process.

Each of the smaller threads encourages further research. Considering folk music in the United States, it has been established that subjectivity alone has

played a prominent role in defining what folk music in the United States is. The research and conclusions by collectors and scholars such as Child, Sharp, and the Lomaxes need to be newly examined and put into better context as to the role they have played in defining culture in the United States. None of these collectors did a disservice in attempting to establish their individual definitions, but as is often the case with scholarly research, too many contemporary factors were eschewed in order to formulate each of the researcher's theories.

At the center of the omission by most scholars is the importance of popular music and popular culture in general. As the twentieth century grew older, this influence became more and more important. Research involving the effects of popular culture have been increasing for some time, but as was suggested in chapter two, popular studies often remove the source from its environment and emphasize factors that have little to do with cultural ramifications. The stigma carried by the term "popular" needs to be addressed and eventually undermined in order to better understand how culture in the United States operates. Recognizing that popular music does not simply mean "pop" music icons or less sophisticated forms of jazz and concert music is key to this understanding. At the end of the twentieth century, the world of popular music has been redefined to include any source of recorded medium. It may be seen as negative to some, but the majority of music that is made post-twentieth century is intended to be recorded on some medium, most likely for commercial sale or broadcast. As was suggested in Chapter Two, once music is committed to recorded medium it can be interpreted as any other form or style, since the way in which the audience will experience it is the same. Research that encourages unilateral acceptance of musical styles and redirects energy toward the effects that different vernacular experiences have on listeners will most assuredly help fill in many of the gaps that have occurred in music criticism, research, and academics.

The center of the vernacular argument supersedes the popular music debate. Even if some researchers find difficulty in undertaking the popular music defense, there is absolutely no way that the influence of recorded sound and technology can

be denied. This may seem redundant, but it can be treated separately.

Contemporary aspects of music production are important, such as current musical releases and performances that are tied into technological advancements, but the retroactive listening that was illustrated by John Fahey and his contemporaries is even more important. The means in which music is archived has opened up a world in which maintaining traditions is nearly impossible on a large-scale level. Only by completely isolating an individual would it be possible to prevent cross-fertilization of styles. The reason that this is even more pertinent to American studies is due to the lack of a fundamental tradition in the United States. This is why the research presented here recognizes a period leading up to and including the early twentieth century as a time in which hard definitions could not be formed. Understanding this should help encourage more twentieth-century studies that view the first half of the century as one that was forming aspects of tradition, not defining them. This research is meant to generate more questions than answers with regard to the United States, but it also intends to present a theory to apply to further research, as seen through John Fahey.

The influence and example of Fahey has yet to be fully explored. Just as this research had many different aspects, Fahey's life can be examined in several ways. Beginning with his experience as a young collector, this area could be further explored to include more of his contemporaries in order to compare and contrast how the vernacular experience relates to contemporary peer groups. Fahey's thesis on Charley Patton is something that is also fertile for examination and can also be tied back into the vernacular experience as it occurs over time. Perhaps the most under represented part of this research is Fahey's contribution as the proprietor of, arguably, the first artist-owned record label and the influence that Takoma had not only on the musicians that recorded for the label, but also on the individuals that were influenced by Fahey to do the same, whether directly or indirectly. Fahey's influence as a guitarist needs also to be expanded as well. His technique, often overlooked as simple, has a depth of virtuosity that can only be achieved by an idiosyncratic cultivated style. His approach used the instrument in a manner that made it appear

more accessible than other styles that have been applied to it, but the reality is that Fahey is one of the few prominent figures of the guitar that utilized the nature of the instrument as it was most easily exploited. So much of Fahey's music and instrumental style was omitted from this research, and more study is encouraged.

An artist can be viewed through the effect he or she has on others, and Fahey's impact has been huge. Shortly after his death, the forum at [johnfahey.com](http://johnfahey.com) was flooded with tributes, dedications, and thanks in Fahey's honor. The transcription of the memorial service found in Appendix Two reveals the many sides of Fahey, as well as the depth of his influence. A decade before Fahey's death, Leo Kottke articulated the seed of this research succinctly when he said, "John is one of the heroes of whatever this country has for a culture . . . What John made available to everybody was a point of view that really didn't exist before he came along."<sup>1</sup> Overall, this research satisfies what it intended: to define a process of identity in the United States during the twentieth century through John Fahey's example. John Fahey took what was made available to him during his formative years and established himself as an innovator beyond quotation. Whether his style is defined as American Primitive or something else is of no consequence. As a twentieth-century figure he should be remembered as someone who represents the fundamental culture of the United States, who has spoken for countless individuals across the globe, and who will undoubtedly continue to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Miller, 42.