

Thomas Hart Benton: Painting the Song

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Alternately praised as “An American Original” and lampooned as an arbiter of kitsch, the artist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975) has been the subject of myriad monographs and journal articles, remaining almost as controversial today as he was in his own time. Although best known, along with artists Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry, as a member of the mid-century group of representational artists known as the Regionalists, Benton was also an active performer, collector, and transcriber of folk and classical music. Surviving in Benton’s home in Kansas City are hundreds of record albums and pieces of sheet music, and tens of dozens of scores he transcribed into a harmonica notation tablature system that would eventually be appropriated and marketed by Hohner, the musical instrument manufacturer and publisher. The latter sheets span the corpus of European classical music, but include many American popular ballads as well.

The record collections likewise show remarkable diversity, including works by George Gershwin, Burl Ives, Glenn Miller, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Andrés Segovia, and with holdings in vernacular Ozark tunes and Yiddish folk songs. In the Thomas Hart Benton and Rita Benton Trusts at UMB Bank in Kansas City, an additional 128 transcriptions of American and British traditional folk songs have been neatly preserved in the artist’s hand. Over the course of his life, Benton performed with harmonica bands in New York, Martha’s Vineyard, and Kansas City. He ably merged folk and classical music, making the latter more accessible and granting the former renewed validity and seriousness, and thus earning himself a special, if often overlooked, place in the history of modern American music.¹

What then are we to make of a painter who spent an inordinate amount of time listening to, performing, collecting, and playing music? What can we say about the songs whose lyrics and larger themes provided titles, storylines, and compositional principles to so many of the paintings by which the artist is best known? At the most basic level, the artist’s engagement with folk songs recalls the early American practice of ringing bells and making other noises in order to celebrate the polity, to invoke a state of *communitas*, and, in the words of historian Richard Rath, to “connect ... folk to community and community to the imagined nation and the

invisible realms of ... public and private, of visible and invisible,” among other realms (50). Benton in turn found in song a link to regions and folkways and peoples often rendered invisible in a modern era. In exploring Benton’s painted songs, it is important to remember that it is not just song, but sound, more broadly considered, to which the artist is particularly attentive. As we will see, in Benton’s pictorial universe, it is through sound that stories are told, opinions are voiced, experiences are preserved, and history is recorded. All that is consequential, or so the artist would have us believe, has both voiced and heard components. Sonic suggestions join visual symbolism as barometers of experience.

Thomas Hart Benton had high hopes for his artwork, aims that usually transcended their visual status, and which invariably concerned sonic metaphors. In paintings depicting time-honored American folksongs, he consistently modeled foreground figures to suggest the music and lyrics coming to life in the middle ground and background. Pushing yet further the expressive possibilities of sound, and particularly its visualization, in several compositions Benton gravitated toward folksong figures who quite literally turned to guns and violence to speak for themselves when unable to make themselves heard through more conventional means. Voice and power, we will see, are two important and interconnected themes in Benton’s art and much Depression-era cultural history.

Benton’s painted, collected, transcribed, and performed songs comprise part of his larger mission of sectional exaltation and cultural preservation—and yet they do more than this. They provided templates with which to put oral tradition into visual form; they offered an arena of experimentation—as if a series of test cases—with the problem of just how to grant agency and autonomy to the songs’ subjects and to the archetypes represented in those songs. Benton’s painted songs, I would like to suggest, perform a sort of give-and-take: the music, lyrics, iconography, and form play off of one another, with the end result, in many cases, of the subject matter literally performing the song, and, conversely, the song mediating the picture’s form and content.

Finding in these tunes musical analogues for the populist history and pluralist sensibilities from which he sought to shape a canon of American art, Benton learned these songs by scouring musical and literary anthologies, by interviewing musicians and raconteurs on his sojourns in Appalachia, the Ozarks, the west, the south, and New England, and probably from commercial radio and live performances as well. Based on the artist’s own comments, some scholars have reasonably speculated that Benton had in mind a so-called folk song series of paintings (Ladner 286). He appears however to not have viewed it in fixed terms or as a one-time project. In a sense, his use of folk music parallels his turning to folk strains in film and literature, as is seen in his lithographs for Jean Renoir’s film *Swamp Water*

(1941) and his works after John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1936, 1939) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and *Tom Sawyer*. But while these works more often than not were realized as portraits and landscape compositions, the songs frequently provided themes ideally arranged as genre compositions. With richly suggestive but typically concise lyrics, the songs often found narrative expansion—a perhaps more complete account, something like the “whole” story—in poetry, prose, and folk legends. Benton's genre paintings, prints, drawings, and murals, in turn, facilitated both the further development of the song's narrative, and, alternately, a refinement of one aspect of its plot and/or sound.

Maintaining the populist sensibilities of his father and great uncle, Democratic Congressmen representing Missouri, Benton gained fame (if not infamy) for his own rebellion against myopic elitism, particularly in the forms of museums and artistic modernism. Aiming for an art capable of registering lived experience (precisely what he saw as lacking in modern art), Benton was, as the art historian Elizabeth Broun once put the matter, something of a “politician in paint” (58). Musical and sonic lines of inquiry both illuminate and complicate these biographical strains. Whatever else Benton's painted songs are about, they also concern quickly disappearing folkways. In a now famous passage in his autobiography, Benton spoke fatalistically about the future of those experiences registered by sound, as if deeply afraid that, once our indigenous musics are sidestepped for impure commercial derivatives, records of lives will be lost. “The old music cannot last much longer,” he remarked, adding, “I count it a great privilege to have heard it in the sad twang of mountain voices before it died” (*An Artist in America* 114). Not unlike his father, “Colonel” M. E. Benton, and his uncle and namesake, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, the artist Benton saw his task as one of popular representation. Preserving the *vox humana* by way of folksong, in turn, was critical to the artist's work in this endeavor.

Prolonged attention to the artist's painted songs yields rich insights into long-established master narratives, corroborating some but challenging and complicating at least as many. In what follows, I suggest that Benton relied on a sort of musical metonymy, with climax moments completing the narrative, and that he often made use of meta-lyrics, passages about the sounding of conversations, protests, and words themselves. Paralleling Benton's own compulsion to speak loudly and hyperbolically to critics and supporters alike—through lectures, radio programs, editorials, and concerts—the artist turned in his paintings to the attention-getting cacophony of gunshots and train whistles.² Typifying so much American folk music, these songs emphasize train wrecks, murder stemming from irrational jealousy, and death from sadistic labor practices. In Benton's depictions of the folksongs “Frankie and Johnny” and “Jesse James,” we again see the artist's “meta,” or self-referential, use of musical themes and related com-

positional devices. In these two cases, however, the song permits Benton an opportunity to re-visit a problem of increasing personal and professional importance: the search for a means of expression when words and verbal communication cease to function.

“Singers and Song’s Action”

“Folk song – singers and song’s action.” So wrote Benton when he was asked in 1969 to comment on his lithograph *Coming ‘Round the Mountain* (1931; Figure 1).

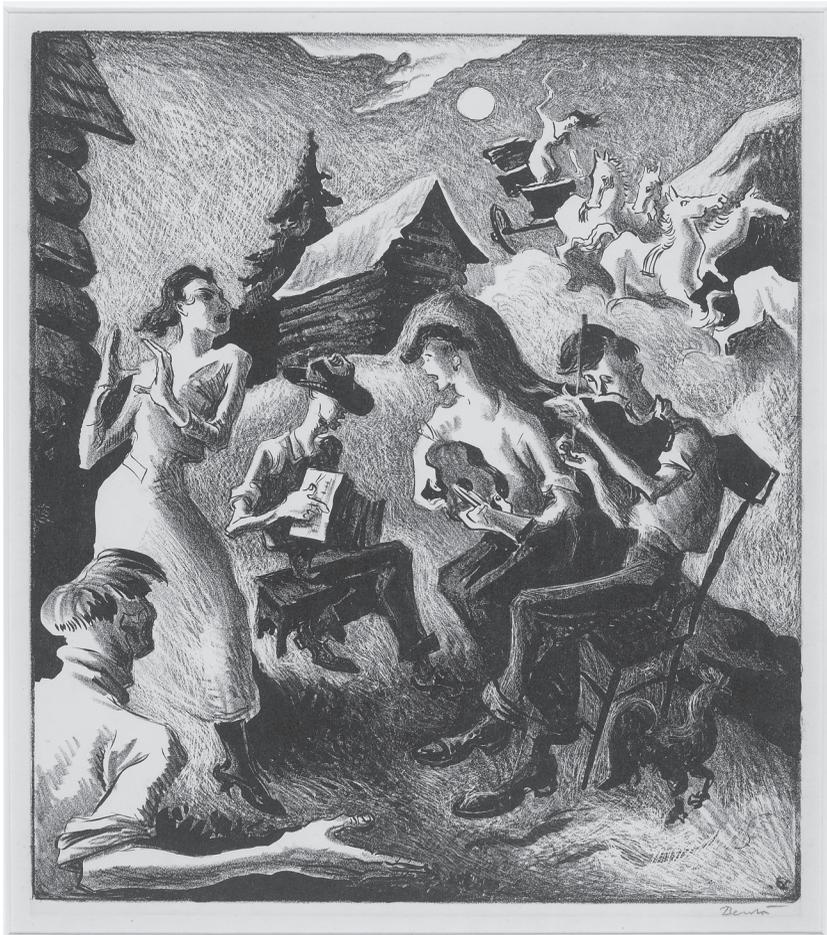


Figure 1. Thomas Hart Benton, *Coming 'Round the Mountain*, 1931. Lithograph, 8 3/8 x 11 1/8 inches. Courtesy The State Historical Society of Missouri, 1975.0004. Art © T.H. Benton and R.P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/UMB Bank Trustee/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

He continued: “A number of paintings and drawings were made during the ‘twenties and ‘thirties depicting both singers and songs. This is the first litho of such a subject” (Fath 28). In the foreground, musicians sing, clap, dance, and play the fiddle, guitar, and harmonica. Sketchily depicted at upper right, the lyrics take form: “she” is “coming ‘round the mountain ... driving six white horses” (although only five are visible). *Coming ‘Round the Mountain* is one of a handful of works, derived from folk songs, in which performers, occupying a space co-expansive with the viewer, play the music for the passage, which is in turn taken from the lyrics, transpiring behind them. Through sound, the foreground figures—the singers and other musicians—evoke the central action of the song as they perform a passage from it. A less obvious example of “singers” making the “song’s action” manifest is the lithograph, *I Got a Gal on Sourwood Mountain* (1938). “This is another,” Benton remarked, “of the song and the people who sing it—or, in this case, dance it” (Fath 58).³ The figures dance and perform the song, bringing its rollicking refrains to life through their volume-producing activities and gestures. “My true love’s a blue eyed daisy,” the lyrics tell us; and, with the frequently sounded refrain “Hay diddy ump, diddy iddy um day,” the song invites us to dance, to sing along, much as the woman at right participates in the musical affair (Fath 58, Sharp 305–06). *Sourwood Mountain* is based on (and is the lateral reverse of) the 1928 painting *Country Dance*.⁴ *Coming ‘Round the Mountain*, *Sourwood Mountain*, and *Country Dance* all point to the artist’s custom of enlisting as subject matter songs that address their own singing.

The “singers and song’s action” trope is probably nowhere more apparent than in the painting *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*, which corresponds with the song of the same name (1934; Color Plate 2). This frequently performed and recorded American ballad (Cohen, *Folk Music* 85–86, 112, 150), narrates the suitor Edward’s walk with his fiancée Lemo to discuss their wedding plans, as well as his murder of her when she simply tells him she is tired and wants to go home. Upon being stabbed, Lemo claims that she has been faithful—a dynamic not mentioned in the previous stanzas, but fraught enough to drive Edward to murder her, as Benton represents in his painting:

Down on her knees before him
 She humbly begged for life.
 But into her snowy bosom
 He plunged the fatal knife. (Randolph 48)

Paralleling the protagonists’ actions in the middle ground is the musicians’ playing in the foreground. Benton’s former student Jackson Pollock posed for the figure playing the mouth harp; the central figure on the fiddle remains unidentified; and the figure at left was modeled on another contemporary student, Glen Rounds, who has taken the harmonica out of his mouth in

order to sing the ballad and further bring to life the “song’s action.”⁵ With the conjoining bands of color, the knife pointing to the musicians, and other pictorial devices in *Jealous Lover*, several formal and thematic elements link the musicians and the lovers (Ladner 289–91). Perhaps most prominent among these is the winding, contorted, yellow band of musical stanza, originating between the two figures at right and culminating in the space between Edward and Lemo. It suggests that the music has not just evoked but somehow produced the dramatic action at center—that the notes have been condensed, distilled, and finally transformed into the unfolding scene. In this regard, it may be noteworthy that Benton has depicted the action transpiring in the penultimate stanza of the version of the song he is known to have used.⁶ When the yellow clef-band reaches its terminus, so this logic might go, both the song and Lemo’s life are almost over.

“The lovers come to exist in imagination,” one scholar writes of *Jealous Lover*, “at the same time that the musicians make their song” (Ladner 289). This assertion is not as fanciful as it might at first seem; Benton would rely on similar devices in other folk song paintings to suggest a leap from the music performed to its theme playing out in real time. In *The Engineer’s Dream* (1931), for example, the yellow form funneling out from the sleeping engineer provides continuity between the dreamer and the scene dreamt (Color Plate 3). In this painting, the approximately triangular shaft of infernal light coming to an apex at the engineer’s head plays a role similar to that of the clef-line in *Jealous Lover*. Both forms facilitate the middle-ground realization of the foreground figures’ actions—that is, their dreaming and performing, respectively. *Engineer’s Dream* comes from Carson Robison’s eponymous song, popularized by early country-western singer Vernon Dalhart, which narrates a mythical railroad accident. In the lyrics, the engineer dreams that his son—also an engineer—is involved in the accident. The nightmare comes to fruition as the younger engineer is unable to traverse a storm-ravaged bridge: “And then through the night came a message / And it told him his dream had been true / His brave son had gone to his maker / Along with the rest of the crew.”

Among the seemingly “loud” passages in the painting *Engineer’s Dream* is the thunderous admixture of steam, smoke, clouds, fire, and artificial light. The song’s lyrics emphasize the “storming” and the “wind howl[ing] a song through the night.” This is punctuated by the ominous, breathy but high-pitched whistle—emulating the train—that marks the third stanza and fiddle solo in Dalhart’s canonical version of the song. And yet the engineer sleeps through this natural and manmade racket. In the song he finally wakes up, only to ignore the omen: “And he did not give heed to the warnin’ / For he thought it was only a dream.” Lest we suffer the tragic fate of the engineer who lost his son, we should remember to listen, “we should regard every warning.” Within the fantasy context of the dreaming

engineer, the train's collision is the result of such aural inattentiveness.

In at least one instance, Benton worked against the suggestion of sounds traveling from one zone to another, thereby *not* giving the music such visual form. In *Minstrel Show* (1934), a nearly unbroken yellow and orange line, formed by the foot of the stage, separates the space of the African American musicians from that of the white audience.⁷ Even with the Anglo child at right straddling these two zones, there is little, if any, formal or thematic continuity between the upper three-quarters of the composition and the lower register. The "singers" do not re-create any "song's action"; they perform in spite of the action, or inaction, before them. Reading the picture's formal components against the passage in Benton's autobiography, *An Artist in America*, describing the event depicted in *Minstrel Show*, art historian and Benton scholar Erika Doss has demonstrated that the picture points to the artist's own "discomfit" at "the ever-widening chasm between white and black Americans in the 1930s" (Doss, "*Minstrel Show*" 80). The painting registers the performers' fears and ambivalence, but it is not clear what it would mean for this mixed psychology to be understood by the audience, or for the vocals, trumpet, and drums to cross that "chasm."

The long, racially vexed history of minstrelsy preconditioned this and countless other audiences to hear affirming analogues to centuries-old, stereotyped, demeaning ideology. A slightly different interpretation of *Minstrel Show*, however—one Doss adopts from the writing of historian Eric Lott—might grant agency to the performers. In her comments on the painting, Doss quotes lines from Paul Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask":

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. (Dunbar 112-13, qtd. in Doss, "*Minstrel Show*" 80)⁸

With their bitterness and proto-revolutionary leanings concealed in their act, indeed beneath their caricatural makeup, the performers—so this logic might go—ultimately have the last word. They "lie" through their "grins" to an unsuspecting audience; they ridicule their ridiculers, giving them the only hackneyed, passé performance they would recognize. In this sense they perform for themselves, not for the quasi-comatose white audience. Like Dunbar's persona, Benton's protagonists too "mouth with myriad subtleties."

Whistling Enlightenment

Among the folk songs Benton illustrated, several prominently feature trains and related imagery. Included here are "Jesse James," "John Henry," "Ten Pound Hammer," and "The Engineer's Dream." A perusal of any monograph

will show that train scenes recur throughout Benton's oeuvre, including several of the paintings for which he is best known. Locomotives also play significant roles in each of his mural projects, eleven of his lithographs, and several dozen drawings and watercolors. Rivalled only by the imagery of rivers and waterways, railroads provided a leitmotif romantic emblem throughout his life, including during his formative years as a boy in Neosho, Missouri:

My first pictures were of railroad trains. Engines were the most impressive things that came into my childhood. To go down to the depot and see them come in, belching black smoke, with their big headlights shining and their bells ringing and their pistons clanking, gave me a feeling of stupendous drama, which I have not lost to this day. (Benton, *An Artist in America* 13)

In *An Artist in America*, Benton recounted that "my first mural," executed "when I was six or seven years old," "consisted of a long freight train in charcoal which went up" a stairway, in the Neosho home, which had been "newly papered in some light cream-colored paper" (13).

With the "belching," "bells ringing," and "pistons clanking," the sounds of trains accounted for a good bit of their allure for Benton. He later emphasized in his autobiography that this visceral connection to railroads persisted into the present. "To this day I cannot face an oncoming steam train without having itchy thrills run up and down my backbone." It was the locomotives' sonic dimensions that continued to enthrall Benton most, to take him back to his youth. "Its whistle is the most nostalgic of sounds to my ear," he wrote. "I never hear a train whistle blow without profound impulses to change, without wanting to pack up my things, to tell all my acquaintances to be damned, to be done with them, and go somewhere" (70–72). Benton's emphasis on the whistle in these writings prompts us to consider closely the function of this emblem in his two best-known train paintings, *The Engineer's Dream* (1931) and *The Wreck of the Ole '97*.

The two paintings maintain several similarities. Among the more obvious of these are the horizontal format, the movement from left to right, the cowcatcher jumping the track, and, of course, the folk song-based train-wreck theme. Somewhat less apparent, but critical to the unfolding action—as well as to the lyrics of the respective songs—is the role of the locomotive whistle. In both pictures, the whistle emits a rich, steady cloud of steam, modeled in white and gray, roughly mimicking the proportions of the darker fumes coming from the smokestack. The suggestion is that the whistle is in the process of blowing loudly or has just been sounded. Seemingly dwarfed by the larger smokestack, the whistle nonetheless speaks volumes about the meaning of each picture, providing an uncommonly clear

example of the sonic as a sign of desperation, a warning that more is being derailed than just a train. Indeed, corporate authority, historical precedent, temporal expectations, and the always-shaky perception of safety in early railway travel are among those things derailed. We can only assume that, as had been the case for the previous eighty years, the whistle here functions to tell time (arrivals and departures) and to ensure safety (that is, *when* its sound is heeded). As the sounding mechanism for most locomotives past and present, the steam whistle in both paintings is an identifying attribute.

In addition to the paintings' formal and thematic affinities, they both depict songs warning against going too fast (both literally and metaphorically), against getting caught up in the mechanical moment, and, ultimately, against the pressures of corporate efficiency. But they also impress upon us the dire consequences of *not* listening—to whistles, to fellow workers, to common sense. In the song "The Wreck of the Old 97," the engineer, Steve Brady, is concerned that his locomotive, the Old 97—rumored to be the "fastest mail train"—is running twenty-seven minutes behind schedule. Hoping to make up some time, he instructs his men to go full throttle and to disregard any signs of warning they may hear:

He received his orders at the Richmond station,
Saying, "Steve, you're far behind;
Now this isn't Thirty-eight, but it's Old Ninety-seven
You must put her into Spencer on time."
When he read his orders he said to his fireman,
"Do not obey the whistle or the bell;
And we'll put Old Ninety-seven into Spencer on time,
Or we'll sink her in the bottom pits of hell."
(*"Wreck of the Old 97"* 197)

Less is known about "The Engineer's Dream"—as both a song and a painting. Like "Wreck of the Old 97," it documents a train wreck that could have been avoided had the engineer and his crew slowed down, or perhaps if they had heeded the warning sounded by the steam whistle. In Dalhart's best-selling rendition of the song, the "whistle" is not mentioned in the lyrics but rather is a sound in the song itself—an ominous, subtle-but-persistent shrill. Yet the whistle cannot startle the engineer out of his deep sleep any more than the ineffectual alarm clock at lower right in Benton's painting. In the painting, it is as if the "storming" and "wind howl[ing] a song through the night" have actually lulled the engineer to sleep and kept him in that state. Meanwhile, the open-mouthed flagman, screaming and waving his red flag, attempts in vain to do what the whistle has failed to accomplish.

In this interpretation, the same substance that powers the train—steam—is unable to save the lives of its passengers by sounding the whistle. In "Engineer's Dream" the protagonist does not hear the warning, while in "Wreck of the Old 97" he hears but ignores it ("Do not obey the whistle or

the bell”). The irony takes on horrific proportions in the latter case, with the verse making clear the roles of steam in powering the train, in sounding the whistle, and, ultimately, in Engineer Brady’s death:

He went over the grade making ninety miles an hour,
And his whistle broke into a scream;
He was found dead with his hand on the throttle,
And was scalded to death by steam.
(“Wreck of the Old 97” 198)

The steam whistle is audible on several recordings of “Wreck of the Old 97.” In this song and “Engineer’s Dream,” steam moves the train and alerts one to danger, but it also kills. Such a failure or imploding of otherwise beneficial technology and rational thought approaches the model dubbed the “dialectic of enlightenment” by philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. For his part, Benton was all too aware of the sacrifices accompanying supposedly laborsaving, efficiency-minded, modern advances—this understanding informed his at-times reactionary, if-it-ain’t-broke-don’t-fix-it style of conservatism.

In showing the still-steaming whistle in *Wreck of the Ole ’97* and *Engineer’s Dream*, Benton joined other commentators of the era in turning to locomotive metaphors to sound a warning, literally, against the deceptive promises of modernization (what better emblem to enlist in railing against industry-gone-amuck than the very harbinger of the industrial revolution in the first place?). The comments of Benton’s sometimes friend, architectural and cultural critic Lewis Mumford, on the slippery relationship of cultural progress and decline are similar to and illuminate the artist’s thoughts on the subject. Like Benton, he retreated to railroad metaphors:

By now [1950], however, every intelligent observer knows ... that our civilization cannot continue indefinitely in the present fashion. Like a drunken locomotive engineer on a streamlined train, plunging through the darkness at a hundred miles an hour, we have been going past the danger signals without realizing that our speed, which springs from our mechanical facility, only increases our danger and makes more fatal the crash. (Mumford 10–11)⁹

Similar to Benton’s whistle, Mumford’s streamlined train makes clear the failure of enlightened technology and the rational, modern thinking from which it stems. Part of the message—to read the painting and song lyrics literally—is to slow down. Doss has observed that Benton “never talks about going fast, he goes slowly. Even on his infamous treks by automobile, he makes you experience it all at twenty or thirty miles an hour.” She adds, “He really wants to feel it, and he wants you to feel it” (Doss interview). For Benton, then, the significance of such a warning, and the reasons for slowing

down extend beyond the dire themes narrated in “Engineer’s Dream” and “Wreck of the Old 97.” The mortality narrative is an extreme form of his call to not be so anxious to get from point A to point B that we miss life’s meaningful interstices. What is at stake—and that against which the still steaming whistle warns—is a realm of feeling and experience all too easily overlooked in a streamlined culture.

Based on their years of studying folk music with railroad themes, folklorists John and Alan Lomax maintained similar thoughts on the metaphorical potential of and critical messages sounded by the steam whistle emblem in popular song. In their anthology *Folk Song U.S.A.* (1947), the Lomaxes prefaced the chapter on locomotive subjects with a section entitled “Lonesome Whistles.” They envisioned the shrieking contrivance as a sort of literal and metaphorical compass whose high-pitches communicate vital information and facilitate dreams and aspirations:

All through the strip of country that runs from Maryland, south and west to Oklahoma[,] ...[t]hese folk musicians and the people they’re playing for listen to railroad whistles the way fisherfolk listen to bell-buoys and foghorns. Out in the country they tell time by the whistles of the trains that fly past their fields. The railroad whistles bring them good news and bad news. The whistles talk to them about the places they have never seen, the fine clothes they have never worn. (244)

This last sentence suggests that the whistle is more than a synecdochal substitute for the train. For those performers of train songs and their audiences, the whistle is a region-specific marker of order, continuity, stability, and a market-driven urbane sensibility. In *Engineer’s Dream* and *Wreck of the Ole ’97*, whistles are miniature devices making larger-than-life sounds, literally announcing the hope and bemoaning the tragedy voiced in the songs that inform the pictures. At so many levels, the whistle frames the protagonists’ and the subjects’ worldviews, with the shrieking device providing, in Benton’s hands, a moralizing moniker, a sign of the cost of not paying attention to one’s aural environment.

Nonetheless, in the train pictures Benton’s own stance remains somewhat ambiguous; equally blurred is the relationship between popular celebration and scathing critique. Like his fellow regionalist Grant Wood, whose *Death on the Ridge Road* (1934; Williams College Museum of Art) depicts the fatal accident caused by an automobile driver going too fast in an attempt to pass a truck, Benton does his share of moralizing, although it is a mitigated moralizing in most of his paintings. The exaggerated perspective, slanted locomotives, windblown figures, and compositionally rhyming forms (such as the train smoke and the clouds) remind us that Benton never shied

away from pictorial hyperbole. Such raw, visceral appeals by way of failed and foiled mechanization match a contemporary visual culture of wreckage, death-defying imagery, and even staged collisions and reenactments. Paralleling the frequent news of locomotive accidents in the 1920s and 1930s, State Fairs and similar spectacles across the country regularly drew enormous crowds eager to see trains and automobiles collide in sublime towers of fire, smoke, and rubble (Nelson 58–63). Similarly, with *Engineer's Dream* and *Wreck of the Ole '97*, viewers are hinged somewhere between searching for enlightenment and desperate amusement.

Speaking with Guns and Paintbrushes

Jesse James (1936), a mural and lithograph by Benton, merits some close study because it illuminates the artist's choice of folk song subjects as well as both the clear-cut and the more subtle sonic meanings to which the artist and his sources ascribed (Color Plate 4). Among the most widely collected and frequently recorded American ballads, "Jesse James" in most versions skips over the fact that the protagonist justified his bank and train robberies and murders as last ditch Confederate complaints against bitterly contested Reconstruction-era Missouri. Like other ballads, the James mythologies, exaggerations, and song versions traveled by word-of-mouth. And, as with several songs and folktales Benton explored, the climax moments assume sonic forms—e.g., the inert steam whistle and the resulting blasts as well as the guns about to fire.¹⁰ Yet the story of Jesse James differs from several of the folk songs Benton transcribed in paint and print in that it contains a deeply imbedded artistic reference. James was shot while dusting off a picture of his mother (or of Stonewall Jackson, according to some) on the wall of his home—only then had he laid down his guns (Lomax and Lomax 284; Cohen, *Long Steel Rail* 100.). Moreover, like various other folktales, the James legend had—and continues to enjoy—a potent visual afterlife in dime novels, sheet music covers, cinema, and radio and television broadcasts (Slotkin 133–39, Buscombe 51).

The cunning tricksterism, the Robinhood-esque stealing from the bloated and corrupt rich and giving to the more deserving poor, the gentleman-bandit aura, the populist sensibility, and the miscellaneous feats carried out by James and his gang are all usually at least mentioned in most versions of "Jesse James." Receiving much more attention in the lyrics, however, are the events leading to James's death at the hands of "that dirty little coward that shot Mister Howard" (the latter was James's alias at the time that his cousin and partner Robert Ford assassinated him) and the mourning for his life. The version of the song in the Lomaxes' *Folk Song U.S.A.* is typical in that six of the nine verses deal with the outlaw's death, not the feats (many of them fictional) that first won him infamy (296–97).

In his comments for Creekmore Fath's 1969 catalogue raisonné of

his lithographs, Benton wrote of *Jesse James* that “this picture shows actions that occurred at different times as if they were simultaneous” (46). Benton, that is, produced a composite, sampling two incidents: the middle-ground melee following a bank heist; and the foreground robbery on the Chicago and Alton Railroad in the vicinity of Blue Cut, Missouri, in September 1881 (Cohen, *Long Steel Rail* 100). In pictorially honing in upon banks and railroads, Benton isolated, in addition to the sites of James’s most frequent and famous exploits, the commonly perceived cause of trouble for so many Americans. He thus followed the folk patterns, oral histories, and ballads by which the outlaw has been mythologized. James’s emphasis on two institutions easily blamed and surely responsible for numerous financial and social woes in late nineteenth-century America only fueled the popular sympathy for the hero and his banditry. In his famous essay on the outlaw as an American folktyle, Richard E. Meyer has shown that “Jesse James,” as song and legend, possesses the actual character’s signal trait of resistance to and defiance of those laws and institutions that invariably have the opposite of their intended effect of promoting the welfare of “the common people” (97–100). With his nascent opposition to elitist arts organizations and other supposedly public trusts, Benton too positioned himself as a “man of the people,” a renegade against officially sanctioned injustice, and he surely saw a kindred spirit in the James folktyle.

Benton, the man, came to possess grandiose mythological proportions in a manner analogous to the Jesse James legend: through word of mouth, in particular the mouths of his students, critics, and antagonists. Unlike the artist, the outlaw is not known to have fueled his fame through public speaking, broadcasting, and publishing, but, as with Benton, the hyperbole of his doings escalated by way of oral communication. For better and worse—resulting in a curious blend of fact and fiction—the Jesse James we have come to know is largely the outcome of speaking the story, passing it from neighbor to neighbor, generation to generation (Spillane 113–14). As Benton effectively performed his paintings (or at least proclaimed their themes) in songs of the same name and in lectures (and unrehearsed, unscheduled rants) on analogous subjects, so James often performed his thievery in carnival fashion, at fairs, on packed trains, and in front of sizeable crowds who would leave amazed at his graceful efficiency, theatrical flare, and respect for those innocent bystanders who suffered from the injustices created by those he robbed.¹¹

As with so many characters in the modern western literary genres that James’s legends would influence, he was a modest, polite, and soft-spoken man until it was time for crime and thievery (or so reminiscences of James and their elaborations as myth suggest), at which point he obviously found ways to make himself heard (Meyer 105).¹² Many of the frustrations James had with banks, government, and corporations would ultimately

animate contemporary efforts such as The Grange and the Populist Party. Aware, as so many Americans of his generation were, that his lone voice carried little if any weight, James spoke to his oppressor not with conventions, tracts, and canvassing but through weapons and violence. In Benton's mural panel and lithograph, then, the James gang speaks with its guns, articulating what their voices never could.¹³

Going through legally and socially sanctioned channels, the rational Benton had more luck than the wild-man James in finding large audiences to listen to his protests. But his words, and in particular his speaking, often failed him, as they were unable to patch up the wounds waged by his paintings and previous words. Time and again Benton threw verbal gasoline on the painted fire. Attempting to defend his teaching and aesthetic philosophies in a 1934 Art Students League question-and-answer session with several John Reed Club members in the audience, he was heckled, accosted on stage, and called an anti-Semite and racist (Benton, "The Thirties," frames 1023–30). His "Art and Democracy" lecture to the Kansas City Democratic Club in 1941, delivered shortly after his homophobic and anti-museum comments cost him his teaching job at the Kansas City Art Institute, clearly could not rationalize, make right, or atone for his earlier wrongs. Benton did not fare much better in the public forums held a few years earlier in the wake of the controversy caused by his Missouri mural, which was fueled in part by citizens' objections to his focus upon the state's unsavory historical characters, such as Jesse James. Try as he might to rationalize and explain, for his audience—and countless reporters and critics—the proof was not in his spoken words but in his painted diagnoses of squalor and corruption throughout the history of the Show Me State (Adams 270–74). For Jesse James and Thomas Hart Benton, guns and paintbrushes, respectively, were last-ditch mediators, resorted to because they were the only media through which the men knew they could be heard and thus make a difference. As the historian Cathy Madora Jackson puts it in her study of Jesse James, "To folk orators and listeners [of the James saga], as well as those newspaper readers, folklore became a voice of protest against injustice" (184).

The art historian Asma Naeem has suggested an equation between the brandishing and report of a gun and the enactment of a court injunction. With either device, Naeem observes, the powerless can become powerful (Naeem interview). So too could Benton with his brush. He would eventually use his paintings, artistic philosophy, and name recognition as a legislative stage. In April 1942 Benton worked with Representative Joseph B. Shannon of Missouri, who delivered a lengthy speech regarding the artist's anti-Axis paintings from his *Year of Peril* series on the floor of the House of Representatives. The entire speech—enumerating the content and meaning of seven of the eight pictures from *Year of Peril*—appeared in the *Congressional Record*. Armed with thick descriptions of Benton's paintings

and previously published statements, Shannon was able to provide a “vivid conception of [the] grimmest horrors of war” (“Benton War Paintings” 1). With the results of his brush and palette, Benton spoke vicariously through the official voice of the United States Congress. Deviating far from his political forebears’—and Jesse James’s—and his own concerns about the “bank power” and other antagonistic interests, Benton was more successful than James in his quest for an alternative vocality.

Frankie and Johnny and Other Fatality Plays

The mural panel *Frankie and Johnny* adorns the wall adjacent to the panel with *Jesse James* in the House of Representatives lounge in the Missouri State Capitol in Jefferson City (Color Plate 5). The two have several points in common. Both were released as lithographs for Associated American Artists. As with *Jesse James*, *Frankie and Johnny* is a romanticized composite of lyrics from a canonical American folk song. And finally, fact and fiction collide in the many versions of each song and its accompanying lore. At least three hundred variants of Frankie and Johnny are known; John Lomax famously commented that it would take a “doctor’s thesis” just to sift through them all (Lomax, *American Ballads* 103). Shedding light on the lyrical labyrinth of Frankie and Johnny are a contemporary story in the *St. Louis Herald* and the testimony of Frankie Baker herself much later in life. According to these sources, Frankie, a twenty-five-year-old prostitute in prostitution-heavy St. Louis, had asked “her man”—the seventeen-year-old pimp Albert Britt, who goes by “Johnny” in most versions—to come home with her from a bar where she had seen him with another woman. An argument erupted when she chided him for cheating on her. Back at Johnny’s home, he threw a lamp at her and, as he was approaching her with a knife, she shot him in self-defense. Johnny later died from the gunshot wounds. Many years later, Frankie would tell of his previous domestic violence toward her, and it is little wonder that the jury exonerated her, agreeing that she acted in self-defense (Brown 126–27, 131–36, 138).

Most variants of the song have at least some hint of the reality of pimping and prostitution that lay at the heart of the events, but they highlight even more Frankie’s love for Johnny, about whom she had heard so many rumors of infidelity. The lyrics also portray Frankie as a good and righteous woman done “wrong” by her man. Most versions emphasize their relationship as star-crossed lovers, and, while empathizing with Johnny, condemn him for his no-good, two-timing ways, for cheating on a woman who literally whored herself so he could wear nice suits and live his chosen lifestyle. Frankie bore such blatant signs of physical abuse when she appeared in court that the judge presiding over the case returned the murder weapon to her for her own protection (Brown 128, 132, 138). Like Jesse James, Frankie was unable to speak for herself, and turned to a gun to do

her talking for her, to reason and communicate when words did not work. With the pistol firing, Benton's scene again accentuates criminal violence as the discursive mode of choice when all else fails.

Changing the setting from Johnny's house to a seedy bar, and depicting him at a table with his lover, Benton's painting and print follow the fictionalized and sensationalized account in several versions of the lyrics. Moreover, the artist adheres to the details found in at least four rather comic versions of the song:

Frankie said to the Judge
 "Well, let all things pass,
 "If I didn't shoot him third degree
 I shot him in his big brown ass." (Brown 139)

Suggesting rowdy commotion and sonic activity in Benton's image, the discharging gun is joined by the toppling table, gesturing bartender, and the picture of the nude dancer on the wall. It is this barroom variant of the song, the so-called "St. Louis version," that the director John Huston popularized when he staged a puppet show of *Frankie and Johnny* in 1930. Mexican artist-caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias's illustration of the barroom accompanying Huston's show somewhat matches Benton's depiction, with its scantily clad women and even the spittoon at lower right. The blurb on the back of the dust jacket of the Huston-Covarrubias book cover states that, "twenty versions of this ballad are included in this book, with the complete history of the song tracing the true incident upon which it is founded, revealed here for the first time." They join the play in "consecrat[ing] ... a dramatic and highly colorful piece of our folk literature" (the irony, of course, is that color as a racial designation is quelled as a consideration in much of the volume).

Like Huston's book and puppet show, Benton's print and mural panel aimed to set the record straight, to sift through the various versions, to forego the apocryphal in favor of some modicum of folk accuracy. But Benton was not, as we have seen, redeeming the tale by way of the historical record. In his notes on the lithograph of *Frankie and Johnny*, Benton, as a folklorist-musicologist, emphasized his interest in "legend" and "mythology." He was more concerned with the musical and folk transmission of the tale than in flawless reportage: "This incident according to legend happened in St. Louis though the tune in various forms is earlier than the 1890 St. Louis story. Anyhow the story is a part of Missouri mythology like the Jesse James and Huck Finn stories" (Fath 41). A self-consciously native Missourian, Benton now had *his* chance to have a say, to weigh in on a narrative that had been told and retold for decades. The Frankie and Johnny to come down in musical and oral tradition was part of the Missouri story to be related visually on the Capitol walls in Jefferson City. In choosing the comic version of Frankie and Johnny—indeed, in choosing this song as his

subject in the first place—Benton found a vehicle with which to lay bare a blunt history of the state. An editorial published amid the hubbub caused by Benton's unflattering but true-to-life mural panels locates his "truth" not in folkloric accuracy, but in his non-idealizing mission:

The artist of the murals refuses to be a society portrait painter. He will not take out the wrinkles, the double chin, or the pouches under the eye. His story of Eden is Eve being bitten by the apple. He is a commentator and interpreter of events, a pictorial newspaper, or historian. In his view of mores, instincts and usages[,] Frankie and Johnnie [sic] are the true Romeo and Juliet, like it or not. ("More Murals" 10)

It was the record of Missouri, not of Frankie and Johnny, that Benton sought to "set straight."

Ultimately, death—usually of a tragic and criminal sort—seems also to be part of that record. Its presence haunts nearly every song Benton monumentalized in paint, and an inordinate number of songs he transcribed, collected, and performed. In *The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley*, Edward does not believe his fiancé when she affirms her faithfulness to him, and so he stabs her, shortly after which she dies. This is not so different from the cheating sub-theme in *Frankie and Johnny*. The theme recurs as well in the popular folk song "Pretty Polly," which Benton owned in the form of a Dock Boggs record; he wrote out singing parts for this song and frequently performed it with his harmonica group in Greenwich Village in the 1930s (Seeger 19; Richter 37, 84). The fatal trajectory of course sounds throughout American folk music, but it appears with great frequency in the songs Benton played, performed, transcribed, and quoted in his paintings. These include the songs "Fatal Wedding," "Frozen Girl," "The Dying Hobo," and "The Dying Ranger." Whatever else *Jesse James*, *Wreck of the Ole '97*, and *Engineer's Dream* are about, they also address the subject of death. As with the songs on which they are based, several of these works relate the death of a woman, or at least a woman "done wrong" by a man. And in each instance, the death ends the song, including its protagonists' soundings and its performers' singing and playing.

Benton's appropriations of the songs "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain," "I Got a Gal on Sourwood Mountain," "The Ballad of the Jealous Lover of Lone Green Valley," "The Engineer's Dream," "The Wreck of the Old 97," "Jesse James," and "Frankie and Johnny" accurately portray episodes from their respective lyrics. But the artist clearly understood these songs as more than visual transcriptions of the words and music. For Benton, as for many of his generation, the songs were allegories addressing the deceptive doctrines of corporate efficiency, the perils and consequences of human

greed, the inability to articulate oneself except through the most radical means, and the uncannily close connectedness of progress and suppression, and life and death.

Notes

1. The indispensable source for Benton's record, sheet music, and harmonica tablature transcription collections is Richter (see especially 61–62, 77, and Appendices I–VI). I have seen yet more “Hohner style” harmonica transcriptions in other collections, including the Pollock Papers and the State Historical Society of Missouri at the University of Missouri, Columbia. I first learned of the 128 songs at the Benton Trusts in Buechner and Goldstein. Some of this music he copied from anthologies or sheet music, but many of the folk tunes he picked up on his annual summer sojourns throughout the south, west, and Ozarks, jaunts he took throughout his life, beginning in the mid-to-late 1920s, stories of which would comprise much of his first autobiography, *An Artist in America*. Throughout this essay my thoughts on the artist's murals and easel paintings are informed by Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*.
2. I outline the artist's fixation upon speaking and being heard in Mazow (16–21).
3. *I Got a Gal on Sourwood Mountain* is reproduced in Fath (59).
4. *Country Dance* is reproduced in Baigell (93).
5. On the painting, see Lawless and Ladner.
6. Benton told Ray Lawless that, in *Jealous Lover*, he was referring to a version of the ballad he knew from folklorist Vance Randolph's collection (Lawless 31). The immediate source would not have been the author's *Ozark Folksongs*—which was not published until well over a decade later—but, rather, surely, a manuscript or perhaps recording in his friend Randolph's collection.
7. *Minstrel Show* is reproduced in Doss, “*Minstrel Show*” (79).
8. Doss gets the quotation from Boime (87).
9. *Art and Technics* reprints Mumford's contributions to Columbia University's Bampton Lectures in America from 1950.
10. On the song's popularity, see Cohen, *Folk Music* (24, 111). On the oral transmission of the myths, see Meyer (96, 101).
11. Two helpful introductions into James's life and legends are Stiles and Yeatman.
12. See Naeem interview.
13. This is not to overlook the frankly psychotic element of James's behavior; it is rather to say that his bitter, reckless, jaded, battle-worn worldview only became audible upon brandishing his weapon. In the context of the Great Depression, James's thievery could be viewed through the lens of populist nostalgia instead of disgust for his psychotic criminal acts; I am grateful to Erika Doss for this point.

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